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Learning about language learning on a MOOC: how Massive, Open, Online and “Course”?

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Abstract. This paper reports on an exploratory research project on the evaluation of the engagement with a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) carried out by six members of staff and two ‘expert students’ involved in the MA in English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Department of English and Languages at Coventry University (CU), United Kingdom, between November and December 2014. Its main aim was to investigate how both expert and trainee English teachers and teacher trainers would find the experience of engaging with a FutureLearn MOOC on this subject created by the University of Southampton in collaboration with the British Council – *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching*. The participants involved agreed to record their thoughts while they were taking part in the MOOC and then met once per week for four weeks at the end of each MOOC unit to carry out a collaborative staff/student reflective evaluation of their experience. The paper will discuss the way in which the participants engaged with this project, which became a blended learning community of professional development practice linked to the global community of practice on the MOOC, and present their perspectives on the pros and cons of integrating a MOOC as an Open Educational Resource (OER) into an existing curriculum.

Keywords: MOOC, language learning/teaching, exploratory research, blended learning.

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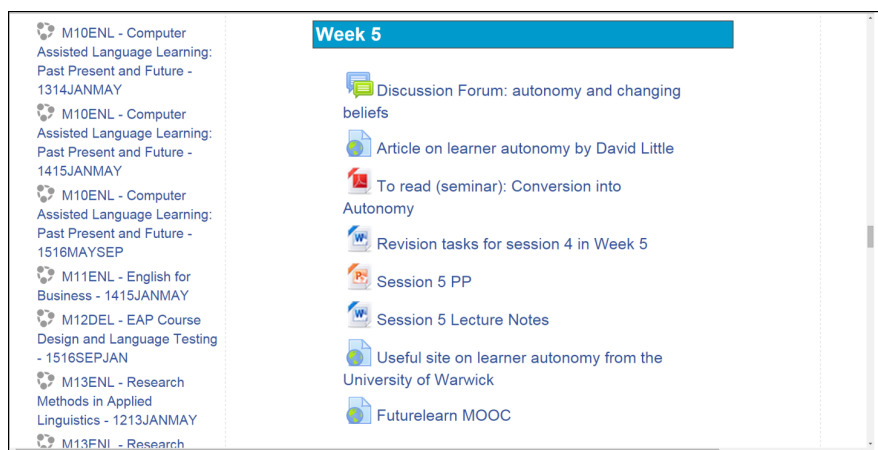
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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the experience of engaging with a MOOC in a project jointly carried out by six members of staff and two ‘expert’ students involved in the MA in English Language Teaching at CU in semester one of academic year 2014-2015. Participants agreed to enrol on the FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding language: Learning and Teaching* throughout its four-week duration. The MOOC had been designed as a ‘taster’ for the online MA in English Language Teaching⁵ run by the University of Southampton in collaboration with the [British Council \(2014\)](#). Around 58,000 people enrolled on the MOOC from all over the world (Borthwick, personal correspondence, July 27, 2015).

The staff involved in this project had been investigating novel ways of enhancing their students’ experience through blended learning curricular interventions for a number of years, linking the development of autonomous language learning and teaching to the acquisition of critical digital literacies and exploring how OERs can be integrated into existing curricula (e.g. [Orsini-Jones, 2010](#); [Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2013](#)).

Figure 1. Screen-shot from T&MoLL&T(CU Moodle website 2014) with the link to the MOOC



This project ran in parallel with another MOOC evaluation project involving all the students on the MA in ELT, as the MOOC had been embedded as an open

5. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/southampton-universitybritish-council-ma-english-language-teaching-online>

educational ‘extra line of support’ into the curriculum of the compulsory module: Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching (T&MoLL&T), see [Figure 1](#). The focus of this paper will however be on the experience of the eight participants involved in the reflective weekly focus groups to discuss their engagement with the MOOC and the lessons learnt from it.

