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MON:What Learning do MOOC Mentors Witness? (Mary Howell)

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[Mary Howell](#)

9 January 2017

Can participation in a MOOC form an effective part of teacher continuing professional development (CPD)? A case study with the theme of implementation.

The crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, in England's schools draws attention to the fact that we need to support practising teachers, so they can remain in the classroom (Hood, 2016) and be effective (Coe, et al, 2014). Strong pedagogical skills and content knowledge, alongside high quality instruction are identified as major influences on pupils' progress and are therefore priority areas for teacher development (Coe, et al, 2014). Open learning approaches, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have the potential to deliver features essential to effective teacher CPD: to offer learning, which is reflective, relevant, sustained over time and collaborative (Cordingley, et al, 2015).

In the context of economic constraints (Department for Education, 2016), a disrupted education landscape (The Economist, 2014) and unprecedented pressure and work load issues for teachers (Coe, 2014), the much needed effective teacher CPD is proving difficult to achieve by conventional face to face means (Hood, 2016). This case study explores open learning approaches and whether online working can support teachers. In particular Massive Open Online Courses are discussed in light of knowledge about barriers and advantages of open learning in professional contexts (Adams, 2007).

Qualitative data, surrounding experiences of MOOC mentors, supporting teacher learning during a 'FutureLearn, 'Assessment for Learning,' MOOC were shared via a professional activity log and in an online focus group. Insights from analysis of this material and supporting literature will be discussed and conclusions about the effectiveness of teacher learning in this MOOCs drawn. Any implications for future MOOC design, best practice in mentor activity and optimal MOOC learning tasks for fostering engagement, reflection and collaboration will be disseminated.

Extra content

Final Poster for What Learning do MOOC Mentors Witness?



[Mary Howell](#)

18:05 on 25 January 2017

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 [Mary Howell](#)
20:14 on 18 February 2017

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Discussion (20) [Links \(1\)](#) [Academic References \(3\)](#)

 [Dr Carol Waites](#)
10:02pm 26 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

Excellent poster and interesting topic. I look forward to hearing about it. I think teachers need incentives to be monitored with MOOCs. It can seem like a lonely place otherwise. Did you get any feedback on monitoring their Professional Development or ways they could interact with each other even if they are doing different courses?

 [Mary Howell](#)
2:34pm 28 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

Dear Carol.

Thank you for the kind comment about the animation, I really enjoyed making it and think I will subscribe to the paid version of the website as I think it allows a very quick and easy way to make a very professional looking poster.

I am interested in your comment about isolation and agree. That was one of the things that prompted me to this study - the knowledge that even in big schools teachers can feel isolated. The first MOOC I

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mentored was about managing behaviour and I was very aware that some people were on the MOOC, because they didn't have someone to work with in school - either because their colleagues were in the same boat and equally unsure what to do, inexperienced or because the subject was taboo in school.

The second MOOC I was involved in drew a different group of teachers, but again people were often isolated and often didn't have someone in school to share ideas with.

One of the interesting things about the MOOC's was that there was evidence that they stimulated new collaborations - online with teachers on the same MOOC and face to face. In both MOOCs we ask if they are working as part of a group and quite a few start off as part of a group or develop a group as the MOOC moves forwards. Particularly encouraging was evidence that teachers who felt they were gaining from the MOOC encouraged others from the same institution to join. We are beginning to look at how the MOOCs could be a stage in a blended learning experience.

We have quite a bit of feedback that teachers appreciated the mentor inputs and the conversations they had with mentors as well as fellow participants (this contradicts some research findings that say mentor presence can shut discussion down _ I need to find the reference for that again).

At the moment I have feedback on interaction by those on the same course, but I am interested in your question about collaboration by people studying different courses - food for thought.

Thank you again for your question, formulating an answer has really helped me to draw together my thinking. I apologise that the answers are quite long.

Mary



[Mary Howell](#)

2:34pm 28 January 2017 (Edited 1:25pm 4 February 2017) [Permalink](#)

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[Leanne Johnstone](#)

8:44pm 28 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Mary,

I think this is a great idea! The intermittent nature of CPD can be a barrier in that if a teacher has a particular issue, it may be some time until they have an opportunity to attend a physical CPD event to address it. Do you have any plans to get feedback from the participants of the MOOC?

Best wishes,

Leanne



[Mary Howell](#)

9:19pm 28 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi and thank you Leanne

That is an interesting and pertinent point you make about time delay and physical CPD.

My original thoughts were to look at participant views and experience, but timing meant I ot seek informed consent - hence the use of their MOOC mentors. Although this was initially mostly a pragmatic choice I think it will yield some interesting insights and a couple of surprises. My colleague is working with a group of teachers, all from the same school and she is collecting information about how they feel about the learning (or otherwise) from the MOOC as part of a blended learning experience.

At some future point I would like to get information and feedback from participants.



