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**Research Article**

**Engaging students and MOOC learners through social media**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports upon an initiative to integrate the Digital Marketing MOOC we produced with FutureLearn into an introductory module for MSc Digital Marketing students at the University of Southampton. We are currently drawing upon the lessons learned from this experiment to integrate more of our MOOCs and their related face to face modules in creative ways. We begin by reviewing the role of social learning before presenting the feedback received from students of their MOOC participation experience. On the whole the feedback was very positive, although we initially received some unexpected criticism for asking fee-paying students to participate in a free online course. These results provided us with an interesting opportunity to discuss the changing nature of value and consumerism in higher education.

**Introduction**

This paper reports upon an initiative to integrate the Digital Marketing MOOC we produced with FutureLearn into an introductory module for MSc Digital Marketing students at the University of Southampton. We are currently drawing upon the lessons learned from this experiment to integrate more of our MOOCs and their related face to face modules in creative ways. We begin by reviewing the role of social learning before presenting the feedback received from students of their

MOOC participation experience. On the whole the feedback was very positive, although we initially received some unexpected criticism for asking fee-paying students to participate in a free online course. These results provided us with an interesting opportunity to discuss the changing nature of value and consumerism in higher education.

The growth of online learning and the extent of choice now available to learners pose a significant challenge to the traditional university education model. MOOCs are the latest example of potentially disruptive technologies that are challenging the accepted model of higher education. As learner expectations of quality and flexibility rise, the possibilities offered to educational innovators by web technologies often tend to exceed the strategic willingness to adapt in conservative and bureaucratic institutions (Weller and Anderson, 2013).

Commentators moved swiftly from the early narrative of hype around MOOCs (Barber et al, 2013) to one of distinct negativity (Laurillard, 2014). It now seems that MOOCs are acting as a catalyst for innovation and change within receptive universities rather than making the entire HE sector redundant. In this they are following in the well worn footsteps of earlier innovations in the Gartner Hype Cycle from the “[peak of inflated expectations](#)” to the “[trough of disillusionment](#)”. In theory, the next stage is for MOOCs to emerge blinking into the daylight of the “plateau of productivity” – older and less exciting but perhaps a little wiser and more sustainable. In particular, we see the potential of social and networked online learning to offer significant added value to campus-based students, as well as to MOOC learners from all over the world.

## **The value of Social Learning**

Social learning is not about consuming content provided by tutors. The role of the tutor is to create the conditions and supportive atmosphere in which everyone can share and learn. In the early runnings of our MOOCs we noted the feedback from learners about the benefits they had accrued by interacting with each other, sharing their stories and building a global network of contacts, both within the MOOC platform itself and through associated social media channels. It was clear that this social learning moves way beyond the received wisdom of “the sage on the stage” - instead it is about participating in a course in such a way that tutors and participants can learn from each other and share what they know.

Mazur (2012) noted how learning improved when students were expected to engage with each other rather than simply listen to lectures:

*“Active learners take new information and apply it, rather than merely taking note of it. Firsthand use of new material develops personal ownership. When subject matter connects*

*directly with students' experiences, projects, and goals, they care more about the material they seek to master."*

The Innovating Pedagogy Report (Sharples et al, 2014) identified "massive open social learning" as the innovation most likely to have a profound impact upon education in the short term. George Siemens, who designed and convened the first MOOC (#CCK08) back in 2008, also emphasised the growing importance of the "social" element of MOOCs in a TED blog post:

*"And, what learners really need has diversified over the past several decades as the knowledge economy has expanded. Universities have not kept pace with learner needs and MOOCs have caused a much needed stir — a period of reflection and self-assessment. To date, higher education has largely failed to learn the lessons of participatory culture, distributed and fragmented value systems and networked learning." (Siemens, 2014)*

Now the world's 3rd largest MOOC provider, and recent winner of [Best User Experience](#) in the UXUK Awards, FutureLearn claim that social learning is a key feature within their MOOCs. Recently a number of courses have been opened up to Google indexing and public viewing of specific content without registration:

*"We believe passionately in sharing knowledge and learning with others, so we'll be opening up more and more steps for you to see and share."*

<https://about.futurelearn.com/blog/introducing-new-open-shareable-steps-in-futurelearn-courses/>

A growing number of University leaders are putting MOOCs at the heart of their online education strategy. For example, Professor Sir Timothy O'Shea, Vice Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, claimed that "hybrid will be the new normal" within the next 5 years (Keynote to FutureLearn Academic Network event, June 2015). He predicted a future of online courses and MOOCs as part of networked curricula, joint degrees and collaborative partnerships.

