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Ten years of open practice: a reflection on the impact of OpenLearn

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Abstract

The Open University (OU) makes a proportion of all its taught modules available to the public via OpenLearn each year. This process involves the modification, of module excerpts, showcasing subject matter and teaching approach. This activity serves both the University's social and business missions through the delivery of free courses to the public, but increasingly its students are using it to inform module choice, to augment their studies and to boost confidence. In a year that celebrates 10 years of OpenLearn, this paper reports on the growth and impact of the platform as a vast open, learning resource and how a new study underlines how this is also serving the OU's own students in terms of supporting motivation for learning and impact on achievements. The paper also discusses how the OU is mainstreaming open practice via module production in releasing content on OpenLearn from its paid-for modules in order to improve student module choice and preparedness and in doing so, is providing a richer learning experience for informal learners.

Keywords: open educational practices, MOOCs, open educational resources, OER, informal learning, OpenLearn

Introduction

The Open University (OU) has been providing free learning via its OpenLearn platform (http://www.open.edu/openlearn) since 2006. Originally supported by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the platform is now key to the success of the University's ongoing strategy of Informal to Formal Learning and hosts over 800 free online courses developed from excerpts of its paid-for modules, issued openly with a Creative Commons licence. With around five million learners visiting the platform each year, 150,000 of which are the University's own students, it has come to represent a potentially rich seam of data for anyone interested in the motivations, demographics and successes or otherwise, of non-formal learners.

OpenLearn also serves as the platform through which the OU promotes its partnership with the BBC and the related free courses and articles that are created to support its co-productions with them. Since its launch, OpenLearn has received 40 million unique visitors and has developed from being a website that hosts module excerpts from its paid-for undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum to one which also delivers short pieces of learning in the form of learning activities and tools, videos and free online courses, including perpetually open adaptations of all of its MOOCs previously presented on FutureLearn. OpenLearn is a Moodle-based platform where its courses are developed using structured authoring tools and then made available online in multiple formats such as Microsoft Word, various ePub formats and PDF. Through the delivery of free courses to the public, this approach serves both the University's social mission (a commitment to widening participation declared in its Royal charter) and business mission (13% of OpenLearn learners go on to make a formal enquiry at the OU). Since providing recognition for informal learning through the issuing of OU-branded digital badges and certificates, this percentage has risen to over 26% on some courses (Law, 2015).

During its 10th anniversary year, the OU is demanding that all module specifications are designed from the start with two learning design outputs: the OU module (for its students); and the open course (for delivery via OpenLearn). This is a cultural shift for the University inasmuch as all module teams will be required to engage with openness from module inception. Previously, their involvement may have been simply to identify existing content and to allow subject specialists to modify it for them. These new learning requirements for the OpenLearn course will draw on what has been learnt from the most impactful module excerpts, MOOCs and Badged Open Courses (BOCs) that have been developed over the past 10 years and to find the balance between the needs of underserved informal learners more widely and its own student body.

Approaches to delivering non-formal learning

Eraut (2000, p. 114) discusses the levels of intention used to describe learning, and describes informal learning as ". . .a residual category to describe any kind of learning which does not take place within, or follow from, a formally organised learning programme or event". In addition, Eraut discusses the ranges of learning modes that are embraced by the term 'non-formal learning' in differentiating it from informal learning, by explaining that it is understood that some deliberate intention to learn has taken place.

We can make judgements about how learners interact with OpenLearn through the choice they have made of the type of learning they are engaging with. For example, by enrolling on and studying a full OpenLearn course that makes its learning outcomes, structure and commitment required of the learner explicit, a learner could be said to be non-formal. However, OpenLearn also provides short pieces of learning (1–2 minutes long) through articles, learning activities, videos and blogs, often produced to support trends and changes to the OU taught curriculum or in response to international events. To put this variety of learning modes further into context for OpenLearn, internal data show that ninety per cent of learners entering the platform do so via Internet search and hence could be said to be approaching it:

- informally i.e. they arrived there because they were looking for general information; or
- non-formally i.e. they may have searched under the term 'free course'.

The percentage of learners arriving on the platform via Internet search has doubled since the first analytics evaluation of OpenLearn that took place in 2009, which noted that 45% of visitors came to the platform via this means, another 45% from referral sites and the rest from typing in a direct URL (McAndrew et al., 2009). This is likely to reflect trends in the way users approach finding information and a reliance on good search engine optimisation to find a website versus having to know a website address up front.

OpenLearn learners can create a free online learning profile which provides the means to track their progress through a course, view and publish their achievements. With a proportion of OpenLearn visitors going on to make a formal enquiry to study at the University, the platform therefore provides a mechanism to deliver a learning journey from informal to non-formal through both the range of content types provided and by the approach taken by the learner; and so on, to a formal learning journey.