[Heather Bloodworth](#)

10:39pm 29 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Mary, This is an excellent poster and very pertinent. We are experiencing the very same issues within nursing. Due to time and work load pressures and constraints, education isn't the main priority any more and usually gets forgotten! E-learning and online courses is definitely the way forward, however trying to keep everyone (student's) motivated and engaged in the course is very challenging.



[Julie Skeats](#)

9:49pm 1 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Mary, A very engaging poster. I think your topic is spot on as school budgets get smaller, opportunities for CPD reduces, so teachers aren't getting the support they need to survive in a demanding career. Many of my friends have left education as they were unable to keep up with the demands of the profession, which just keeps changing. Keeping up with CPD to support the constant changes doesn't happen because of budget constraints. So the use of MOOCs which means teachers could study at a time to suit them, sounds like a great idea. Not sure how some teachers would feel who struggle with technology, using a MOOC might just stress them out even more than they already are.



[Allison Bell](#)

8:24pm 2 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Mary,

Very interesting topic. Particularly interested in what you say about the role of mentors to promote conversations:

"We have quite a bit of feedback that teachers appreciated the mentor inputs and the conversations they had with mentors as well as fellow participants (this contradicts some research findings that say mentor presence can shut discussion down _ I need to find the reference for that again)."

Three points on that: feed back from learners on our first MOOC included very positive comments about the engagement of mentors and that they felt their comments were being read; secondly that there's an art to sustained mentor involvement where there are large participant numbers so ways to give the impression of a strong educator presence need to be explored (e.g. summarising points/weaving etc.). Last point would be that in my experience online facilitation is at its best when it's encouraging students to think for themselves - leading/controlling conversations does seem to inhibit posts from students..

Allison



[James Fanning](#)

11:44am 4 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Mary, I think the Norwegian government invested in MOOC CPD for teachers, with some quite impressive results.

One of the issues raised by teachers in my study was 'the working time agreement' (McCrone Agreement) i.e. in discussions with them there was an assumption that any online CPD (or Career Long Professional Development as its called here) should take place in school time (on our national intranet something like 30% of responses take place outside school hours). I wondered if in your study mentors had raised any observations around the flexibility of MOOCs but the fact that teachers work within a fairly inflexible system and what impact this might have?



[Mary Howell](#)

11:58am 4 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Heather - thank you. Yes new methods, but new challenges too. A colleague looked at the MOOC as part of a blended leaning experience and keeping everyone engaged, even when they feel they are benefiting is hard with so many pulls on people's time. Julie - again thank you - your experience resonates so strongly with mine. It saddens me that so many talented people are leaving and I am encouraged that you think CPD can make a difference. The DfE have recently made productive recommendations about teacher workload, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-teachers-workload/reducing-teachers-workload>, but even within the profession these reports do not seem to be widely known. Allison - thank you - yes a balancing act in the mentor role seems to be necessary. What you say concurs with our mentoring experience a- I'll be putting a bit about what we

learned about mentoring from our experience and review discussions in my presentation.



[Mary Howell](#)

11:58am 4 February 2017 (Edited 1:27pm 4 February 2017) [Permalink](#)

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[Mary Howell](#)

12:30pm 4 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi James and thank you for raising what is a really important point. There is a huge danger of everyone just getting sucked into a culture of expecting teachers to just work on their CPD or whatever in their own time. In England the workload issues are huge and the contractual position is complex as pay and conditions in academies and free schools are not the same as in schools under Local Authority control. There was a workload agreement in England quite a few years ago and much of what was in that seems to have gone by the board and as I mention above the DfE have had working parties explore issues <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-teachers-workload/reducing-teachers-workload> Mostly I have been looking at the MOOC from a perspective of teachers participating on a purely voluntary basis. The topics have been behaviour management, formative assessment and differentiation, so teachers do tend to sign up out of a personal interest or their own perception of their needs. I suppose what might happen is that if it can be demonstrated that effective teacher learning and transformation of practice can be brought about through MOOC participation, then we may end up with school leaders compelling teachers to participate or building it in to a CPD expectation and then as you say the flexibility of a MOOC might be a blessing (I can do it when it suits me) or a curse (no excuse to not participate, very easy to add to someone's load without much cost or perceiving what needs to be taken away to allow time for the CPD). You have certainly given me lots to think about - thank you



[Mary Howell](#)

12:30pm 4 February 2017 (Edited 1:30pm 4 February 2017) [Permalink](#)

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[Allison Bell](#)

7:40pm 5 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Mary,

I'll look forward of course to the presentation, but anything further you can share with me about your own experiences with the role of the mentor and how that influences learner commenting would be really helpful for my project too.

