3 What our MOOC did next: embedding, exploiting, and extending an existing MOOC to fit strategic purposes and priorities

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Abstract

This chapter describes how one particular Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), created at the University of Southampton, has evolved beyond its core purpose as a promotional tool, to complement and serve purposes and priorities of relevance and importance to wider university strategic aims. It briefly outlines elements of the course design and content, and the impact of the course over its six runs to date. It describes the steps taken to shape the evolution of the course including review, re-use of assets, use of the course in research, and its role as inspiration for a 'spin-off' course. It concludes by noting that one MOOC can provide rich and varied opportunities to enhance and support areas which are key priorities in UK higher education institutions.

Keywords: MOOC, language learning, online education, blended learning.

1.   Introduction and background

Research into the development of MOOCs from essentially standalone educational experiences toward utilisation more widely as part of a broader

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approach to education has been underway for some years. In 2014, a CETIS[2] white paper identified MOOCs as an opportunity for institutions to think more strategically about online education given their potential for "enhancing existing classroom teaching practices, promoting institutional reputation, and developing new revenue models" (Yuan, Powell, & Olivier, 2014, p. 3). Since that time, MOOCs have been incorporated into the digital strategies of many universities in the UK, for example, the University of Edinburgh describes MOOCs as part of its "commitment to knowledge exchange and outreach"[3], and University College London makes use of them as short, professional development courses within a community of learners and researchers[4]. There is also a growing body of work being developed on how MOOCs might contribute to campus-based teaching through blended learning scenarios (e.g. Israel, 2015; Orsini-Jones, 2015).

The University of Southampton's major involvement with MOOCs began in 2013, when it became one of FutureLearn's[5] first partners. FutureLearn Ltd was created with the intention of becoming the UK's primary MOOC-platform provider and it has been highly successful in doing this, and in encouraging the development of high-quality, appealing online courses. It currently boasts over seven million learners and continues to grow. Since 2013, the University of Southampton has created 18 different courses via FutureLearn which have had circa 80 runs (at time of writing). These courses have reached over 630,000 learners[6]. Although most Southampton MOOCs were originally developed as standalone online courses, our MOOC teams across the university have sought to explore how such courses can support campus-based activities in diverse ways, from outreach and recruitment activities to blending MOOCs with campus-based education.

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2. Centre for Educational Technology, Interoperability and Standards, United Kingdom; http://www.cetis.org.uk/

3. https://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/moocs/about

4. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/courses/short-courses-cpd/moocs

5. www.futurelearn.com; https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/understanding-language

6. Number of learners signed up to UoS/FL courses, as of December 2017.

Considerations around the evolution of Southampton MOOCs has taken place against the backdrop of the implementation of a revised institutional strategy entitled 'Simply Better'[7], which emphasises (amongst other aspects) the consolidation, extension, and promotion of excellence in research, teaching, and enterprise.

2.   Method

The focus of this chapter is a MOOC that was initially developed in 2014, called 'Understanding Language: learning and teaching'[8]. This course was created as a collaboration between Modern Languages and Linguistics at Southampton and the British Council[9] and it was intended to act primarily as a marketing tool to increase student recruitment to a jointly run online Masters (MA) in English Language Teaching (ELT)[10]. It offers a 'taste' of key concepts in the study of applied linguistics and runs over four weeks, featuring a different topic each week: language learning, language teaching, technology in teaching, and Global English. Course content reflects some activities and topics covered in the Masters in ELT. The course has attracted over 100,000 learners over 6 runs[11].

Course content is delivered by a range of staff within applied linguistics at Southampton and at the British Council via short videos and linked discussion questions. It aims to be academic but approachable in tone. There are also texts to read, tasks to engage in, and interactive elements such as polls. Learners discuss and respond to questions or tasks in comment areas attached to each activity and the notion of 'learning as a conversation' is at the core of the learning design[12].

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7. https://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/strategy.page

8. www.futurelearn.com/courses/understanding-language

9. www.britishcouncil.org

10. https://www.southampton.ac.uk/humanities/postgraduate/taught_courses/taught_courses/modern_languages/r900_ma_english_language_teaching_online.page

11. Learners are defined by FutureLearn as people who have signed up and viewed at least one step.

12. https://www.futurelearn.com/using-futurelearn/why-it-works

Peer learning through social activity is a key part of the course's design and activities frequently require learners to share their own content, e.g. photographs of their own classrooms or plotting their global location on an interactive map. The course is greatly enriched by the shared experiences and knowledge contributed by learners.