Whilst McAndrew et al. (2009, p. 35) report that "the original design considered a division between learners and educators" in their evaluation of the platform, Perryman, Law and Law (2013) report that only 15% of OpenLearn learners are educators. With 74% of these indicating that they are using OpenLearn for professional development and 35% for teaching purposes, the University continues to support educators who choose to use the OU's OER in the following ways:

- By providing multiple formats of OpenLearn courses for use and adaptation offline,
- By issuing content using a Creative Commons licence to enable reuse and repurposing, and
- By continuing to provide the OpenLearn Works platform (www.open.edu/openlearnworks) (formally called LabSpace) for copying, pasting, reworking and republishing its (and others') new and existing materials as OER.

Recognition for non-formal learners

Studies undertaken in 2013 analysed and compared the demographics of the OU's informal and non-formal learners, students and educators using OpenLearn and the University's free learning on content iTunes U and YouTube (Law, Perryman & Law, 2013; Perryman, Law & Law, 2013; Law, Perryman & Law, 2015; and Law & Perryman, 2015). Much was learnt from these studies about users of OpenLearn including how they were using the platform (their journey) and how they were progressing to formal education or more non-formal learning (their motivations). The studies provided recommendations for the University around the delivery of learning material on OpenLearn. These were to:

1. Improve the usability of OpenLearn around the user experience of studying an unsupported course, and
2. Create an entire Badged Open Course (BOC) curriculum aimed at widening participation and for student preparedness.

Understanding the usability challenges of learners using OpenLearn as a course environment has required the OU to make modifications to the platform, based on the understanding of learners' interactions with it and with each other, modifications which will result in a complete redesign and representation of content during 2016.

However, the platform remains a sandpit for the development of courses delivered online via Moodle and a rapid means by which to test new approaches to, and tools for, elearning. One of these approaches developed in response to recommendations for the platform, has been around the recognition of non-formal learning, specifically the issuing of open digital badges and statements of participation (non-accredited certificates) for participating in and completing OpenLearn courses.

The growing interest in micro-credentialising and digital badging has been identified over recent years, notably by Grant and Shawgo (2013) and highlights that learners want recognition for informal study. This challenges the notion of informal learning described by Cross (2007) as one where ". . . no one assigns grades. . ." and ". . .no one takes attendance." Whilst we recognise that learning is still taking place as a supplement to formal learning there is a growing demand and expectation that non-formal learners want recognition for their achievements and engagement. This builds on, and concurs with, work by Miligan, Littlejohn and Margaryan (2014) who describe how we learn from each other in informal personal networks and how social networking tools augment this practice. They report that "These [social networking] tools are inherently open, encouraging the learner to make the evidence of their learning public and freely accessible to all by default. In this way, one individual's learning becomes available to their peers, and to future learners" (Miligan, Littlejohn & Margaryan, 2014, p. 7).

Key findings and initial impact of the project to develop and publish media-rich, OU-branded BOCs on OpenLearn has been reported (Law, 2015) most notably to show that this recognition for learning through the issuing of OU-branded digital badges and certificates, raises the percentage of those making a formal enquiry with the University from 13% to over 26%. In addition, these non-formal

learners who engage with BOCs are less well qualified than OpenLearn learners overall. Earlier OpenLearn evaluation showed that 23% of learners using the platform perceived themselves as having a disability; for those undertaking a BOC, this ranges from 15% (for *English: skills for learning*) to 37% (for *Succeed with Learning*). Where the lower percentage is seen on *English: skills for learning*, it may be explained by the fact that the majority of learners are not in the UK, compared to the other BOCs where over 70% are UK-based. Outside of the UK, descriptions of disability vary compared to those we have grown used to in the UK and hence may not be as readily declared. In order to explain the very high proportion of disabled learners in *Succeed with Learning*, this could be due to an older and less qualified demographic overall or the desire to test if it is possible to succeed in an educational environment. This evaluation also showed that the majority studying BOCs declared that it gave them a sense of achievement (84%) and that it helped keep them motivated (58%) (Law, 2015).

When comparing the MOOCs developed initially for use on FutureLearn as adapted, open courses for OpenLearn, a high click-through rate to make an enquiry with the OU can also be seen (~23% overall), although this is slightly lower than BOCs (internal University data). Internal data analytics and these data gathered to date provide key information that will directly influence the improvement of the elearning approach and use of media for all OpenLearn courses.

Clearly this use of the platform as a test bed for innovation in elearning has provided some surprising data with positive implications for both the social and business mission of OpenLearn. In addition, understanding media mix of what makes an impactful and engaging OpenLearn course will have positive financial implications and enable better planning and development in an environment where around 60 new courses are being produced each year. In addition, the awarding of a digital badge will also be relevant to the OU's formal students, who will see this University recognition for non-formal study on their student record.