2. Method

This is a small-scale project that mainly draws on qualitative, exploratory data, but also includes some quantitative results obtained via a survey. The data were collected in three ways:

- participants’ logs while engaging with the MOOC;
- weekly ‘post-MOOC-unit’ focus groups that were recorded;
- online survey.

This study is auto-ethnographical in nature, as participants recorded their reflections during each week throughout the four-week duration of the MOOC and shared them in the weekly focus groups. The study includes quantitative results yielded from a survey administered after the MOOC finished. The survey was created with the Bristol Online Survey tool, which complies with the Data Protection Act and included a mixture of Likert-scale type statements and open-ended questions based on recommendations on survey design provided by [Dörnyei \(2003\)](#).

The project is based upon the evaluation of engaging with the FutureLearn ‘Understanding Language’ MOOC occurrence that ran between 17th of November and 14th of December 2014 and obtained CU ethical clearance in October 2014. Participants agreed to:

- engage with the MOOC for 3 hours per week (the time recommended in the MOOC instructions to complete each unit);
- carry out the set activities on it for the 4 weeks of its duration;
- record their thoughts relating to the activities and their ‘metareflections’ on how their learning experience was affected by the platform and its global social collaborative features while engaging with them;

- share the recorded material with the principal investigator (PI) and the research assistant attached to the project;
- engage in a one-hour weekly focus group recorded by the PI using the ‘Voice Memos’ tool on her iPhone;
- write up the findings collaboratively and participate in their dissemination (self-selected participants with the PI);
- fill in the post-MOOC survey (one designed for staff and one for students).

All participants were asked to answer the ‘orienting’ questions attached in the Appendix before the project started and to reflect on the post-MOOC questions (also in Appendix) during the focus groups. The participating tutors were three female lecturers and three male lecturers. The two students – both female – were studying on the MA in ELT at CU. One of them was hired as research assistant for the project.

3. Discussion

As discussed by [Mulder \(2015\)](#), MOOCs can polarise views in academia. The PI for this project agrees with [Kim \(2015\)](#) that MOOCs are opening new educational horizons and they are an “innovation with the potential to have large impact” (p. 3), but there were differing views amongst the participants of this project on this point. As the PI had integrated it into her mandatory module, she was a bit surprised that the survey revealed that her peers thought her curricular actions to be rather risky. However, all participants agreed that there was enough valuable content in the MOOC to make it a useful open educational addition to an existing course.

Also, in the survey answers, all staff agreed that they would recommend studying on a MOOC to their students. Both staff and students enjoyed having access to different perspectives on the topics they were covering on the MA, within an environment that had the added value of a very professional-looking layout, easy navigation and interesting tasks. Most staff commented positively on some innovative activities encountered on the MOOC, like using *Padlet* to share classroom settings from across the world. On the other hand, most of them saw it as a drawback that the MOOC appeared to have been created for specific marketing purposes: to promote the online MA in ELT offered by the University of Southampton with the British Council.

There was one aspect of the MOOC that all staff found disappointing, possibly because they had had high prior expectations of the social-collaborative opportunities offered by the MOOC: that is to say the discussion forums attached to each unit. Here are two comments reported in the open ended section of the survey. Question: “How did you find the communication on the MOOC forums?”:

“There were too many comments to follow a thread”.

“Impossible. I am not sure how you are supposed to have a meaningful discussion with over 50,000 people. I just read a few comments and moved on. I felt that it was too time-consuming to try to respond to comments that on the whole lacked any substance. It seemed to be people just stating how they were enjoying the course and not really engaging with the topics/subject”.

The question of how best to facilitate and structure online discussions on MOOCs to maximise social co-construction of knowledge has been discussed in the literature in various ways. For example, [Coetzee et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Towndrow, Aranguiz, Purser, and Pradhan \(2013\)](#) explore the use of small peer groups to support MOOC participants in their learning of content and reflection on their progress. Perhaps it would have been better to have smaller groupings for the discussions, but this might be impossible to set up in a MOOC that has over 50,000 participants.

