An Open2Study MOOC experience from a staff perspective

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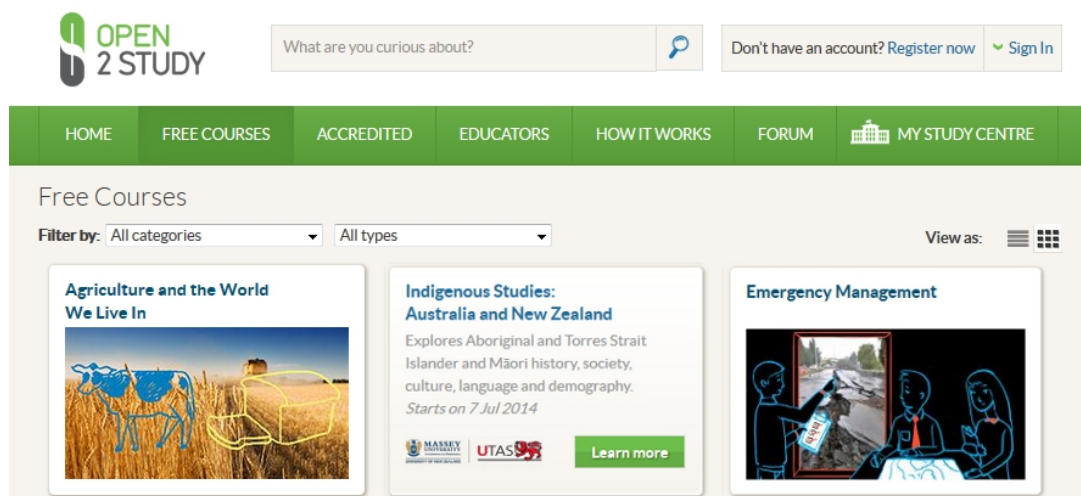National Centre for Teaching and Learning
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This paper reports on the experiences of staff involved in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) initiative by Massey University using a system known as Open2Study developed by Open Universities Australia (OUA). In 2013, three courses (known as subjects) were designed and developed in conjunction with Open2Study as a pilot project. The initial results reported here form part of a larger evaluation of the initial trial with a particular focus on the experiences of the staff involved. Preliminary findings highlight a number of benefits and challenges. Higher visibility, enhanced working relationships and transferability of skills were amongst the benefits identified by staff for both individuals and the wider University. The challenges faced included tight timeframes and differing expectations in terms of format, pedagogy and support from Open2Study experts. The resulting Open2Study courses and the experience gained now provide models for other staff to follow.

Keywords: staff experience, MOOC benefits, MOOC challenges

Background

There are a number of drivers for universities to decide to enter the MOOC space. Among these are higher visibility and marketing potential, greater enrolments, access by more students, trialling of new courses and opportunities to be innovative with teaching and learning approaches. Even so, there are still only a small proportion of universities who have launched MOOCs globally (i.e. approximately 2%). However this number is growing; with 10% of universities having plans to offer MOOCs in the next few years. Of the courses currently available, most are not credit bearing, are of short duration and often offered for free.

Figure 1: Open2Study screen and courses

Massey University made the decision to enter the MOOC space in 2013. When Massey was approached to join Open2Study in February 2013, the perceived benefits included enhancing Massey's reputation as New Zealand's pre-eminent distance education provider in online learning. It was also seen as an opportunity to promote Massey's signature platforms in key areas of world-class expertise and to showcase the University to prospective international students (see Figure 1). The University saw an opportunity to access the Australian market in establishing a partnership with Open Universities Australia (OUA) to develop three pilot subjects. This pilot was developed through OUA's research arm Open2Study whose infrastructure enables them to host large numbers of enrolments (to-date there have been over 400,000 registrations). Open2Study's 20% retention rate, which is higher than many MOOCs, and their high-end video production facilities were also key factors in making the decision.

