OnCreate

Learning Spaces

MOOC-Platform-Centred Courses

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Development of MOOC-Centred Design Courses

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Abstract

The growing demand for teaching and assessment platforms to accommodate the explosion in online, self-paced courses has yielded some fantastic provisions. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have the difficult role of meeting the expectations of and supporting learners from diverse geographic locations, academic background, levels of attainment and experience using digital tools and interfaces. Whilst there there are multiple definitions and forms of MOOC, they generally refer to online courses that are designed for large numbers of participants, usually offering free access to activities and content.

For OnCreate courses, the requirements for selecting a platform were quite simple because we had a relatively in-depth knowledge of capabilities of the participants, a luxury compared to courses that have to reach the far ends of the Earth and cater for learners of all ages. The only real stipulation was that the platform should be free (as to not incur costs to our students or institutions) and not be subject to any geographic or political restrictions from the member countries represented by the consortium.

Another aspect to consider to the election of a particular MOOC is whether or not the course was external or hosted by a member(s) of the consortium. If it were external (as was the case for the +acumen HCD course), then the platform is dictated so the decision was out of our hands. If we were the hosts, we had to select an appropriate platform. There is a quite a list to choose from on https://www.class-central.com/providers.

Below are the top 21 rated by courses currently running/open:

· Coursera	· Miríada X	· NovoEd
· edX	· France Université Numerique	· EduOpen
· FutureLearn	· iversity	· Federica
· Canvas Network	· Open Education by Blackboard	· Stanford OpenEdx
· Independent	· Kadenze	· gacco
· NPTEL	· Rwaq	· Open2Study
· Udacity	· openSAP	· Eilademy

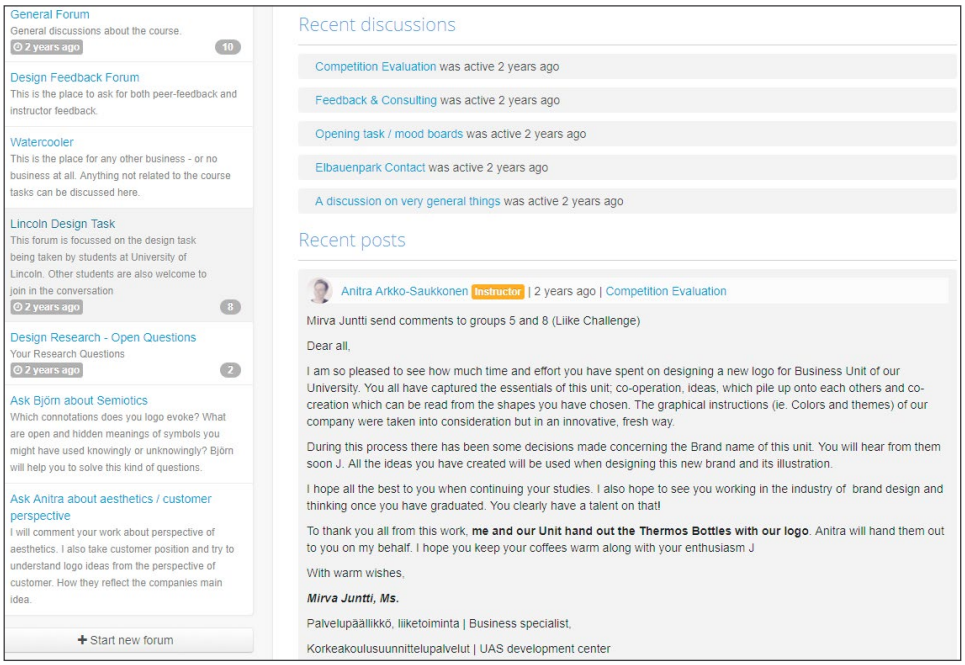
During the initial research phase of OnCreate, a number of consortium members took part in an +acumen/IDEO NovoEd MOOC on Human Centred Design. This enabled OnCreate researchers to analyse and evaluate technological and pedagogical issues presented by this particular platform. What follows is an exploration of the NovoED platform , alongside teaching and learning provisions on Eliademy , an alternative MOOC platform that was eventually adopted for a number of OnCreate courses.

MOOC as a collaboration platform

The collaborative potential for MOOC's varies per provision. Certain MOOC's have built-in collaboration tools whilst others outsource this particular aspect to a third party. It seems, from very modest primary research, that beyond the basic premise of bringing learners together to a focal point, that MOOC's are not designed with collaboration at their core. The majority of content is self-paced with the focus on personal development. Where the focus of a course is group or team-based, collaboration seems mostly restricted to generating real time documentation.