Tutoring on the course is offered by a mix of university and British Council staff, who monitor comments and respond with questions, comments, and further information. One of the key roles of a tutor is to foster the development of conversations around course concepts and topics. Such ongoing activity is complemented by more high profile tutor input in the form of end-of-week video reviews, which summarise key discussions and respond to learner questions raised during the week.

3. Results and impact

3.1. Number of learners

The course has generated a great deal of interest globally with consistently high numbers of learners signing up to take it at each run. Naturally, numbers have dropped over time but are still healthy: 58,000+ for the first run compared to 10,000+ for the sixth run. Of those that sign up to take the course, on average 50% actually click through to start the course. The vast majority of learners on the course are from outside the UK. A related Youtube channel which hosts tutor reviews and recordings of live content has had over 79,000 views.

3.2. Recruitment to online MA in ELT

There has been an increase in numbers applying for the online MA in ELT and the cohort has increased in size over several recruitment cycles and become more geographically spread across the globe. During the first run of the MOOC, a scholarship scheme was piloted which offered the opportunity to apply for a discount on fees for the MA to learners who completed the MOOC. This

generated a large amount of interest (circa 8000 expressions of interest) and so the scheme has been maintained throughout all of the course runs, resulting in a number of scholarship students within the MA cohort.

3.3.   Impact on local staff

There has also been a positive impact on academic staff who have contributed content to the MOOC. Engagement with creating the MOOC has led them to consider how aspects of MOOC/FutureLearn pedagogy might feed back into classroom-based teaching (e.g. focused, bite-size input leading to a conversational approach); how the communication of complex ideas could be presented in clear and accessible ways without losing academic rigour; and how accessing new audiences beyond the classroom walls could be a highly rewarding experience.

4.   Evolution over time

4.1.   Re-use of MOOC digital assets

The course was edited ahead of each new run in line with user and tutor feedback and experienced a major review ahead of its fifth run. This review saw content edited and updated, links added, some structural changes (the rationalisation of some activity steps) and the addition of an extra week (see below). Staff within applied linguistics were encouraged to use disaggregated MOOC content to support campus-based classes by adding materials to the University's virtual learning environment.

4.2.   MOOC as research instrument

For the fifth run of the course, an extra week was added. The purpose of this was to provide updates to the fast-moving field of Global English and to experiment with using the course to crowd-source research data about language policies and practices around the world. The research data would feed into an existing

international research project led by Professor Jennifer Jenkins, the Director of the Centre for Global Englishes at Southampton. The course offered an excellent opportunity to capture a diversity of perspectives on the global use of English, due to the high number of globally-located course participants using English as a second language.

The new week invited learners to take part in a survey about language policies in their local context and thus to become part of an extended research and education community by contributing to ongoing research. The response has been excellent and the survey was closed after more than 1000 responses. Data is still being analysed and will form a key part of the research team's work going forward.

4.3.   Next generation MOOC

The team's experience in creating and delivering the MOOC has inspired the creation of another FutureLearn course: English as a Medium of Instruction for Academics[13]. The course builds on ideas touched upon in week 4 of 'Understanding Language' and is oriented toward the continuing professional development of teachers in higher education. The focus of the course is around working effectively in international classrooms, discussing linguistic and cultural issues, and complementing the ideas covered by the earlier MOOC. 'EMI for Academics' was created as a MOOC, but will be repurposed and run internally for our own staff alongside classroom-based workshops.

5.   Conclusions

The MOOC 'Understanding Language: learning and teaching' was created with an explicit marketing or enterprise-related purpose and it has been successful in this core purpose. It has also proved to be a rich educational experience for thousands for learners and inspiring for the staff involved in its creation. It has

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13. https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/emi-academics

piloted and supported an innovative way to collect research data and the re-use of its high quality digital materials have led to improved support for campus-based students. It has taken excellence in research and teaching to a global audience. In these respects, it demonstrates the rich potential that just one open online course can offer to enhance and support areas important to higher education: research, education, enterprise, outreach, and student engagement. As the course continues to run, we will continue to seek opportunities to align it further with university priorities and this will include reviewing its effectiveness and development as a promotional tool to attract new students. These activities will take place as part of a vision of online education which is very appealing: not a distinct and separate activity but integrated into the fabric of university business and life.

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