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## Simple Sense. An alternative approach to Online Tutorials

### Student Dissertation

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## MON: Simple Sense. An alternative approach to Online Tutorials (Peter Scott)

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For new students beginning studies with the Open University, the range of information they are presented with can be bewildering. They are expected to develop new learning skills alongside the academic topic they are studying and for many, this will be their first exposure to academic work for many years. For these students, engagement with online activities can be challenging, there are many reasons that students fail to complete modules (Simpson, 2013), but one key issue is difficulty in managing time between learning and the demands made on them in day to day life.

I have noted that attendance at Online tutorials on the module TU100 is relatively poor, on occasions no students turn up. I canvassed opinion within my own tutor group regarding why students chose not to attend these sessions. Typical responses to a straw poll I carried out have been: "I haven't used it yet, solely because of not having time" (Roddis, A., 2015), "I attend ... depending on my work" (Paez, J., 2016). There have been examples of technical problems with access: "I am concerned as I have unfortunately missed the online tutorial ... I am in the room and there is no-one else there" (Iqbal, A., 2016). These difficulties in engagement with the OULive sessions mean the students are missing out on important academic materials and also missing out on an important online interaction with other students. Willging and Johnson(2009) cite isolation and lack of interaction as a contributory factor towards dropout from distance learning courses.

The theme of my project is Implementation and I have chosen to approach provision of an alternative for students who cannot or do not attend Online tutorial sessions. My project seeks to both address the isolation and lack of interaction and to offer both an alternative to those unable to attend and also additional resources for those who are able to take part but for whom more information or opportunities to interact are desired. The project centres on the creation of a short course to be delivered via Moodle which is approached by students in the form of a Mini MOOC. Computer programs are all based on the same operations regardless of the language used, and understanding these operations and how they sit together is an authentic activity and this type of learning is best achieved in a participative environment (Sfard, 1988). The underlying pedagogy of the course is connectivist, effectively seeking to allow students to connect with each other to work on those aspects of programming they are having difficulties with.

My presentation will discuss

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- The approach taken towards developing the course.
- The theory supporting the approach to the course.
- Difficulties encountered in the implementation.
- The response to the course from students
- The response to the course from fellow TU100 tutors.
- Next steps with the project.

I hope the findings will be of interest to fellow tutors, both in the STEM field and across other faculties.

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[John Baglow](#)

6:11pm 16 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Peter, I run a basic teacher-training course and have had similar experiences to your findings. Interaction is, I think, a vital element in the learning process. I am thinking of making online tutorials compulsory!

I am not entirely sure that I understand your proposed solution: You say *The project centres on the creation of a short course to be delivered via Moodle which is approached by students in the form of a Mini MOOC.* Do you mean that the mini MOOC is an instructional course which persuades the students of the merits of online tutorials? Or do you mean that it adopts a completely different route to effective learning, avoiding the need for tutorials?



[Elaine Dalloway](#)

11:44am 17 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

In a brick built university attendance at some tutorials would certainly be compulsory. For OU studies I was unable to attend tutorials which were literally hundreds of miles away and really felt that I missed out. On earlier levels (1 and 2) courses I was able to travel to tutorials and the benefits were great.

Perhaps with the technology we have today attendance at least one of the planned tutorials should be compulsory?

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[John Baglow](#)

2:23pm 23 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Peter, reading your abstract again, I'm realising that by tutorials you seem to mean teaching sessions - I was thinking you meant general purpose tutorials which were pastoral or explanatory in nature. Have I got that right?



[Peter Scott](#)

7:55pm 25 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

John, we currently run a series of 9 teaching sessions covering Sense programming. The aim is that they complement the learning activities in the Programming Guide students are given as part of the module, they are there to reinforce the concepts and to give the students experience of working together on a piece of programming work.

I can see a point in making the tutorials compulsory but am not sure how the less confident students would deal with that. My concern is that even with the approach I have tried for the project participation is not good, there must be a balance to be struck.



