Integrating #FLIrish101 in an LMOOC – learner engagement and pedagogical approach

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Abstract. Course specific hashtags are a feature of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) delivered through many of the major MOOC platforms. Their pedagogic objective is usually considered as a means to facilitate social learning and collaboration between learners. Research into the use of hashtags by learners illustrates limited engagement and integration within their learning experience (Veletsianos, 2017) and that MOOC providers use course hashtags mainly as a means of promotion and marketing. This paper presents the findings of an analysis of the use of the #FLIrish101 by a cohort of learners undertaking a Language MOOC (LMOOC) designed for ab initio learners of Irish. The LMOOC is delivered through the FutureLearn platform. The paper outlines the main findings from an analysis of the Twitter dataset to interpret the LMOOC's learner use of the hashtag. The paper critiques the implicit research design, pedagogical principles and engagement strategies employed by the LMOOCs academic designers to integrate the hashtag as a purposeful means to support collaborative language learning outside the confines of the MOOC platform

Keywords: hashtag, learning design, language learning MOOC, LMOOC.

1.   Introduction

Dublin City University launched the *Irish101: Introduction to Irish Language and Culture* on the FutureLearn platform in 2018 as part of the *Fáilte ar Líne*

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('Welcome Online') project co-funded by the Irish Government. The LMOOC is designed for A1 learners of the Irish language and is part of a suite of courses being developed for the global audience.

This paper reports mainly on learner engagement with the #FLIrish101 and critiques the use of the hashtag within the LMOOC. Research on the pedagogical integration of Twitter into MOOCs reveals limited engagement with hashtags (Veletsianos, 2017). However, Twitter is noted to support participatory culture amongst users where they can share and interact on specific themes, interests, or events (Page, 2012). From a learning perspective, the provision of informal learning and engagement opportunities are reported to enhance learning performance (Jones, 2011; Kassens-Noor, 2012). The underlying pedagogical objective adopted within the Irish101 LMOOC was to integrate #FLIrish101 as a means by which learners could actively produce language outside of the confines of the platform, thus underpinning a constructivist approach to learning along with the social aspects of learning (Conole & Alevizou, 2010). This objective was aligned with Borau, Ullrich, Feng, and Shen's (2009) findings which found that learners within their study found it easier to communicate in the target language on Twitter.

2.   Method

2.1.   Assessing learner engagement

Within the LMOOC, learners were encouraged to complete simple language production activities outside of the platform using the #FLIrish101. The findings presented are based on an analysis of those tweets which used the #FLIrish101 during the first iteration of the LMOOC and the comments placed in the comments forum of the LMOOC.

Tweets were downloaded from Twitter using a simple screen scraping approach. The data set was cleaned to remove promotional and other non-relevant tweets to provide a final dataset of 145 tweets from learners over a four-week period in early 2018. All LMOOC comments were downloaded and mined using keywords (such as 'social media', 'twitter', and 'facebook') to develop a corpus of approximately 67 comments (out of over 24,000 course-wide) specifically relating to Twitter and tweeting. A thematic analysis of the comments was conducted and cross-validated by the researchers.

2.2.   Findings from tweets and platform comments

The tweets themselves spanned a broad range of perspectives and functions, with some specifically engaging with learning activity:

> "Maidin mhaith! Tá sé fliuch inniu. #FLIrish101 #Gaelige" [*Translation*: Good morning. It's wet today] (Learner A, 2018).

Other tweets were not linked to learning activities:

> "#FLIrish101 My view of a recent sunset here in the USA. Have a great weekend everyone. I love this Irish class through FutureLearn" (Learner B, 2018).

The total number of learners who utilised Twitter was low, with a small number who tweeted more often and did not support continuous interactions with most threads limited to one response. The main themes to emerge from learner comments within the platform included a reluctance to using Twitter as a channel to produce language outside of the platform due to (1) an absence of knowledge regarding Twitter and (2) a preference to remain in-platform. Furthermore, the lack of a Twitter account was viewed with concern by some learners:

> "What happens if you do not tweet or twitter or whatever it is called? The wording is encouraged but it looks like I will miss a whole portion of the course" (Learner C, 2018).

Others recognised the value of using Twitter and social media as a means by which they could engage with other learners outside of the platform to produce language, whilst some learners indicated their preference to use alternative social media tools:

> "An interesting mix of language and historical material, especially around Ogham and trees. I need more practice at talking - have set up a Twitter account @X and have met a couple of learners there" (Learner D, 2018).

> "I use Facebook but not Twitter" (Learner E, 2018).

An important contextual theme to emerge from the data was that some voluntarily referred to their age to contextualise their comments with both positive and negative perspectives for Twitter and social media:

"I have no idea about Twitter and/or Facebook but think I could cope with this comments page. Hope I can keep up" (Learner F, 2018).

"BTW Im 68 and have been computing since 1987. I use Facebook but not Twitter" (Learner G, 2018).

3. Discussion

In general, engagement with Twitter by Irish101 learners was low, particularly when contrasted with the vibrant forum use by learners within the LMOOC. This finding is aligned with Veletsianos's (2017) contention regarding the limited interaction of many MOOC learners with in-course hashtags. The implication may well be that learners view the platform as a safe learning environment, with learners reluctant to move outside it. Concern for privacy was thought by the researchers to be linked to this, though further qualitative research would be needed to support this contention. The conceptual distinction, between 'private' or 'personal' in-course activity, and 'public' space, is both interesting and important to explore, as several learners explicitly mentioned their negative attitudes towards social media participation. It also suggests that despite prompts, the function of social media activity was invariably secondary and thus 'invisible' in grading/completion and may need to align more closely with these to encourage meaningful engagement. The potential value of learner interaction via social media as relates to language learning is large, however, and suggests there are good reasons to consider doing so. Finally, an interesting factor relates to course demographics; learners referenced their age to frame opinions regarding social media. The majority of learners were over 55. This age group was usually categorised as either 'Hobbyists' i.e. those who learned for specific hobbies, or 'Vitalisers' i.e. those who enjoy a wide range of experiences and learning for its own sake as a means of development (FutureLearn, 2017). Such categorisation is important particularly for reflection during the iterative redesign of the LMOOC to recognise the cohorts' social media experience, which are likely dependent on their wider experiences and beliefs.

4. Conclusions

Although the integration of Twitter as a means to informally support learners to produce language outside of the platform was attempted, it was in the main not embraced by most learners. Although a reluctance to use Twitter was expressed by

some, a group of learners did take it upon themselves to make use of Facebook, specifically a group established by one Irish101 learner linked to the project's Facebook page. That group has 43 learners, with substantial discussion and evident engagement. This bottom-up activity demonstrates that social media can be useful for learners as part of an informal learning setting. The difficulty of integrating Twitter into the design of an LMOOC was realised in Irish101. The conception that focussing on learning design alone may increase engagement with Twitter as per Veletsianos's (2017) conclusions is problematic as the findings of this study suggest. Learner concerns relating to their uses and knowledge of the social media tool and their conceptions of privacy should also be factored into facilitating a supportive digital language learning experience.

5.   Acknowledgements

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