In terms of the two provisions that are being compared for the purpose of this case study then it is fortuitous that they represent the two extremes of the spectrum for supporting collaborative development.

Eliademy features no collaborative tools within it's environment.
The closest native function to support interactive communication of any aspect is the forum:



Labelled 'Discussions', this tool is not conducive to collaboration. That is not to say it serves no purpose. The forum is appropriate for asynchronous communication, usually to support the course hierarchy whereby instructors feedback or notify the course populs simultaneously of key aspects of the course, logistical matters, changes or general notifications. This function is a great way to reach your entire cohort with consistent information, but without group-initiated protocols, the lack of synchronous communication renders it ineffective for collaboration.

What forums are good for, and always have been/will be, is support both in terms of helping solve a problem and also the ability to provide feedback or critique. These tasks are not dependent on the ability to communicate in real time as they represent an end point in a journey or a part of a journey. A request for help is the first chapter on an ongoing narrative to help solve a problem collectively. Feedback is a culmination of thoughts describing an artefact or concept at a given point in time. Therefore they do not require, or should expect, immediate responses. In fact, it is very often the case that a response to both situations demands careful and considered comments.
The forum for the Branding Design course (illustrated above) was

underused because it was usurped by tools/platforms that supported real time communication when true collaboration was required. However, the forums were used for mass communication and a small amount of critical review.

NovoEd was the platform used for one of the few externally hosted courses that members of the consortium participated on. In many ways NovoEd is similar in structure to Eliademy (and most other MOOC's) and like Eliademy, it did not feature native functions to directly facilitate collaboration. However, unlike Eliademy, NovoEd provides an internal handling of Google Drive/Doc where each participant was asked to connect their Google account to their NovoEd account or use their Google credentials to authenticate themselves with the NovoEd platform. Although the embedding of external collaborative tools might not seem significant, the fact it was implemented so seamlessly provided the illusion that Google Docs was an extension of the NovoEd platform and that the user never had to "leave" the confines of the platform in order to take full advantage of Google's excellent collaborative tools.

Additionally teams could initiate a Google Hangout, with all group members instantly invited, by the simple click of a button on the 'Team' page.

It seems that this approach of embedding third party provisions within a MOOC provides the most appropriate solution because there are numerous great synchronous communication and collaboration tools (see below) already in existence. MOOC's need not provide bespoke tools for synchronous collaboration. It is possible that the inclusion of such tools would dilute the true function of the MOOC and possibly detract attention away from providing an appropriate and effective learning environment for the individual.

However, despite the benefits of the above approach, it must be noted that any platform embedding third party tools has no control over the operation of the tools or how the users interact with those tools. In the case of NovoEd/Google Docs for example, if a team member creates a Google Doc for the team and then deletes it. There is nothing the other team members nor NovoEd could do. That content is potentially lost. That

being said, this is no different from the team note-taker accidentally (or otherwise) destroying physical documents.

Complementary tools and platforms

From observations, it does not appear as though it is the role of MOOC's to operate as a 'collaborative platform'. Therefore MOOC's rely on external provisions to provide this functionality. There now follows a description of the external tools utilised by OnCreate projects when working on MOOC centred courses:

Google Docs/Drive & Microsoft Office 365

As mentioned above (and below) and detailed throughout OnCreate documented processes, Google Docs (https://www.google.co.uk/docs/about/) is a fantastic provision for working collaboratively with text, presentations, numerical data, drawings and gathering research. Google Drive (https://www.google.com/drive/) is the cloud-based service where Google Docs (and other files) are stored.

In the interest of objectivity, Microsoft also have an online collaborative version of their famous Office suite called Office 365 (https://products.office.com/en-gb/business/office).

Office 365 offers an even more comprehensive selection of online tools, most of which support real-time editing and collaboration. However, Google Drive/Docs is totally free and features a simpler interface which seems to suggest a more focused approach on content as opposed to form. The issue with Office 365 not being free means that unless all participants (or their institutions) are paid subscribers, then they will not have access.

Padlet

When gathering/sorting visual research and ideas iteration, Padlet (https://padlet.com) offers a near synchronous way of contributing, editing and commenting on ideas/research collaboratively. It lacks the effective sync speed of Google Docs and Microsoft Office 366 but is free and relatively initiative thanks to its very visual interface and approach to interaction.

Padlet has been extensively utilised in OnCreate projects where collaboration on creative briefs was a requirement. It was especially effective in supporting the iterative research and design processes of teams of people working remotely. The majority of interaction with Padlet has been asynchronous and it is a great provision for evidencing collaborative the production process of projects.