Patrick Stoddart, Head of Education Technology at the University of New South Wales, described their digital strategy as "*MOOCs as mainstream*" in a recent presentation to Futurelearn Partners (January, 2016). Every programme in the university (UG and PG) is now working to offer MOOCs within an integrated curriculum framework that combines Open Educational Resources (OERs) with free MOOCs, traditional modules and additional professional development features into a "*package*" according to the specific requirements of each programme.

At the same event, Professor Peter Horrocks, Vice Chancellor of the Open University, called for what he termed the "*collaborative creation of education*". He noted that digital approaches in terms of learning and teaching will be at the heart of the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The key message from the day was that the web is already transforming key sectors such as

music and journalism, and education is not exempt from this process. Forward thinking universities need to stop treating digital simply as online file storage and instead focus on harnessing its potential for social, collaborative learning on a global basis.

### **Building networks of campus-based students and MOOC learners**

Our MOOC in Digital Marketing with FutureLearn first ran with 14,597 registered learners in October 2014. While our traditional students from a range of courses were encouraged to take part, there was no formal requirement to do so and it was seen as an “optional extra” to their studies. For the second running of the MOOC a year later, we wanted to link in our campus-based students more specifically to enable them to benefit from participation in a global community of learners, and reflect on their experience for module assessment purposes.

The introductory module of our Digital Marketing MSc (75 students) was chosen as the vehicle for this experiment. Students were asked to register for the MOOC, work through the course materials, and interact with MOOC learners via the discussion forums and the various social media spaces (mainly Google+, Twitter, Facebook) that evolved during the course. The assessed work for their introductory module required them to write 5 blog posts reflecting on different aspects of the learning experience of participating in these communities. In the next section we will report on the feedback we received from the students by drawing upon the written reflections on their blogs and from personal conversations.

We initially set up a [blog](#) and [Twitter](#) account to support the MOOC on social media. The blog was used for occasional features by PhD student contributors, and “behind the scenes” course production stories. The Twitter account and #FLdigital hashtag was used extensively by the Educators and student Mentors to share relevant news stories, respond to queries and retweet useful posts made by MOOC learners on their own twitter accounts. A Facebook group was set up by a MOOC learner which is still active today. The most successful channel was a [Google+ group](#) that was originally set up by Simon Fogg, a learner on the original Web Science MOOC (2013). He reconfigured the group title and description to support the Digital Marketing MOOC as well. It currently has 2,290 members. We also made use of [Storify](#) to summarise the events and discussions of each week, and a [YouTube channel](#) to post end of week summary videos. The videos include a live event we broadcast using Periscope, weekly chats between educators and mentors, and students reviewing their own key learning points. The main objective with the MOOC social

media channels was for us to demonstrate how to use the tools we were recommending to learners on the course, to encourage people to participate and try them out for themselves.

In the second phase of the project, we will interview the students at the end of their student programme to see if the value they initially attached to this learning experience has increased or decreased over time, and evaluate what this means for our plans for MOOC / classroom integration in the next academic year.

## Results

There were 16,116 registered learners on the MOOC, of which 39% were classified as “social learners” in FutureLearn terms (meaning that they made at least one comment within a discussion). There were 17,871 comments posted in total during the course. The feedback from MOOC learners was overwhelmingly positive, but for the purposes of this paper we have focused on the reflections of the 75 campus-based students who participated in the MOOC:

- Only 12% of the student group had any prior knowledge/experience of MOOCs
- 15% initially disliked the idea, but came to like the MOOC by the end
- 15% were neutral before/after studying the MOOC
- 62% liked the MOOC from the start
- 8% disliked the MOOC throughout

### *Most common positive comments from participating students:*

- The value of learning from current practice in a world where “learning how to learn” is more important than what you know (for example a set and quickly outdated curriculum)
- Diversity of MOOC learning community
- The flexibility of timing for participation, at a time when many students were multi-tasking with job applications and other geographically dispersed responsibilities.
- The ability to learn at their own pace, especially if English was not their first language.
- Useful comments, examples and feedback from other MOOC learners based all around the world (190 countries).

