

Evaluating the Use of a MOOC within Higher Education Professional Development Training

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the effectiveness of a massive open online course (MOOC) as a professional development tool in higher education. The transition from the MOOC's initial intended use as a low cost way for students to access education and aid their studies has evolved to facilitate continuing professional development (CPD), particularly within the commercial sector [1].

Findings from this study indicate there is an increase in participation and satisfaction amongst higher education staff who undertook a MOOC compared to attending traditional staff development days. Recommendations from this study's findings highlight that staff were keen to engage with the MOOC format, but felt they needed face-to-face meetings as well to reinforce, contextualize and discuss the key messages of the MOOC. In addition to this, time allocation within workloads should be considered for any future inclusion of MOOCs for staff development.

Keywords

"Professional Development", "best practice", "staff development", "CPD", "MOOC", "higher education"

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the findings from a study conducted at Hartpury University Centre where teaching staff volunteered to participate in trialing a MOOC on blending learning, to examine whether this format could be used as an alternative to traditionally delivered staff development days. MOOCs provide the opportunity for both educational and corporate sectors to provide a learning platform for a large amount of learners enabling them to have an education that is free from geographical and physical boundaries with minimal financial limitations [1, 5].

The move to using MOOCs in CPD [1,4, 6] highlights the change in awareness and perception that providing targeted and customisable CPD to staff is both more efficient and cost effective, and can be directed to individual staff development needs. Over the past decade online distinct learning programs have been expanding within the CPD market [1, 4, 6].

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2. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Continual professional development is vital in all professions although it has been highlighted that it is vital for higher education academics [3, 4, 5]. This is because university academics need to keep pace with the continuous developments in both their subject area and pedagogical advancements.

Teaching and learning within the higher education sector is under increasing scrutiny as highlighted in the Green Paper of November 2015 [2]

and also the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) review of the future of quality assessment [7]. The Green Paper introduced the teaching excellence framework (TEF) that will aim to improve teaching standards. Because of associated developments within the higher education sector, CPD for academic staff is likely to become increasingly important. [1, 6]

3. EVOLUTION OF THE MOOC

Higher education has to respond to rapidly evolving digital technologies. Whereas some authors state that MOOCs are relatively new [1], others [5, 7] highlights that the MOOC concept is merely an extension of distance learning that has progressed from paper correspondence to video courses through to distance learning internet based e-courses.

The initial intention of the implementation of MOOCs was to provide an educational opportunity for a mass audience. Initially centered on lowering the cost and accessibility of college and university courses [4]. The majority of MOOC programs offer the opportunity to purchase a certificate of completion and varying levels of CPD certification. The year 2014 was highlighted as the 'year of the corporate MOOC', with a surge in companies not only using existing courses as a form of professional development but also creating and delivering them in specialist areas [1]. This turned the direction of the MOOC into a form of delivering specific CPD courses in key areas and changed the way CPD is viewed and delivered [1].

4. RESEARCH METHOD

Epistemologically, this research followed an interpretive social constructionist approach [8, 9, 10, 11]. This approach emphasises the idea that human knowledge is a human construct and therefore research should examine the world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it [10]. Ten academic members of higher educational staff volunteered to participate in a MOOC about blended learning, which ran over five weeks with four hours

of allocated time per week. Staffs were initially emailed to ask if they would like to participate in the MOOC and be part of the study. Therefore, this was an opt-in staff development opportunity. Of 65 members of staff, 15 opted in (23% of all staff.)

During week three of the course the researchers held a focus group to gain feedback on participants' experience of the MOOC and if they thought the content so far would help improve their teaching. Four key themes were discussed during the focus group; format of the MOOC, content, usefulness to teaching, and potential for MOOCs as a means of staff development within an HE environment. Breaking down the elements of the MOOC from its delivery, design, time allocation, content and the reasons for participation, the researchers were able to build a picture of the aspects that may impact the MOOCs potential use as a professional development tool. At the end of the five-week course six individual interviews were held to gain in-depth perceptions of the four main areas previously identified during the focus group. Interviews were analysed using a grounded theory system of open, axial and selective coding [12]

5. FINDINGS

Findings from the focus group highlighted that staff were struggling to keep up to date with the course on a weekly basis. Six members of the group acknowledged that they were behind on the weekly sessions due to other commitments being prioritised, with only two out of the ten allocating specific time each week to complete the session. The time allocation for the MOOC was specified as four hours per week, however all ten staff said it did not take this long to complete. All staff said it had taken them between one to two hours to complete, and thought that it would only take four hours if participants were engaging fully with the discussion board and the signposting to additional activities.

The academics who participated in the MOOC strongly believed that completing a MOOC which was specific to their own personal professional development requirements was very beneficial. This was seen to be of more value than attendance at generic staff development events that were not tailored to academics' level of experience or CPD needs. MOOCs were viewed as a means of achieving customisable CPD, and this aspect of the MOOC format was well received by all staff.