[Callum Moore](#)

6:18pm 30 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

The project 'seeks to both address the isolation and lack of interaction and to offer both an alternative to those unable to attend and also additional resources for those who are able to take part but for whom more information or opportunities to interact are desired'. I like this. I know that I'm someone who would greatly appreciate that.

It's a very difficult line to get right. I know some have said sessions should be compulsory, but a lot of people enrol in Open Uni etc. because they have other commitments. Yet, how are you to learn if there's no direct input? I'm looking forward to seeing what you come up with!



[Lesley Hamilton](#)

9:58pm 8 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Peter,

As someone who has staff development as part of my remit, I find it difficult to get staff to commit to both online and F2F workshops. I find that when offered, on average 5-8 people sign-up for the workshop but on the day, I'm lucky to have 2-3 people turn-up (and sometimes none). It is very frustrating as the effort in preparation and running workshops is the same whether it is for 8 or for 1 but the time/overhead is much higher.

Apologies usually involve changing circumstances and time, e.g. so and so was sick so I was drafted in to take the class.

In summary I'm wondering if a mini-MOOC such as you describe would be a possible option for engaging staff in staff development opportunities.

Do you intend to include both synchronous and asynchronous activities? I'm interested in learning what Moodle activities you will employ and how you will use them to engage students.



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

11:37am 16 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Peter

Here is a summary of the questions/comments from your presentation - please respond as you wish:

- ▶ I wonder if this is a common problem across the OU, or associated with particular subjects or levels.
- ▶ I was amazed to find I was the only person to attend a computing tutorial.
- ▶ It really surprises me that sessions focused on TMAs would not attract attendees. Assessment-focused sessions normally garner the greatest numbers, in my experience.
- ▶ Do you think this might be discipline issue ? computing students are difficult to engage in face to face let alone online.
- ▶ surprises me as well perhaps timings are the main issue - doodle ?
- ▶ it is interesting that different disciplines have higher attendance, whether online or F2F. Economics students all turn up, computing students not so much!
- ▶ I was a computing student and found tutorials invaluable - they were face to face at that time though - but I would have joined online too
- ▶ I wonder if students pursuing different disciplines do display varying behaviour in terms of attendance, adherence to regulations, etc.
- ▶ Duration of the course for building trust?
- ▶ The "too shy" one is interesting. You can quite easily turn up and not say anything or even write anything in the chatbox! It's far less intimidating than face-to-face seminars.
- ▶ TU100 has had issues of expectations not matching with what was expected
- ▶ Too shy ie don't have an 'open state of mind'.
- ▶ another contrast our students are asking for more onlinetutorials - i'm wondering now will they attend them?
- ▶ Can be quite intimidating if you have participants who are quite over-powering.
- ▶ Does anyone make attendance compulsory?
- ▶ Are Gilly Salmon's 5 steps relevant here?
- ▶ Or a wiki?
- ▶ There are a number of F2F conventional unis where attendance at lectures is (effectively) compulsory.
- ▶ Where did you find teh course on Moodlecloud? Would love to know.
- ▶ Could you ask old students to test the site?  
I found old students very enthusiastic
- ▶ open it up for testing = open scholar style

- ▶ Isn't it amazing how H818 has encouraged all of us to learn new things to create/make. Learning design to make us comfortable with being uncomfortable as a collective. Discuss.
- ▶ A successful MOOC designer has told me before that a key tip for designing a module is to withhold information until the next session and have cliff-hangers in the section before. Story-telling style :-)  
very interesting
- ▶ would you consider making it more challenging through the use of visual basic or even python rather than scratch
- ▶ Punctuate the course with virtual classroom?
- ▶ Do you encourage students to meet in OU Live without you being there?



[Peter Scott](#)

8:36pm 29 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

I will group some of the points together as this may give a more complete answer.

