4 Integrating MOOCs into traditional UK higher education: lessons learnt from MOOC-blend practitioners

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Abstract

Tertiary teaching is going through transformations as a result of web affordances, open access, and online learning platforms, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Some academics are taking advantage of MOOCs by integrating them into their teaching practice. This study investigates why some UK lecturers are blending MOOCs into their Face-to-Face (F2F) lecture-based teaching, how they are using them, and what they have learnt from the experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six lecturers who had the experience of integrating MOOCs into their teaching. Data analysis shows that academics have a wide range of reasons for adopting this practice, with the most common reason being giving students a platform to engage in global communities and international conversations. Results generated both an understanding of why some academics are using MOOCs in their teaching practice, and a list of practical advice for MOOC-based blending novices.

Keywords: MOOCs, blended learning, higher education, open education, online learning.

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1. Introduction

Since the creation of MOOCs, there have been discussions on their use in Higher Education (HE), in particular on how to repurpose them. A recent development in the use of MOOCs has been their integration into traditional lecture-based F2F teaching in HE (see Albó & Hernández-Leo, 2016; Fair, Harris, & León-Urrutia, 2017; Orsini-Jones, 2015; Orsini-Jones, Conde Gafaro, & Altamimi, 2017; Orsini-Jones et al., 2018; Yuan, Powell, & Olivier, 2014). However, it is still difficult to know exactly how widespread the adoption of these hybrid initiatives is and what lecturers need to take into consideration when new to this practice.

2. Method

2.1. Research setting and participants

Participants in this study were six lecturers from three UK universities who had the experience of integrating MOOCs into at least one of their F2F modules at their respective institutions (Table 1). Participants used a range of MOOCs from the FutureLearn platform. Half of the participants embedded the MOOCs into postgraduate level modules, two into undergraduate modules, and one into modules at both levels. Lecturers' levels of experience in blending MOOCs varied from blending a MOOC into their teaching for the first time to over four years of experience in designing, being in, teaching on, and blending MOOCs into F2F teaching.

Table 1. Participants' departmental affiliations and integrated MOOCs

	Affiliated department	MOOC title and platform
1	Modern Languages	Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching The Art of Teaching Foreign Languages to Young Learners Becoming a Better Teacher: Exploring Professional Development
2	Computer Science	Why We Post: The Anthropology of Social Media Learning in the Network Age
3	Archaeology	Developing Your Research Project

4	Business	The Power of Social Media
		Learning in the Network Age
		Building your Career in Tomorrow's Workplace
5	English	Jane Austen: Myth, Reality, and Global Celebrity
6	Modern Languages	English as a Medium of Instruction for Academics

2.2.   Data collection and analysis

Participants were individually interviewed following a semi-structured interview. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and data anonymised. The data was analysed as per thematic analysis positions of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) and Braun, Clarke, and Rance (2014).

3.   Results and discussion

Data demonstrated that most of the lecturers believed change was taking place in HE, either in the way course content is or needed to be delivered, or on what students expected from their university experience. Results from the interviews are presented here as per Research Questions (RQs) used in the study.

3.1.   RQ1: Why have lecturers decided to embed a MOOC into their F2F modules?

3.1.1.   Wider discussions

The added value of taking part in wider and more global conversations was a strong theme that emerged from the interviews. All lecturers mentioned the fact that students could engage in more global conversations and explore different perspectives as one of the main reasons for the MOOC-blend. One of the most experienced lecturers strongly highlighted the importance of students' engagement in global communities, and how much students benefit from creating international connections and exploring global perspectives, which are less likely to happen in smaller localised F2F interactions.

3.1.2.   Multidirectional input

Another popular theme that emerged was the possibility of students receiving input from a range of directions. Most lecturers stated that MOOCs give students the chance to hear from other experts, academics, and professionals in the area, be exposed to different voices, views, and examples, and learn from researchers who are at the top of their field.

3.1.3.   Real life learning and interactions

Three of the informants stated they chose to integrate the MOOC as a way of providing students with the opportunity to learn through real life situations or interactions.

3.1.4.   Digital and other transferable skills

Another reason was to add digital and transferable skills as learning outcomes to the modules. Some lecturers highlighted the importance of students developing digital skills to become more employable and aware of what pieces of technology they can use and how.