- Contacts made and employability networks developed
- Opportunity to reflect on most useful aspects of their overall learning experience
- Opportunity to feedback their ideas for changes to improve the experience for future students
- The global input / examples shared / range of experiences of the learners

*Most common negative comments from participating students:*

- The large volume of information in the discussions could be overwhelming
- Hard to decide which sources of information shared by learners were most robust/reliable
- The limitations of the platform structure for facilitating discussion (it was difficult for conversations to be sustained because of the volume of posts which meant they soon disappeared from sight, and notification was slow - only once per day - when replies to an author's thread were posted)
- Too many social channels to monitor and participate in (We used Twitter, Facebook, Periscope and Google+ as well the "official" platform discussions.)
- Being required to participate in a freely available online course when "they had paid for lectures"

### **Implications and next steps**

With a positive rating awarded by 92% of students at the end of the MOOC, we were pleased that overall the students seemed to have got a lot of value from it as indicated above, but we were surprised at the negativity that some of them displayed initially (15% of the group). We had put a huge amount of effort into producing the MOOC - it contained the very latest research into digital marketing trends and developments, had significant levels of tutor involvement in the discussions, a team of student facilitators on hand to answer queries and monitor the forum, value-added real time sessions, a large number of learners from all around the world who were generous in sharing their knowledge and experiences, and weekly video feedback to reflect on the issues covered. All in all, the "package" of engagement and content was far in excess of what the students would have received on a "standard" module consisting just of weekly face to face lectures.

Feedback from external learners who were not based on the full time programme was overwhelmingly positive, but some fee paying students associated "free" with lower quality. This comparison is interesting and maybe a key one, because if the practice is to be more widely adopted, it is something that has to be addressed. We can frame this as a problem of "free" and it

impacts on how value is understood too. Some students value lectures more because of the comparison. They are in effect telling themselves that “the lectures must be better because they were the expensive bit”.

The points some students made about information overload in terms of the volume of discussion posts, and the difficulties of evaluating their quality can be addressed in future with much greater attention to digital literacy development (Beetham, 2015) at the very start of the programme. In hindsight, we should have prepared the students much more specifically for the challenges of this type of online learning. We assumed some degree of familiarity with online social learning which was actually in short supply - only 12% of the group had any prior experience of MOOCs. In a separate project, we are developing digital literacy materials for incoming students at level 1, but postgraduate students will not directly benefit from this. For final year students, we run workshops in developing a professional online profile for employability, and active participation in the MOOCs fits in well here.

As tutors we had some sympathy with the complaint about the limitations of the Futurelearn platform structure, and the associated difficulty of sustaining conversations with other learners. There have been significant upgrades to it since the MOOC ran in November 2015, which should go some way towards addressing this issue in future. As discussed in the previous section, the social media spaces around the MOOC were heavily promoted and well used for discussions by external users and tutors. Our intention was to use social media for demonstration and encouragement purposes rather than to deflect discussions from the main course platform, where indeed the vast majority of conversations took place. Few of the full time students ventured into the MOOC social media spaces, complaining that there were “too many channels to monitor”. From a group of aspiring digital marketers who are very likely to face exactly this situation in their future workplace, we found this reaction rather disappointing. Hopefully phase two of the project when we ask students to reflect on their learning at the end of their course will uncover a re-think of this aspect.

We might also frame this as a ‘spatial’ issue. Faced with multiple and potentially new platforms, students didn’t know where to post. Possibly they also took an instrumental view, and focused attention where they ‘had’ to for assessment purposes. In fairness, a group of full time students who have elected to attend a face to face programme are always likely to be hard to please online. They have time, they have money, they are based on campus (or very close to it) so they expect to be entertained in the classroom. The “typical” MOOC learner taking a free online course has none of these advantages. Next time we could address this by making much more specific integration between classroom and MOOC activities. For example, students could work together in class to

produce a video communicating their group's response to an issue raised in the MOOC, and post it in the platform for feedback from MOOC learners.

As noted earlier, in the second phase of our project we will revisit the student blogs and carry out more interviews to establish the extent to which the networks developed during the MOOC have been sustained beyond the course, and how they have contributed to the students' overall learning experience on their MSc programme. This will further inform our plan for how best to take forward the hybrid model in the next academic year.

This discussion has focused on how we might best deal with the more negative issues that students raised about their participation in the MOOC. We must not forget that nearly two thirds of the group liked the MOOC from the start, and we have listed many positive outcomes of their experience in the previous section. What complaints we have don't seem fatal. We might, therefore, accept that students benefit from integration of the MOOC, even though some will complain about the things we have identified, i.e. we live with complaint because we are sure of the educational value. This is part of a broader concern that HE must now 'make students happy', even though we all know that rigorous challenge can be frustrating, confusing and difficult.

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