The criteria for course selection were based on whether the subjects would contribute to social, economic or cultural development. Agriculture was selected because students would learn how to mitigate food shortages and encourage sustainable production. Emergency Management would benefit developing countries when disasters might strain their infrastructures. The collaboration between two Universities in different countries on the Indigenous Studies course embodies the cultural benefit of the subject. Open2Study subjects have a standard format. They contain four modules. Each module is designed to run for a week and contains sixty minutes of video broken down into 10 topics of 6 minutes duration each. Each course also contains formative quiz/simulations in each module. Assessments are undertaken at the end of the course and students are required to obtain a result of 60% or more to pass. After the courses were chosen, staff worked together to structure the course offerings and gather resources that would be incorporated as part of each subject. Once the initial design of the subject and scripting of the videos were done, a Massey staff member from each course travelled to the Open2Study offices in Australia to film the videos. Videos (which form a central component of each Open2Study subject) were created that contained video excerpts, images, diagrams and the academic talking about their content area. It is noteworthy that Massey staff are not involved in the course offerings themselves. Open2Study tutorial staff are responsible for the running of each subject offering, monitoring discussion forums and assisting students.

To-date, the courses have been well accepted, with strong enrolments and good reviews from students (see Table 1):

Table 1: Analytics associated with the courses

Course	Enrolments	Offerings	Videos viewed	Posts	Overall Course Rating
Agriculture and the World We Live In (AGRI)	3,762	3	15,317	906	88% from 258 reviews
Emergency Management (EMG)	4,584	3	17,385	2,175	89% from 320 students
Indigenous Studies: Australia and New Zealand (INDG)	1,920	2	8,863	1,263	92% from 160 students

A formal evaluation of the initiative was undertaken, utilising a qualitative approach. Ethical approval for the evaluation was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. In-depth qualitative data was gathered through staff interviews, including the lecturers, academic development staff and distance learning managers involved in the initiative. Findings presented here draw on staff interview data that were collected after the development of the three courses in the initiative. The interview asked staff to talk about their experiences particularly in terms of the benefits and challenges of the project. While the interviews were conducted with a small number of staff (n=8), the investigation represented an overall participation rate of 80% of the key staff involved in the initiative. Therefore, this provides some useful feedback on the project both in terms of affordance and challenges.

Preliminary findings

Themes that arose from the initial analysis included the effect of prior experience in distance education and MOOC courses and the benefit of working within a team on the development. Other themes focused around the benefits of being involved with the development of the courses. This included higher visibility both for the University and individual. Finally, there was the perceived benefit of building capability across the University. Challenges included tight time frames, differing expectations by Massey and Open2Study staff, frequent course

content restructuring and issues surrounding the accumulation of copyrighted resources.

Benefits

Typically, universities start offering MOOCs in order to increase their visibility and attract new enrolments by offering taster courses like those offered by the Open2Study initiative. Another driver is the ability to build capacity to offer larger scale courses or to pilot new course offerings. These benefits were also highlighted by the participants in this investigation. Some indicated that the MOOC courses provided good visibility for their own courses and programmes. They were even hopeful that it might expand their university course offerings as Participant 1 said: "it could be a way into a course that you might do as a front piece to enrolling into a post-grad programme".

Working within a team was identified as having a positive effect on the experience of the academic staff and, to a certain extent, their perception of how successful the development process had been. At various times individuals were asked to complete aspects of their subject MOOC development on their own - whether that was research and structuring of the course material or filming of the videos. Therefore, all staff members were part of a team although some subject teams had less formal connections. Those who established more formalised teams, either through working together or via pre-established departmental groups, appeared to develop more supportive relationships and lessen the feeling of isolation that may have occurred when individual tasks needed to be completed. As Participant 5 stated, "you get to develop quite a close relationship with a team like that".

Another benefit listed by the participants was that it raised their own profile both within their institution and externally. Participant 2 commented, "the benefits are, I think, that we have increased our profile, we are getting really good feedback." Improved working relationships within the University also occurred between professional development and academic staff members. Participants indicated there was more shared understanding about what was possible in a larger scale online course. These working relationships could be extended and continued in existing and new programmes. External relationships also benefitted from the MOOC initiative. Academic staff enlisted the help of industry experts to produce video interviews that would be used in one of the MOOC courses. Participant 4 commented that working together has "meant that our relationship with those organisations has been enhanced significantly".

The decision to partner with an organisation that had established capacity in online course development (i.e. OUA) was a deliberate move by the University. Participant 8 indicated that, "One of the reasons we were doing this was to learn about how you could design courses more effectively in an online space". Participant 3 saw value in the way the subjects were developed. He plans to consider how a similar process may be introduced to produce Massey courses.