Tutorial attendance does appear to differ across faculties, I am drawn to the differences in H818 and TU100 as a personal example; I would have been shocked to have the levels of attendance that we have seen on H818 in any session for TU100. Even my first face to face session had only 5 out of a group of 22 attend. It does appear that IT has a higher percentage of people with challenging personalities; I have certainly worked with some very creative and able but socially difficult people over 26 years in the IT industry. There is some research (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) suggesting evidence that there is a relatively high incidence of aspergers syndrome or high functioning autism amongst maths and IT students, perhaps this may have some bearing on the interaction with tutorials. It does seem to be an avenue for further research and in this context possibly an avenue for more work on accessible learning opportunities.

Gilly Salmon's 5 steps are very relevant here. The current OULive model is not getting past the first stage for these students and it is this that started me looking at other ways to approach engaging participation. If we are stating that online participation is an expected outcome for the students then we need to be sure that we have as many ways into participation as we may need. If the learner is not motivated to access the system, then moving to the next step of online socialisation is not going to happen.

The course on Moodlecloud is on the home page when you register for a Moodlecloud account.

The points on interspersing the course with virtual classroom sessions and also leaving the students hanging are very useful. I am of the view that the original OULive sessions are designed to slot in in between sections of the course materials in exactly that way. IT brings me back to the original question I had about how I could get the students to take part in the virtual classrom sessions.

The course should be adaptable to any programming language; the idea is to create the framework of how the logic of the program works and then to flesh out the framework with the program. The language we use should be interchangeable according to target audience.

I hadn't thought of encouraging the use of OULive, I tend to use it for one to one sessions where students are not happy with Skype. One to take away for the 16J presentation :-)



[Paula Adriuzzo](#)

3:42pm 2 April 2016 (Edited 3:43pm 2 April 2016) [Permalink](#)

Hi Peter,

I found your discussion as a result of searching for Sfard as part of an activity for H800, a module that I am currently taking.

Regarding the various types of tutorials, I did maths modules and am in the SE of England. For level one modules there were always plenty available where I live, Brighton. But as I progressed up through the levels the face to face tutorials were further and further away, such as Guilford, Coulsdon, Southampton, Tunbridge Wells and at various universities throughout central London, I travelled to those that I could get to easily by public transport. What was good about this was over time I began to make friends with those that I began to recognise from previous tutorials and we began communicating as to who the best tutors were, and, if we couldn't make it in person then we would scan and share our notes. I wouldn't have been able to maintain a 2:1 honours had it not been for the support I had had from these contacts. There were also a number of online tutorials which were quite well attended and also available as recordings for later use. The level 3 modules I did were all online, and despite there being a lot of activity on the forums the attendance for tutorials was quite disappointing; odd times there were as many as 8 but usually only about 3 and sometimes no one showed. The recordings were accessible afterwards, and a lot of people took advantage of this, but if no one showed up then there was no recording. We also got to know which tutors ran the most worthwhile tutorials as was the case with face to face tutorials.

I'm not sure why people couldn't or didn't attend the online tutorials, they were mostly held at around 8pm, a time which was convenient for me, if I didn't attend it was usually because I either forgot or hadn't found a particular tutor helpful.

Paula



[Peter Scott](#)

9:40am 7 April 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Paula,

Hope you're enjoying H800, it seems ages since I studied that module but it opened up a whole new world of interest for me.

Tutorial attendance is a long standing problem and I have to admit, I was often one who didn't attend. I do think there is a changing approach to consuming information that comes from the introduction of tablet devices and the like; information can now be at your fingertips at any time and patterns of consumption differ. There is a move towards consumption of bite size pieces of information and this tends to be accessed

asynchronously. As I reflect on my project here, I am less convinced that formal lesson style tutorials are going to be the answer. I found myself asking how my approach differed from that of the lessons in the OU module. Perhaps a playlist of short snappy online presentations that could be accessed as required by the students might help? This however moves away from Sfard's participative metaphor and I still feel there is mileage in students working collaboratively on a small project for programming modules.

Peter

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