The blended learning MOOC was time released, in that staffs were not able to progress beyond the week they were currently doing. All staffs said that they would have liked all of the course materials to be available from the outset, enabling them to progress more quickly in concentrated blocks of time, rather than having to wait. Having to wait was seen to be a contributing factor to losing momentum and motivation to complete the course. Staffs highlighted during individual interviews that they would have liked a blended learning approach to delivery, which, ironically given the focus of the MOOC, they felt it did not deliver. Staffs thought there was much more scope for directed activities that were assessed more creatively before moving on. In this respect, questions were raised about the pedagogical value of the MOOC. All staffs felt that there was scope for very passive participation in the MOOC. Although collaboration and discussion were encouraged during the MOOC, this was done via discussion boards. Five out of the ten participants had visited the discussion boards and felt that discussions were superficial and did not foster a deeper understanding of the subject area. The time lag for response meant they had often moved on to the next subject before receiving any response, which left them feeling that it was not worth revisiting the discussion boards.

Participants thought the format of the MOOC was professional, but the presenters somewhat boring and unengaging. Discussion surrounding the presentation of the MOOC highlighted that staff thought specific presentation skills were needed, that stretched beyond teaching within a classroom environment. Participants spoke of these skills as a mix between being able to enthuse people about the subject area, to encourage their ongoing participation, to understand the pedagogy of MOOCs, and to also have skills akin to those of TV presenting.

As part of this trial, Hartpury University Centre offered to finance the CPD certificate that was available to those completing the MOOC. Staff welcomed this, but highlighted that there was still an expectation for them to attend the compulsory staff development days as well as completing the MOOC. Staff would have appreciated having a requirement to complete a specific number of hours of CPD, and to be able to choose what this CPD entailed. Four of the ten participants thought that this would have helped them complete the MOOC as completing the MOOC in addition to the existing staff development days was seen to be onerous.

Staff found the content engaging but would have liked programmed face-to-face sessions in conjunction with the MOOC to discuss the content with others and share their thoughts about implementing what they had learned. A suggestion made during the focus group was to meet on a weekly basis and complete the MOOC as a group; this would allow staff to complete it in the recommend time, which seemed to be a key issue. Participants also thought there was some potential benefit in watching the MOOC as a group and then immediately discussing how the resources and techniques showcased within the MOOC could be utilised within teaching.

Although participants thought the online forum was useful to gauge how blended learning is being implemented at other institutions, staff felt that a discussion for staff at Hartpury would be more beneficial. Staffs were generally positive about sharing good practice with others online, but stated that if no one is online at the same time as them, it is hard to gain feedback or have a natural conversation.

The environment plays a big part in the engagement and participation within a MOOC and staff development. Having a different location allows separation from the environment where there is the immediate pressure of teaching. The researchers found that certain academics preferred having staff development in a separate location as this increased their engagement in a new topic.

Results from the interviews supported the main finding from the focus groups conducted in week three, that time allocation, the MOOCs design and content and the environment within which it is conducted all contribute to the participation and completion rates of the course. Of the six interviews conducted, three had participated and completed the course, with three volunteering to participate in the course but not completing it.

To summarise, the key reasons why members of staff did not complete the course was due to three factors. Firstly, time commitment, the participants felt that with other teaching commitments and administration requirements they did not have the time to complete the course based on the recommended hours. Secondly, loss of interest - after the first week participants felt that the course was no longer of enough interest to pursue. The last factor was the lack of face-to-face interaction to discuss areas of interest and sharing good practice.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has highlighted several issues surrounding the use of MOOCs for professional development in higher education, the first one being a lack of completion and concerns about the time commitment needed. Compared to formal learning there appears to be much higher rates of dropout and unequal patterns of participation within MOOCs [13]. In order to positively affect completion it is recommended that MOOCs are used as a professional development tool but used in conjunction with scheduled workshops and discussion sessions. This could take a blended learning format as a means to overcome difficulties in relation to timetabling sessions when everyone is available. The MOOC highlighted various tools and applications, which can be used within teaching, and participants strongly felt that there was a need for a discussion group to discuss these applications and share ideas and good practice. It is clear from this research that participants found that the value of the MOOC was dependent upon discussion about how the skills learned are used in context. The scaling of MOOCs can mean that active and collaborative pedagogies are lost, and some of the networked effect of online discussion and collaboration are not realised [14]. In order to fully benefit from MOOCs as a professional development tool increasing thought is needed by developers in relation to the pedagogical underpinning of these courses, the learning design and the platform design [15]

MOOCs offer universities the potential to create communities of enquiry, however this research suggests that there is still a need for face-to-face discussion too. MOOCs also enable customisation of learning, whereby MOOCs can contribute to helping staff create a personal learning environment [16], and taking a more active approach to their own development.

There is potential to signpost staff to relevant MOOC platforms which cover the subjects taught at Hartpury, and which would provide the opportunity for staff to select which MOOC they would be most interested in completing. Members of staff would have the autonomy to choose the most relevant one for them, but would need the certificate of completion to evidence engagement. However careful consideration is needed as several participants raised concerns about the passive nature of MOOCs and a tendency towards superficial learning rather than allowing for deep learning. It is recommended that participation in a MOOC is allocated within the staff's workload in order for it to be productive and reduce the potential 'drop-out' rate. Additionally, should institutions require staff to evidence their engagement within a MOOC, a certificate of completion is required. This has a financial cost that would need to be taken into consideration by the institution.

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