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## Making the Most of MOOCs - Digital Learning with the University of the Third Age

### Student Dissertation

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## MON: 'Making the Most of MOOCs' - Digital Learning with the University of the Third Age (Wendy Maples)

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[Wendy Maples](#)

11 January 2016

**The multi-media conference presentation will be a demonstration of my 'Making the Most of MOOCs: Digital Learning with the University of the Third Age' work-in-progress, presenting the rationale for and development of an appropriate-technology web-based platform to facilitate informal online learning, and the digital learning resources that will make up its content.**

The 'Making the Most of MOOCs' project involves research into digital learning inclusivity and, more specifically, consultation with Southeast University of the Third Age (U3A) representatives in order to identify an appropriate web-based learning platform and to source/develop learning resources to support digital literacy for informal educational purposes. The project emerged from my general interest in digital literacy for informal education and from a happenstance conversation with a former academic colleague, now a passionate member of the Southeast U3A Network, who was investigating better means of supporting online learning amongst U3A members (Pitt, G. 2015a).

The U3A was established to support and encourage lifelong learning amongst its members. This endeavour has meant almost exclusively self-generated learning activity presented and discussed at face-to-face meetings. However, informal interviews with U3A representatives (Staniforth and Pitt 2015, Pitt 2015b) and a report by the U3A Trust's Standing Committee on Education (2015) indicate that some U3A members wish to make better use of educational content that is increasingly available through 'MOOCs' (Massive, Open, Online Courses) or other online educational resources (OERs). In accord with the U3A's understanding that learning is a social activity, some U3A members would also like to explore the wider potential social and inclusivity benefits of online networks. Early discussions with Southeast U3A Network representatives suggest that – in broad contrast to data on the relevant age demographic identified by the Office for National Statistics (2015) – the large majority of members have access to the Internet, with their main purpose to its use being communications with friends and family through Skype and email. Some U3A members routinely use the Internet for educational purposes, and there are some U3A groups who, over the past year, have utilised MOOCs to inform group discussions (U3A Standing Committee on Education, 2015).

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Although there is extensive member expertise on a huge range of topics, there is currently limited member knowledge, expertise and confidence about distance and online learning. The U3A Southeast Network representatives group has therefore asked me to scope an appropriate web-based platform and digital learning materials to support: 1) Better use of MOOCs and other OERs; 2) Greater social learning opportunities for U3A members unable to attend face-to-face U3A meetings; 3) Greater interactivity between 'virtual U3A' members and face-to-face members.

The 'Making the Most of MOOCs' multi-media presentation will address pilot project work-in-progress, covering: 1) Background data and scholarly research informing inclusivity issues for the U3A age demographic; 2) The U3A's OER needs and interests, based on consultation with Southeast U3A Network representatives; 3) Initial investigations into appropriate web-platform technologies that best facilitate online learning practice; 4) Initial investigations and/or development of digital learning resources to be 'housed' on the platform.

**Word count: 497**

## References:

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[Elaine Dalloway](#)

11:04am 17 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Wendy, I've taken part in some really good MOOCs on FutureLearn - in particular a course about

[Hadrian's Wall: Life on the Roman Frontier](#) by [Newcastle University](#) and

[Shakespeare and his World](#) by [The University of Warwick](#)

The courses used video not only to allow the lecturer to speak directly to the students (often delivered from relevant locations such as sections of the wall) but also to show artefacts from the time, bringing the whole thing to life.

I wondered if the organisations involved would provide additional materials, for example pamphlets or workbooks (these could be digital for printing) to an organisation such as the U3A?



[Dr Carol Waites](#)

6:03pm 17 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Wendy

I find this project really exciting! If I understand you correctly, you are planning on gathering suitable online learning resources for third age people on different subjects adapted to their interests. So, rather than developing courses yourself, you will give access to courses? It sounds like you will provide support to help them access these courses? And you will help them interact with each other on the platform?

This is wonderful as I imagine many may find it difficult to physically attend these meetings and so they can interact online such as we are doing now!