OU students' use of free learning

With the success of the BOCs in mind, OpenLearn research projects have recently been refocused onto the University's own students who are using the platform. Internal data analytics, show that around 150,000 OU students use OpenLearn annually, identified through their log-in credentials. Whilst it has been possible to track year on year, the number of OpenLearn learners going on to make a formal enquiry to study, the University's systems have only recently been able to follow that journey beyond any enquiry; too early to draw any data from it regarding journey or progress. Hence a study was undertaken in 2015 whereby 10,000 OU formal students across the full curriculum were surveyed to see whether they had used OpenLearn to augment their studies, or indeed were aware of its existence at all.

Mixed method surveys were issued by email to 10,000 OU students, across a range of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, who had recently completed a formal module with the OU. The surveys were delivered using the SurveyMonkey platform comprising a combination of Likert scale, multiple choice and open questions. The aim of the survey was:

- to ascertain what proportion of OU students had an awareness of the OpenLearn platform and other free (non OU) learning sources;
- what the impact of using OpenLearn had on them in terms of preparedness and confidence; and
- what types of learning they had made use of on the platform (e.g. whole courses, videos, short activities etc.)

Of the 1,127 respondents, 48% had used OpenLearn, the majority of which (72%) had viewed free courses, over videos, activities or other short pieces of learning. Of those who had used OpenLearn, 48% declared increase in confidence in their studies as a result. Qualitative data gathered in the survey showed four main themes as to the opportunity that using OpenLearn affords:

- To **improve confidence** and/or re-assure students they have the ability to study at HE level;
- To **see what study at the OU is like** before making a commitment;
- To help students **choose the right module** through the provision of taster courses as they move through a programme of study; and
- To use OpenLearn materials as an additional resource to **augment their learning**.

A selection of open comments reflecting these four themes are given below:

When I first enrolled it was a great place to visit and brush up on essay skills or simple mathematics just to provide a bit of confidence when, for those that had not studied for quite sometime, just needed a little boost:)

I did the "business of football" course, and it enabled me to understand how the OU works and what to expect

Open learn provided a feel for the learning material that is used in the study module. Some of the material I liked and understood while a few I did not like. So extracts from certain modules made me disregard them as possibles for me. This was very helpful when it came to choosing modules

It helped me summarise some of the more complex subject areas of the module whilst I was studying it.

Of those students who had declared that they had used OpenLearn it was further investigated, using internal analytics, as to whether they were more likely to pass the module that they were currently studying than those who had not used OpenLearn. Data showed that OU students using OpenLearn were 5% more likely to pass and progress to their next module, than those who did not.

Conclusion

During its 10th anniversary year, a project to review and enhance the presentation of OpenLearn courses is being developed which will draw on all of these data and will communicate and recommend the guiding principles of open course design. All OU module specifications will be designed from the start with two learning design outputs: the OU module (for its students); and the open course (for delivery via OpenLearn). This is a cultural shift for the University inasmuch as all module teams will be required to engage with openness from module inception. Previously, their involvement may have been simply to identify existing content and to allow subject specialists to modify it for them.

The development of OpenLearn courses and open educational practice amongst academics and course designers at the University will become an integral and strategic practice, key to the success of the organisation in a time of falling student numbers in UK HE.

By taking what we have learnt from MOOC production, evaluating the pedagogical features that boost confidence, learning and course engagement in an open, unsupported environment, we are able to positively influence module production at the specification stage to also produce meaningful and engaging open courses containing rich media and formative assessment.

To augment the guiding principles of good OpenLearn course design therefore, OU modules teams are required now to think of these uses when designing for the open i.e. that excerpts for adaptation should be more highly considered. Bearing in mind that these are unsupported courses (i.e. no tutor is present) guiding principles for the learning design of OpenLearn courses adapted from OU modules will be:

- That learners value the recognition for their achievement (free Statement of Participation and/or digital badge) through passing tests or completing a course of study,
- Learners most value quizzes with associated feedback,
- That closed environments with a start and finish date i.e. MOOCs, have lower completion rates than open courses with no start and finish date,
- The use of activities and video (especially that of a tutor, or 'face' of a course) are especially valued,
- That forced social activity encourages high drop-out,
- To select the most engaging and enticing content within a module, making a key topic accessible to new and existing learners,
- Courses can be designed specifically to support induction; the OU loses many thousands of learners who have a long wait from registration to module start each year. A targeted OpenLearn course with recognition from the OU, will prepare a learner with key skills across a qualification as a whole, keeping them motivated while they wait for module start,
- That the development of an OpenLearn course should be carefully scheduled such that it is live on the platform many months before the module begins, and
- That new assets, such as videos, animations and quizzes, developed specifically for an OpenLearn course can be as useful to augment learning for formal students.

This coming together of data on the growth and impact of the platform as a vast open, learning resource and how this is influencing the OU's own students, is a cause for celebration and also for reflection. By mainstreaming open educational practice via module production to improve student module choice and student preparedness we are able to provide a richer learning experience for all learners, informal, non-formal and formal alike.

Acknowledgement

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