3.1.5.   Additional resource

Some of the lecturers decided to use the MOOC as an additional tool to the course, to introduce topics or as a revision tool, in particular for weaker students. Most lecturers felt the content of the MOOCs was good but simplistic for university level, therefore, their content was used to introduce topics that were going to be further discussed in class.

Other themes emerged from the data, but these were only mentioned by specific lecturers. These involved students getting feedback from a wider audience, a preference for using the MOOC platform over the university's virtual learning environment, an increase in students' learning flexibility and inclusivity, and

the chance to be innovative. It is important to add that all lecturers had more than one reason to integrate the MOOC into their modules.

3.2.   RQ2: What suggestions did the lecturers have for new MOOC-blend practitioners?

All lecturers had pedagogical, structural, or practical changes they wanted to implement as a result of their experience, or suggestions for new MOOC-blend practitioners, and these have been divided into four categories (Figure 1).

Figure 1.   Recommendations for new MOOC-based blend practitioners
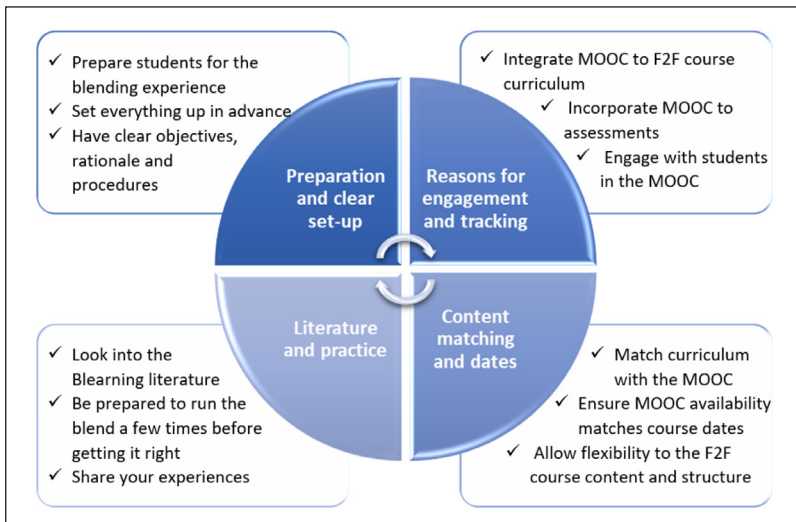
The most common advice given by the participants highlighted the importance of student preparation, course set-up, and task design. Most of the lecturers suggested having at least one session at the beginning of the F2F course to prepare students for the MOOC-blend and teach them about online learning and Netiquette. Suggestions also involved presenting the MOOC and what value it adds to students. Lecturers who had over a year of MOOC-blend experience

concluded that in order to ensure students' engagement with the platform, the MOOC-based tasks needed to not only be fully integrated into the F2F course but also assessed or attached to a reward. Another suggestion given was to track students' participation, either by following and responding to them in the MOOC, or by asking students to submit their interactions as part of an assessed task.

The third category involved matching the F2F curriculum with the MOOC, and ensuring its availability matches the F2F course dates. One of the participants suggested the need to be flexible with the F2F course content and structure as matching these with the MOOC can guarantee a smoother blend.

And lastly, it was recommended that new MOOC-blend lecturers should investigate the blended learning literature and be prepared to run a few blend trials before getting it right. Data showed that more experienced MOOC-blend lecturers had tested different blending formats and that there is a need for practitioners to discuss and share their experiences due to a lack of academic publications in this area.

4.   Conclusions

This paper provided an overview of some UK lecturers' drive to integrate MOOCs into their teaching and practical advice from a community of practice. Findings showed that academics have a range of reasons for adopting this practice, with the most common ones being giving students a platform to engage in global communities and international conversations and exposing them to different views and experts in the field. Results from this research provide academics with some of the initial knowledge needed prior to integrating MOOCs into F2F teaching, such as preparing students for the MOOC-blend, designing MOOC-based tasks, and matching the F2F curriculum with the MOOC content to ensure student engagement. Further discussions are needed into this practice, including its benefits, obstacles, and impact on students' learning.

5.   Acknowledgements

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Education 4.0 revolution: transformative approaches to language teaching and learning, assessment and campus design
Edited by Kate Borthwick and Alessia Plutino

Publication date: 2020/08/10