Carol



[Chris Gray](#)

4:18pm 30 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Wendy

Your project has a strong link with my one, which you've also indicated in your comments on my Cloudscape.

The platform I am developing could readily be adapted to suit the needs of your project, although the latest Moodle 3 is probably a platform you have looked at. This is something which we are developing at work.

If a lot of video content is to be included you may already have considered having part of the platform having links to other hosts, Vimeo / You tube, to reduce the demand on your

own host.

Carol has mentioned about sourcing content from elsewhere, but can I ask if there will be a few people acting as course content uploaders or converting text based to digital content, or maybe even having many users create their own content (i.e User Generated Content, like on Wikipedia say)?



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

11:30am 16 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Wendy

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

- ▶ How marvellous to hear this - such a large enthusiastic group
- ▶ Do you know what percentage of U3A members have worked in education?
- ▶ Why do they use FutureLearn do you think? Are there advantages vs other MOOCs?
- ▶ How doe U3A function in rural areas as opposed to the urban?
- ▶ Proficiency is an interesting and slippery term, don't you find?
- ▶ in sweden we have something like this called studieframjandet anyone can start a 'learning circle'
- ▶ Sounds like they need marketing
- ▶ Agree communication seems an issue
- ▶ Interesting social organisation of members - those who like the geographical based member led course offerings and those who wish to belong to the U3A as a distributed group - not necessarily mutually exclusive groups - think venn diagram



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

9:07am 23 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Many Congratulations Wendy! Your presentation has been voted by delegates to be one of the most effective of the H818 Online Conference 2016 and you are officially one of our H818 Presentation Star Open Badge Winners! Please see how to Apply for your Badge here: <http://cloudworks.ac.uk/badge/view/33>

Well done!

Simon

H818 Conference Organiser



[Wendy Maples](#)

1:17pm 26 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi! I am sorry to have somehow left these comments without answering -- like Sarah, I haven't got to grips with this site, having finally got used to OpenStudio...

Elaine - interestingly, I learned today that a couple of U3A Standing Committee on Education members have been engaged in dialogue with Edinburgh University about accessing MOOC materials 'offline' and being able to mix them, as proper OERs (they don't use this language of course), with U3A bespoke notes, etc. AND their next stop is a meeting with Future Learn. There are copyright issues around this, which are really interesting, which are to do with the U3A being not well enough recognised as an educational institution -- though they are an organisation for learning.... Important, formal, differences, I gather!

Carol! Thank you :). The project has changed enormously, including having been radically scaled back around the potential EdTech aspects. In short, however, I am now looking at 1) helping to advise on bolt-on online learning facilities, in particular forum and conferencing software, but at a higher, National level than was 1st envisaged; 2) Possibly (too many variables to mention) developing online materials for developing digital literacy (which, interestingly, was my main initial interest before I got embroiled in U3A stuff) -- which I now think would make sense to deliver to a specific sub-group of U3A-ers that they call 'Subject Leaders'. So these would not be subject specific (though could be inflected in different ways, or taught in a subject-specific context, which is better pedagogically of course), but would take the form, I think, of 'skills' activities, possibly supported with online tutorials or a F2F workshop. If this gets the go-ahead (I have a meeting on the 1st March -- too late for my EMA, sadly), I would want to develop something that looks not dissimilar to your report-writing website!! :).

Chris - Yes, we have been working very much on parallel projects, I think -- though yours has progressed much more than mine! I spent a LOT of time playing with things like iMovie, which while time-consuming really has felt like an accomplishment, and, yes, I now have my own YouTube and Vimeo page in part because of the issue you raise. The U3A has a lot of U3A in-action YouTube clips, but as far as I know they haven't coordinated these into a U3A site. Your comment has made me think about this as another piece of advice I will offer when I meet the SCE on the 1st March. Thank you for that!

Simon - Thank you for the list of comments -- it is really kind of you to sort through all of that and create a comprehensive list!! And, gosh, really? Wow! I am sitting here with an enormous grin on my face -- I am really surprised and incredibly flattered.

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