Challenges

The biggest challenge, mentioned by all of the participants involved in the development of Open2Study subjects, was the tight time frame a theme that resonates within the sector. Typically, the development was on top of an already full schedule. Deadlines were particularly strict because they were dependent upon the asset production team being available within a specific time slot and staff had to travel to the production facility. Usually each subject was assigned one week to complete the filming of videos which, in itself, imposed a tight timeframe. Similar statements have been made in the literature when the video production and editing drives the project schedule.

Problems also arose when expectations of support by the staff did not match what was provided by the Open2Study production team. There was tension relating to the way the videos were produced. Staff wanted to use tele-prompters, for example, while they were filming their videos that would ultimately form the central resources for each MOOC. However, Open2Study didn't use tele-prompters because of prior experience of poorly developed material by other presenters who had read from the tele-prompters in the past. Massey staff, however, felt they had the skills to use the tele-prompters effectively. As Participant 1 indicated, "I said, well yes it might come across stilted where people are not experienced at that, but our job as teachers is to be able to read and put across a story". There was also frustration during post-production when the end result was not what the staff envisioned or, as happened in one situation, there was a problem where none of the videos could be used.

This highlighted another difficulty experienced by staff members, the need to restructure the course content. The breadth and depth of the content covered in each subject also had implications on the workload of the staff

involved. In one case, it was problematic because the content went beyond what was typically covered in the staff member's existing programme. Other staff members found it was a fine balance of giving a taster to learners with sufficient content that it was not unmanageable in such a short course and did not impact on their own courses, "it was really a delicate balance of giving people enough for them to get some tangible benefit for having engaged and gone through the course" (Participant 2). The inflexibility of the video development process caused some difficulties. Even when materials and resources had previously been adapted from online use, issues with the resolution of images or the format of the files meant they could not be used in making the videos. In other words, the academic staff presenting could not refer to resources, images or diagrams on screen in what they felt was an effective manner whilst being filmed. As Participant 5 indicated "our initial impression … was that it was a little bit rigid." As a result, some of the staff charged with presenting the material questioned whether or not the approach was effective from a pedagogical perspective and whether this would result in fewer students being engaged and completing the course. Ensuing discussion between Massey staff and the production team did alleviate some of these issues.

Copyright was also a major concern for two reasons, firstly, from a quality perspective to ensure high quality resources and secondly from a legal perspective, ensuring that no copyrights were breached. All of the visual assets, collected by academic staff prior to filming, needed to get copyright clearance before they could be included in the final Open2Study offerings. One course benefitted from a staff member that had a great deal of experience with copyright materials and was able to source visual assets through creative commons licensed resources. Knowledge of image formats and resolutions were also critical as specific formats were used by the provider. As Participant 5 explains, "yeah, so when we collected our own assets then we had to validate that [with the provider]". Another staff member working on a different MOOC was not as fortunate and eventually had to seek assistance from a copyright specialist within the University.

Future plans

When asked whether or not they would do it again or recommend that others in the University should follow the same path, there was universal acknowledgement that certain issues would need to be addressed. More discussions about what the development process entailed would need to be held before the development process began. Academic staff need to be briefed on video assets format prior to any development. More complete and comprehensive storyboarding before the production of the videos might have solved some of the difficulties and misunderstandings. Allowing time, beforehand, for rehearsing the video sequences would have also helped. Although this would have required more time with the production teams as Participant 4 identified, "in fact if there had been more of that pre-production stuff there would have been more time, but it would have meant a better quality product."

Conclusion

At this early stage of the study, these are only preliminary findings and further analysis of the data is necessary. It is notable that many of the challenges appeared to be caused by the rigour of the provider's development process. Considering that the perceived rigidity is based on a concern for quality it may be necessary to provide more training for academic staff who wish to develop future Open2Study MOOCs. One of the key messages so far is the importance of copyright and the need for academics to be conversant with copyright requirements. This highlights an area that may be a growing concern for organisations venturing into the MOOC space. Specialist skills may be required in the areas of copyright and creative commons. Training and support are needed to ensure there is sufficient capacity across an organisation without the over-reliance on particular individuals.

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