Innovative online professional learning from the Open University

MOOC stands for Massive Open Online Course.

A MOOC is a short course with around 3-30 hours of programmed online learning usually between 1-8 weeks long. They are generally supported via participation in a peer learning community which may or may not be moderated by an academic facilitator. Their growth as a vehicle for online learning has been remarkably rapid, with the first acknowledged University-produced example being noted in 2008 (by the University of Manitoba), the acronym MOOC coined sometime around 2009-10 and the first UK university MOOC platform, FutureLearn, being established in 2012. They are considered:

- Massive – due to uncapped registration of learners, which leads to large, internationally distributed, connected learner cohorts. One early example, Stanford University’s “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence” which in its first run in 2012 attracted 160,000 learners worldwide.

- Open – as registration is available to anyone and does not require previous study or existing qualifications. In addition, most MOOCs are free, although some do charge for entry and many charge for certificates

- Online – no requirement for face-to-face attendance, although some MOOCs include or are linked to online meet-ups

- Course – the concept of a pedagogically designed learning journey

The focus of a MOOC is to attract as many individual learners as possible to participate in their mutual learning about a specific subject area in an online learning environment. The Open University’s MOOC platform is FutureLearn, which it runs on behalf of a consortium of UK universities and other bodies, such as the British Library. For a small fee FutureLearn MOOCs also offer individual learners the capacity to certificate their learning.

At the Open University, the learning materials – written articles, videos, interactives, etc. – on which many of its MOOCs are based can also be used as an Open Educational Resource (OER). This is a set of learning materials on a specific subject which are available free and can be studied informally by anyone. The Open University places these on a browsable online learning environment, known as OpenLearn, so that individual learners can use them as a short self-study resource, Some of these also include certification or badging of completion and are known as a Badged Open Courses (BOCs)

To check the list of OERs identified as relevant to policing professional development look at the following linked page on our website www.centre-for-policing.open.ac.uk/learning.

The Open University’s Centre for Policing Research and Learning was established in 2015 with the help of the Police Knowledge Fund, and part of its remit is to provide innovative online learning which supports police professional development. The Consortium of 16 police forces with which the Centre works in collaboration were keen for us to explore the potential of a MOOC as a way of bringing together police officers and staff from around Britain with those in other countries, and with other public service professionals and stakeholders in learning about topics of mutual interest. The Open University already had a number of successful MOOCs developed by OU academics which reflected their research specialisms related to policing, such as cybercrime and forensic psychology.
From workshop discussions with the Consortium forces, the topic of public leadership, another of our research specialisms was identified as the subject for the Centre’s next MOOC, linked as it is to questions of public value, stakeholder perspectives and multi-agency collaboration. Read more about the research interests and specific projects of the Centre by clicking the following link: www.centre-for-policing.open.ac.uk/research.

It is a key commitment of the Centre for Policing Research and Learning that all our work is evidence based, i.e. that it is underpinned by rigorous academic research linked to practitioner experience, and our approach to learning is no different. One topic which is being studied by our researchers is what makes a good MOOC. This is a really difficult area as many of the MOOC provider platforms maintain commercial confidentiality around information about learner numbers and experience. What we have learned, based on extensive research on online learner experience over the last two decades is that for such large heterogeneous learner populations, one size does not fit all.

We have learned for example that the method of delivery aids isolated learners and that the course design can accommodate versioning or adaptation for particular professional specialists. However there is some debate about the impact of online learning on time poor learners. While it can be studied flexibly, scheduling time for study can be a complex matter related to the value of the learning to the individual – a highly subjective judgement. This is why FutureLearn provides timed presentations for learners wanting the live experience with permanent access to the course thereafter, and OpenLearn provides access to the course learning materials for anyone on a permanent basis.

Current research indicates that MOOC learners enjoy assimilative learning activities such as videos and articles, which have to be short and have a purpose. They like content to be bitesized so they can pick it up and put it down, and they like to understand the learning outcomes – why am I doing this? The Open University MOOC in Forensic Psychology for example is serialized and structured around two fictionalised crime investigations.

Research into the online experience of professional learners, indicates that learning content must be relevant to their work but also offer the opportunity for comparative discussion of mutual interest topics with peers from other related fields.

If you would like to sign up for any of the MOOCs mentioned in this article go to www.futurelearn.com to check out the next starting dates. If you are interested to find out more about the work of the Open University Centre for Policing Research and Learning go to www.centre-for-policing.open.ac.uk or drop us an email at oupc@open.ac.uk

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