Skype/Google Hangouts

The function of both Skype (https://www.skype.com/de/) and Google Hangouts (https://hangouts.google.com) is to connect people or teams of people via video conferencing. Whilst not particularly collaborative in nature, these communication suites are perfect for delivering project information personally. Even the ability to see who you are working with/for seems to have a positive motivational effect as when contributing/participating on a MOOC driven course, it is possible to feel isolated and lack of human connection. This might account for notorious low retention rates of some MOOC's.

Google Hangouts goes slightly further and can be used as evidence of meetings or critiquing sessions thanks to its ability to archive video feeds on YouTube. If appropriate, Google Hangouts also have the option to be broadcast live and be promoted through Google's (limited) social media platform.

In terms of OnCreate, these tools were the fall back option for video conferencing when Adobe Connect (see below) was either not available or not operating properly.

Adobe Connect

Throughout the working duration of the OnCreate project, Adobe Connect (http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html) has been used in multiple ways. In the context of working with MOOC's, it extends the functionality provided by the MOOC and other supporting platforms such as Google Docs. It even superseeds Hangout/Skype because of Connect's ability to host breakout rooms and support a near web-conference environment.

However, it is very costly and while we were fortunate enough to have

an institution within the consortium that had a license, it is doubtful that the cost of purchasing this provision in order to support the MOOC's OnCreate were involved with would not have been viable or efficient use of funds.

As a cursory note, the platform has many issues and replies on outdated Flash-based technology which requires plugins and even dedicated applications in order for it operate. That said, it can be a very effective tool for reaching a large number of participants and supports various hierarchical modes of structuring a session.

Basecamp / Facebook

Project management tool Basecamp (https://basecamp.com), and social media platform Facebook (https://web.facebook.com) both offer synchronous communication tools to support management and facilitate participation in courses that are hosted on MOOC's. However, these tools themselves can perform the role of the MOOC as a hub for course/project activity. There are each treated to separate discussions within this output.

Microsoft Teams

https://products.office.com/en-gb/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software?&wt.srch=1&wt.mc_id=AID522516_SEM_6g5ium6n

A relatively new tool has recently surfaced within some of the partner institutions that combines the functionality of a number of the above tools into a very powerful suite of project management, communication application and collaborative tools. Although Microsoft Teams has not been officially used within OnCreate, had this tool been available from the project's inception, and had it been a free provision, then the chances are that the consortium would have adopted it for use in multiple roles.

This discussion has been included in the interest of objectivity and future potential for impact as an extension to the MOOC experience (for participants and tutors), and as an alternative for current project management tools.

Useful methods

Based on the experiences of using MOOC's as part of, or at the centre of, OnCreate learning activities, there are some suggestions for their effective use. These suggestions are connected to extended the MOOC where it fails to provide appropriate functionality:

· Create a working protocol — establish what external platforms are required to extend the MOOC (if needed) and what role they will play. This plan needs to be clearly disseminated to all participants and their expected contribution made clear.

· Suggest a communication model — it is vital to document and share how to manage communication or output between the disparate platforms. This prevents the dilution of information streams. For example some MOOC's might provide participants with a chat feature but it might be unintuitive or asynchronous. Participants then might start communicating on Facebook. This could fragment discussions, especially if a chat system is used to informally create and manage project goals. Make it clear that the integrity of discussion threads is essential.

· Delineation between official and casual workflows — as an extension to the above suggestion, it might be advisable to assign an official and casual workflows. Official workflows will be used for evidence for assessment or public-facing engagement. If supported, these workflows should probably exist on/in the MOOC. Casual workflows allow participants to communicate effectively using their tool of choice (probably Facebook). This segregation of discussion-based content and reporting will ensure that the official project discussion/outputs are always disconnected from noise and other social chatter - all of which negatively affect perceived professionalism and cloud the key project outcomes. In many ways this mimics the physical office environment where the official workflow represents boardroom meetings or presentations and the casual workflow represents the 'watercooler'.

Resources

OnCreate original guides on »How to collaborate in real-time using Google Docs & Drive« you can find on the website.

These videos were created to extend the text-based official help of Google Drive/Docs and to provide context for the OnCreate Branding Design workshops. They were also produced as test footage for the University of Lincoln's evaluation of the Swivl platform and hardware.

Literature

An interesting article on the recent explosion of popularity in MOOC-based programmes:
https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2016/01/05/use-of-moocs-and-online-education-is-exploding-heres-why/#286c12be7649