Thanks - Allison



[Mary Howell](#)

10:34pm 5 February 2017 (Edited 10:37pm 5 February 2017) [Permalink](#)

Hi Alison Yes sharing would be good. I'm hoping to get something onto Open studio mid week, which should give you some info on what we found through the project and MOOC review



[Leanne Johnstone](#)

7:04pm 6 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Mary,

I have answered your questions from Allison's post below:

What inspired you to choose and dip into the MOOCs where that was your approach? If the topic was something that I found interesting or it related to my teaching practice, I would sign up so I had access to it. I then used them like I would a reference book, accessing bits when it related to a lesson I was

teaching. Less often the course would have a particular part that I would find very interesting but I didn't want to complete the rest.

Do you think you drew lasting learning from doing that? Yes, because I was really motivated to learn about the topic. So although I probably accessed only a small proportion of the course, it really stuck with me because I found it so interesting.

What was your motivation for fully completing the BLE one - how was that different to the ones you dipped into? Initially, I was encouraged to do it by one of my managers but I stuck through it and completed it all because I wanted to be able to use it to support an application for CMALT. The course was really good so that helped.

Hope these answers help. Feel free to use them in your project as you feel appropriate.

Leanne :-)



[Mary Howell](#)

3:15pm 8 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Leanne thank you that is both helpful and interesting.

Mary :-)



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

10:58am 14 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Mary

Please find below the main questions and comments from your live presentation. It's up to you how to answer them, whether you wish to group them, or whether you wish to point to an answer already given above, for example.

Best wishes

Simon

- ▶ High attrition rate for teachers! Plus the incoming ones do not have the technical knowledge needed for subjects like Science!
- ▶ Sadly schools do not see this as a priority, even when it is covering basic H&S (legally required) training....
- ▶ To be fair, if I hadn't been creating/producing those moocs, I may not have! When I've done them on my own I've sort of lost steam...
- ▶ I think MOOCs are great, but like Liz, I lose steam and the day job gets in the way
- ▶ Did you find that the more active the mentors are, the more 'active' the participants are?
- ▶ I think it must depend on why one is undertaking the MOOC?
- ▶ Interesting idea of linear and non-linear working
- ▶ Does finishing a MOOC matter? I spoke to a company in Edinburgh who said they encouraged their staff to only complete that part of a MOOC that was relevant to the skills they required. Should teachers be the same?
- ▶ And I think has a lot to do with the platform
- ▶ I've never completed one but I never intended to. I was always just checking them out for approaches, materials, videos etc.
- ▶ Sometimes, learners just want to dip in and out of the content of a MOOC, without actively taking part in the activities and discussions
- ▶ The most active one I joined was a FutureLearn one where the tutors dipped in to the forums too.
- ▶ Having helped facilitate discussion board during 'live events', I can appreciate how much effort and resource is needed to sustain these!
- ▶ I wasn't too bothered about having a mentor, in fact I would avoid it, but my partner wanted a close mentoring relationship. It must surely depend on the person and their confidence, - at least I would think so (no more evidence than my experience to go on though)

- ▶ agree - the dialogue / sharing ideas is really important - too many MOOCs I've seen are the 'body of knowledge' type..
- ▶ Research supports that - educator 'presence' makes a difference
- ▶ I agree that sharing ideas is important but some might need more supervision/mentorship.



[Mary Howell](#)

11:40pm 14 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Thank you to everyone for the interesting comments and questions - I will try to respond in detail soon.
Thank you to all who attended 'live' for tcreating such a suportive atmosphere.



[Mary Howell](#)

8:37pm 18 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Thank you for your comments and questions from the Conference. Here are some thoughts and comments.

High attriton rates, lack of suitably qualified teachers and shortage not being a priority in school - I think this is finally hitting home as schools struggle to recruit, but sadly it is a vicious circle. If schools are short staffed or lack the experienced staff they need, huge pressures fall on those in post and the problem can be exacerbated.

Losing steam - yes I agree the motivation for studying the MOOC is important and in addition even for motivated adults study is hard, with many pulls on people's time and priorities. One of the main points that has been clarified in my own thinking about MOOCs, through this project, is that the design needs to reflect learner needs and the way people use MOOCs, rather than trying to mimic the linear formats of traditional, face to face courses. I note with interest the comments that follow through in the thread from Conference and chime with that sentiment - finishing is not always the point. During Allison Bell's presentation someone saidthey did not feel obliged to read the whole of a book, they just picked out the bits they needed and I liked that analogy applied to MOOCs. I do think they can be treated in a similar way and design should perhaps reflect this. Having said that it will depend on the subject matter, the purpose of the MOOC and what is being assessed (if anything) and the use assessemtn is put to.

That's a fair point - that personality influences how someone reacts to mentor presence and being asked to discuss in forums. What we learned as mentors was that there is an art to mentoring and we are conscious that our learning about this role and how to be effective MOOC mentors is only beginning.

Finally yes I agree that some need support to engage and discuss online and the nature of support and how a wider range of people can be encouraged to engage online is something I want to explore further.

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