

Open, future, online teaching: enabling excellence in the student experience

Abstract

This mixed-methods study reports on a continuing professional development intervention (CPD), called #OpenTeach, designed to upskill part-time online teachers. CPD is recognised as crucial to the upskilling of educators to enhance the student learning experience. However, an important gap exists in the provision of CPD for part-time and online teachers who rarely have the opportunity to avail of campus-based resources (Beaton & Gilbert, 2013). To address this gap we need to better harness the potential of more flexible models of online education. Geographically dispersed online teachers require opportunities to engage with new learning designs, new digital competencies and new ways of embedding digital technology in teaching, learning and assessment. Accordingly, the #OpenTeach intervention addresses this challenge through a highly targeted CPD programme for part-time online teachers. The core of the initiative involves the development of a short open online course on online teaching best practice. This course will develop the digital and pedagogical competencies of the 90 DCU Connected online teachers locally and will be open to online educators globally. The #OpenTeach: Professional Development for Open Online Educators project is funded by the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the features of effective online teaching in the context of [DCU Connected online degree programmes](#). The aims of the study are to generate new knowledge about effective online teaching practice and to harness this new knowledge to support the professional development of online teachers and to more effectively support online student learning experiences.

Part-time teachers miss out on CPD

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is recognised as crucial to the upskilling of educators to enhance the student learning experience. However, an important gap exists in the provision of CPD for part-time and online teachers. As they rarely have the opportunity to avail of campus-based resources they may consequently have limited access to professional development (Beaton & Gilbert, 2013; Hitch, Mahoney, McFarlane, 2018). Harvey (2013) argues that this ad hoc approach to CPD for part-time teachers may impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

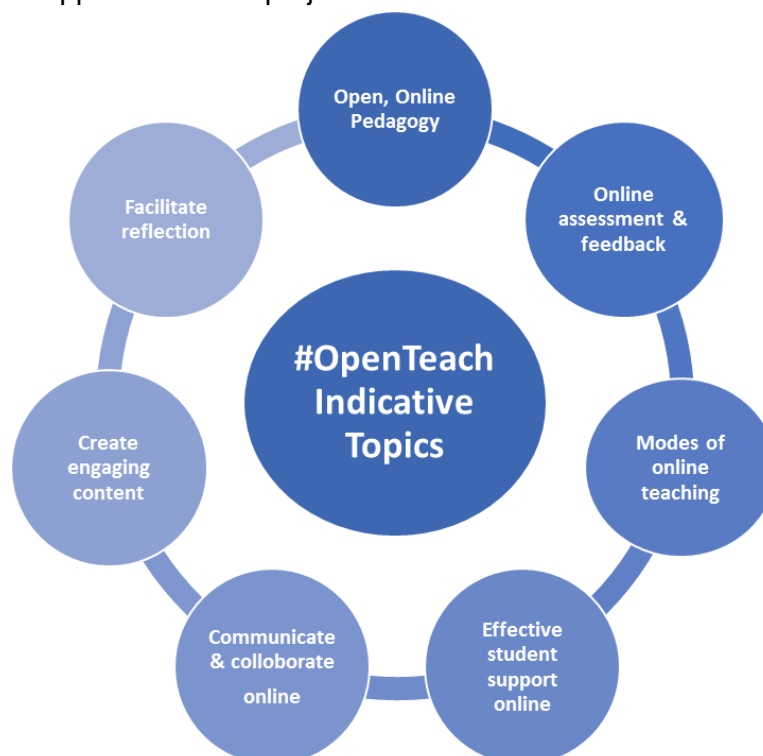
To address this gap, and better harness the potential of more flexible models of online education, this underserved group of geographically dispersed teachers need opportunities to engage with new learning designs, new digital competencies and new ways of embedding digital technology in teaching, learning and assessment (European Commission, 2013). Accordingly, the OpenTeach intervention seeks to address this challenge through a highly targeted CPD programme for part-time online teachers.

Teaching online is different

Online learning is the fastest growing areas of education worldwide. In the U.S., a recent report by Babson Survey Research found that 32% of all American college students were studying at least one course online (Seaman, Allen, Seaman, 2018). However, teaching online requires different pedagogical approaches to traditional lecturing, therefore institutions need to support teachers transitioning into online teaching to ensure quality (Gurley, 2019; Mohr & Shelton, 2017). Effective online teaching supports student engagement and success, this is key as online students are more vulnerable to attrition (Coker, 2018; Woodley & Simpson 2014).

The #OpenTeach course

The project aims to create a short online course centred around seven evidence-based digital guides on open online teaching best practice. A pilot of the short online course will be run in 2019 involving staff from DCU and other institutions, as well as students so we can get their feedback on the course. There will be a social layer on twitter using the hashtag #OpenTeach as a means for interaction and sharing of practice during the course pilot and as a dissemination approach for the project.



Methodology

The study adopts a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014) using qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. The study is framed by the following overarching research question: *what are the features of effective/good online teaching?*

The study has two phases: In phase one, prior to the #OpenTeach intervention, a needs analysis was conducted and in phase 2: following the intervention an evaluation phase data collection will take place.

In phase one and two, two data collection methods are adopted: online focus groups and anonymous online surveys. Data is generated in each phase through online semi-structured focus groups with online teachers and online students, conducted in real time online using a private adobe connect classroom.

Three anonymous online surveys were created for the study, adapted from (Campbell, Reedy, Baird, Baird, 2018) instrument. They include open-ended and five-point likert style scale questions about the features of effective online teaching and the #Openteach intervention. The online survey has been created using Qualtrics and was administered through a recruitment email sent to current DCU Connected students and teachers using a generic email account.

The quantitative and qualitative data will be analysed with equal priority. Descriptive and inferential statistics will be used to analyse quantitative data via SPSS statistical analysis software. The qualitative data will be analysed following a data-led approach following the Braun & Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Following the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data sets, they will then be compared using a side-by-side comparison approach (Creswell, 2014).

Participants were selected based on purposive sampling. Permission for access to the DCU Connected current students (n=1000) and DCU Connected current tutors (n=90) and their email addresses has been granted by the relevant Open Education gatekeeper. As the Openteach course will be an open online course, a third cohort of participants will be those participants from outside of DCU, who indicate through the course sign up process that they consent to participate in the research study.

Ethical approval for the study has been granted by the Dublin City University research ethics committee.

Conclusion

The #OpenTeach project has the potential to plug a significant gap in the provision of professional learning opportunities for part-time online teachers and to support sectoral development of online teaching best practice in Ireland.

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