The student research assistant commented that engaging with the MOOC had complemented her study on the MA course in that similar topics were covered and her learning was consolidated by having the material presented in a variety of ways and from various different perspectives.

4. Conclusions

Staff and students found that there were learning benefits in engaging with a MOOC and that it was advantageous to be able to study on the MOOC anywhere and at any time after enrolment. Despite the difficulties encountered on the forums, they felt they were part of a global community of practice that also gave them exposure to global perspectives on the topics covered on the MA in English Language Teaching at CU. The MOOC also appeared to offer a different approach to learning, while at the same time supporting the consolidation of the MA content matter, albeit at a somewhat superficial, ‘taster’ level in some parts.

As for the discussion regarding the acronym, it was agreed that the MOOC was definitely ‘Massive’ in terms of capacity as its infrastructure appeared to manage

to handle thousands of participants engaging at the same time from all over the world. This created some communication issues though, as numbers need to be limited to have a meaningful discussion online. ‘Open’ applied to many aspects of the MOOC, mainly the fact that it was free (this was seen as a big advantage by all); normally, in MOOC literature, it also refers to ease of accessibility and the delivery of open curricula (Klobas, MacIntosh, & Murphy, 2015). However, some participants commented that it is not really open to all, due to the digital divide: accessibility requires the Internet and powerful computers/tablets/phones. All participants agreed that the MOOC exemplified the ‘Online’ concept well, in a distance and mainly asynchronous learning mode – but there were live sessions available too – that could be accompanied by classroom-based ‘analogues’. Many of the activities on the MOOC could be used (and were used) as a useful springboard for face-to-face discussions. As for ‘C’ for Course, Klobas et al. (2015) define a course as a “systematic sequence of learning activities” (p. 7). In this sense the FutureLearn MOOC was a course, but one participant thought it resembled more a module than a course. This is possibly just a matter of semantics, as “course” means different things in different countries (e.g. sometimes a UK module is a US course). At a deeper level, a MOOC is not a course because it lacks the scaffolding presence (in Bruner’s 1983 terms) of experienced teachers supporting the learners at each step they take.

Despite their reservations on MOOCs in general, all participants agreed that engaging with the FutureLearn *Understanding Language* one had been a worthwhile and stimulating experience even if they came to the conclusion that MOOCs are not as transformational and/or as “disruptive” as some claim them to be.

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Appendix

Pre-MOOC orienteering questions

- Do you know what a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) is?
- What are your expectations of studying on a MOOC (students/staff who have not completed/done one yet only)?
- Have you ever completed an online course for CPD (Continuous Professional Development) before? What was your experience of it?
- Have you ever engaged in 'Think Aloud Protocol' for research purposes before? If yes, how did you find it, if not what do you think it entails?
- What are in your opinion the 'troublesome' areas in language learning and teaching?

- Which ones do you expect to be covered by the MOOC on language learning and teaching?

Questions for weeks 1-4 of the MOOC

- How does learning language learning and teaching theories on the MOOC compare with your previous modes of study of the same topic?
- What value-added (if any) do you think there is in taking a MOOC?
- Did the content of the first (or second or third or fourth, depending on the week of study) week meet your expectations in terms of what you had predicted before you started?
- Would you recommend studying on a MOOC to your students? If so, would you take an integrated approach or keep it separate from what you do?
- How does interaction with peers on the MOOC differ from interaction with peers in other settings (e.g. face-to-face CPD, VLE)?
- How are you finding the process of recording your thoughts while engaging on the MOOC?
- Are there any aspects of the MOOC you are not happy with?
- Would you consider writing a MOOC for English Language Teaching? If so, what topic(s) would you like to cover?
- How are you finding the experience of taking part in this reflective project for the purpose of your CPD? And in general?
- Any other thoughts you would like to share?

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