

7 BMELTET – Blending MOOCs into English language teacher education with telecollaboration

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Abstract

This paper reports on how the FutureLearn Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) *Becoming a Better Teacher* was blended into English Language Teaching (ELT) university programmes in conjunction with telecollaboration. It discusses how the addition of a MOOC blend can enhance a telecollaborative exchange by adding to it increased opportunities for social collaborative interaction on a global scale. Blending MOOCs into English Teacher Education with Telecollaboration (BMELTET) fosters the students' reflection on online and blended learning and teaching to support their future teaching practice. The paper illustrates how participating students – undergraduate ELT students from Spain and postgraduate ELT students studying in the UK – participated in both synchronous and asynchronous exchanges on the MOOC content. The discussion will focus on how a holistic approach to the integration of technology into language teacher education programmes with a blend of formal and informal platforms can support students in reflecting on their beliefs.

Keywords: MOOCs, ELT, blended, telecollaboration.

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1. Introduction

Telecollaboration can foster the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) for the digital age (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 74; Müller-Hartmann & O’Dowd, 2017, p. 2; Lloyd, Cerveró-Carrascosa, & Green, 2018; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018). It enables participants to develop both the intercultural ‘savoirs’ proposed by Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002), and also their media literacy.

Previous related studies illustrated that embedding an existing MOOC that is relevant to the syllabus covered by students engaged in teacher education, and combining it with telecollaboration, appears to enhance participants’ critical digital literacy and ICC (Orsini-Jones, Conde Gafaro, & Altamimi, 2017). Such projects can moreover help with dispelling existing negative beliefs about e-learning held by students engaged in ELT teacher education (Orsini-Jones et al., 2018).

BMELTET involved undergraduate ELT students from Florida Universitària (FU) in Spain and postgraduate ELT students studying at Coventry University (CU) in the UK. The integration of the FutureLearn MOOC *Becoming a Better Teacher: Enhancing Professional Development* (designed by the British Council and University College London, Institute of Education) into the existing curriculum in the two institutions offered the opportunity for students to reflect on their professional development with a worldwide community of practice. The main research question posed was whether or not BMELTET could support students in ELT education in adopting a holistic approach to the integration of technology in their future practice while developing their ICC.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This study discusses the occurrence of the BMELTET project that was carried out between September and December 2017. The Spanish participants were 12 third

year undergraduate students on a four-year degree course (Bachelor of Arts in primary education). They were all Spanish nationals, between 18-30 years of age. Fifty-six percent had prior teaching experience.

The students based in the UK were 26, from a variety of different nationalities: 15 Chinese, six British, and one respectively from Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, the Netherlands, and Pakistan; they were between 21-60 years of age. Fifty-four percent had prior teaching experience.

2.2. Procedure

All participants read and signed a consent form that had been approved by the ethics governance unit at CU and agreed to:

- fill in a pre-project and post-project online survey;
- engage with the *Becoming a Better Teacher* MOOC for three hours per week for the four weeks of its duration, while also doing their related ELT course face-to-face and engaging in telecollaboration with their partners;
- record their reflections on how their learning experience was affected by the MOOC platform and its global social collaborative features while engaging with it in three ways: in the MOOC discussion, face-to-face in class, and on the dedicated Moodle telecollaborative discussion; and
- participate in two class-to-class live Skype reflective sessions.

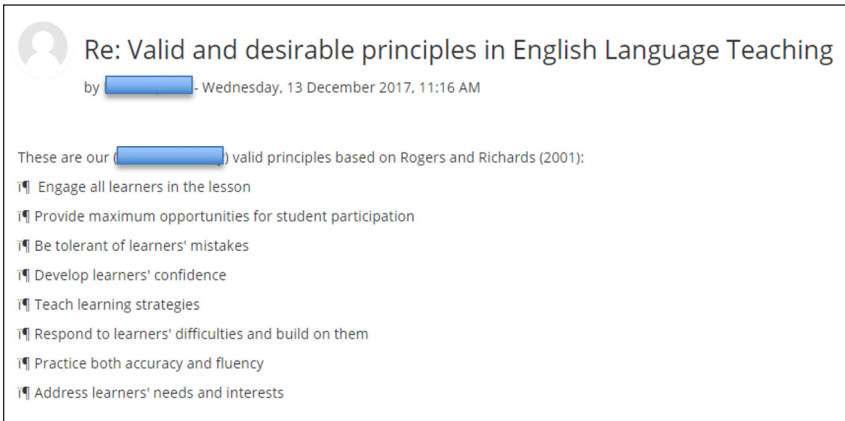
2.3. Tasks

A dedicated Moodle BMELTET website was created to enable participants to discuss specific units in the MOOC. A Skype all-class session was carried out for two of the tasks related to the MOOC topics and the relevant curricular content linked to the MOOC in each institutional programme. Students posted their

reflections both in the discussions in Moodle and in the MOOC. Live Moodle Chat was also used, but proved to be less effective than asynchronous forum postings and Skype exchanges.

The first week focused, for example, on the conceptualisation of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) on the MOOC. Students were invited to take part in the MOOC discussion and reflect on this experience individually in the relevant Moodle forum. Subsequently, they were paired up (one from FU and one from CU) to post together on the topics covered on the MOOC in the Moodle forums. Another task involved working on ‘valid and desirable principles’ to apply to language learning and teaching (see [Figure 1](#), a screen shot from the Moodle discussion that supported the project).

Figure 1. Screen shot of telecollaborative pair reflection



3. Results and discussion

In the pre-BMELTET survey, there was a marked difference between the participants from FU and CU regarding their initial awareness of what a MOOC is: only 46% of the participants from CU against 89% from FU. The fact that most CU participants were from overseas would appear to be a factor here.

Another difference in the pre-BMELTET survey had to do with the perception of usefulness of online learning. The statement set was: ‘online learning is not suitable for language learning’. While 66.9% of FU participants chose either ‘mostly disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’, with only 33.3% ‘neither agree nor disagree’, the breakdown for CU was a 57.7% of positive feedback and 42.3% negative.

None of the participants had taken part in telecollaboration before BMELTET.

The post-BMELTET survey highlighted a shift in position amongst CU participants, who appeared to align with FU participants in having found the experience of engaging online with a MOOC and with telecollaboration.

The major findings from the survey were:

- 70% of participants agreed that engaging with the BMELTET project changed their beliefs as a teacher;
- 80% agreed that the MOOC discussions made them feel part of a worldwide community of practice;
- 60% agreed that taking part in the project had changed their beliefs on online learning (in a positive way); and
- 80% agreed that the project had helped them with reflecting on their teaching practice in a novel way.

A small group of students (10%) did however write in the open comments that they still preferred a face-to-face mode of instruction to a blended or distance one, e.g. “Actually, even if we need to use technology, I’d prefer to be taught in traditional ways” (Student A).

A limitation of these findings is that the participation in the post-BMELTET survey was considerably lower (31% of all participants) than in the pre-

BMELTET one (85% of all participants). All students however commented positively on the telecollaborative Skype exchanges during oral feedback sessions, which had enabled them to discuss specific intercultural issues relating to their teaching contexts.

The encouraging results reported above are summarised well in this comment extracted from the post-BMELTET survey: “[It] is a good and interesting experience. I would put it into practice for the future because I am learning a lot” (Student B).

4. Conclusions

All participants commented positively on how the project had made them aware of the potential of online and blended learning for ELT and made them realise that online collaboration, both via MOOCs and telecollaboration, was useful for the purpose of enhancing their CPD, their reflective practice and their ICC. Not all students were however at ease with the project and some found it challenging because of its digital complexities (number of digital platforms used and passwords to handle). Nevertheless, the data collected and discussed here demonstrate evidence of a shift in positive beliefs towards online and blended learning for most participants and an appreciation of the ‘added value’ of blended learning, which, it is hoped, will support a holistic approach to the adoption of technology in their future practice³.

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3. The authors are aware of the fact that the General Data Protection Regulation introduced in May 2018 might limit the opportunity to mix formal and informal learning discussed here.

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