

Integrating a MOOC into the Postgraduate ELT Curriculum: Reflecting on Students' Beliefs with a MOOC Blend

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7 Integrating a MOOC into the postgraduate ELT curriculum: reflecting on students' beliefs with a MOOC blend

Marina Orsini-Jones¹, Barbara Conde Gafaro²,
and Shooq Altamimi³

Abstract

This chapter builds on the outcomes of a blended learning action-research project in its third iteration (academic year 2015-16). The FutureLearn Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching* was integrated into the curriculum of the Master of Arts (MA) in English Language Teaching (ELT) at Coventry University (UK). The MOOC was designed by the University of Southampton in collaboration with the British Council and many of its topics appeared to coincide with those on the MA in ELT module 'Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching'. The initial blend trialled for the project included all students covering the same topics in various ways, e.g. in face-to-face workshops at Coventry University, on the MOOC with thousands of participants, and on the institutional virtual learning environment – Moodle – with peers on the module. This enhanced blend afforded unique opportunities for reflection on the problematic areas of knowledge encountered by students on the MA in ELT, such as learner autonomy. The work reported here was carried out by one of the authors (Altamimi), an 'expert student' who replicated the

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research design of the first cycles of the study carried out by Orsini-Jones in 2014 and 2015, and focused on learners' beliefs, rather than on learner autonomy.

Keywords: blended learning, MOOC, ELT, beliefs.

1. Introduction

This study is the third cycle of an action research project carried out in the School of Humanities at Coventry University (UK). It relates to the integration of the FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching*, by the University of Southampton and the British Council, into the curriculum of the MA in ELT. The first phase of the project (semester one 2014-15) investigated the engagement of six members of staff and two expert students⁴ with the blended MOOC pilot (Orsini-Jones et al., 2015) which had been integrated into the module 'Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching', while the second phase (semester two 2014-15) focused on the evaluation of the students' reflection on the experience of studying the MOOC in a blended learning mode (Orsini-Jones, 2015).

The type of MOOC blend described here, where the content of a MOOC becomes an integral part of an existing curriculum in an institution that is not involved in the development of the MOOC itself, is relatively new in the UK higher education sector, but there are numerous precedents in the USA (Israel, 2013; Kim, 2015; Sandeen, 2013). Sandeen (2013) calls this type of blend a 'MOOC 3.0' or a 'distributed flip' model. The value of blending open educational resources into an existing curriculum is also supported by a study by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), as previously illustrated (Orsini-Jones, 2015, p. 5).

4. For further information on the concept of the 'expert student' refer to Orsini-Jones (2014).

It was hoped that the MOOC blend would offer the MA students a unique and global collaborative learning opportunity, as the FutureLearn MOOC pedagogical model is underpinned by Laurillard's (2013) education technology dialogic framework. The overall aim of this MOOC blend was to evaluate the impact of a novel blended learning experience on the MA students' perceptions and reflections regarding challenging topics in their discipline. Secondly, the study aimed at exploring how the MA students' beliefs could be affected by a multiple level meta-reflection on their knowledge and practice carried out while taking part in a relevant MOOC in blended mode.

As stated in Orsini-Jones (2015, p. 5), the MOOC was integrated into the module *Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching* that carries 15 of the 180 credits on the MA in ELT. Its aim is to give students an in-depth understanding of the theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and illustrate their links to approaches and methods of language teaching which they inform. The module's learning outcomes are that, on completion, students should be able to:

- critically appraise the major theories of SLA;
- discuss the relevance of SLA theories to the development of teaching approaches and methodology;
- discuss and appraise the implications of sociocultural theories for the development of second language learning and teaching approaches and methodology;
- analyse the suitability of needs of specific English language learners in specific English language learning contexts and discuss the teaching and learning approaches most appropriate to their situation.

The outcomes are summatively assessed as follows (Orsini-Jones, 2015, p. 5): one essay (at home) and a seen exam (the students receive its text a fortnight before the exam takes place). The exam comprises two questions to answer, one

of which is relevant to the MOOC blend. The main topics covered by the weekly units of the MOOC were the following, and many sections coincided with an existing topic on the MA module:

- Week 1: Learning Language: Theory.
- Week 2: Language Teaching in the Classroom
- Week 3: Technology in Language Learning and Teaching: A New Environment
- Week 4: Language in Use: Global English

Orsini-Jones (2015) further points out that

“[b]efore the integration of the MOOC into its syllabus, the module was delivered by a blend that included face-to-face contact [...] and online support provided through activities available in a dedicated Moodle website where students could access information on lectures, view relevant videos, engage in interactive tasks [and quizzes] and discuss the material covered in class in online discussion forums before, during and after the face-to-face sessions” (p. 5).

After the MOOC was introduced, the blend was enhanced by the opportunity not only to access extra online materials and new ‘expert voices’, but also to engage with a much wider community of practice. A MOOC navigation session was delivered face-to-face in a PC laboratory as soon as the MOOC started. At the end of each unit, the MOOC included a section called ‘Reflection’ where participants were expected to share the positive aspects of the week. The students on the MA were also asked to do the same on the discussion forums in Moodle.

The findings reported here stemmed from the third phase of this MOOC blend project carried out by Altamimi, an ‘expert student’ and one of the authors, and were reported in her MA thesis (Altamimi, 2016). Altamimi replicated the

research design of the previous studies by Orsini-Jones (2015) and Orsini-Jones et al. (2015), but focused on learners' beliefs rather than learner autonomy. Also, her study did not include the intercultural learning component on *Facebook* that had characterised the second cycle of this curricular action by Orsini-Jones (2015). Altamimi explored if and how the participants' beliefs in relation to key language learning and teaching concepts had been affected by their engagement with the MOOC blend project.

2. Methodology

2.1. Context

This work is framed within the overarching transactional pedagogical enquiry approach known as 'Threshold Concepts Pedagogy' (Cousin, 2009; Flanagan, 2016), that aims to identify which of the fundamental concepts in a discipline are challenging (troublesome) for students. This is done in order to put in place ways of supporting students with crossing these curricular stumbling blocks. Threshold concepts usually present a number of troublesome areas, which are troublesome because they challenge the learner with knowledge that is 'alien' both in terms of epistemology (knowledge system/language) and ontology (learner's identity and beliefs). For example, the overarching structure of a sentence was previously identified as a threshold concept in linguistics (Orsini-Jones, 2010) and each of its components proved to be troublesome to students (e.g. morphemes, clauses, phrases).

A distinguishing feature of the threshold concepts approach discussed here is that the identification of troublesome knowledge is sought by student researchers, or 'expert students', who, having adopted threshold concepts pedagogy for their own research design, help staff members discover areas of troublesome knowledge by enabling them to approach these problematic areas from a student's perspective (Orsini-Jones, 2014). Altamimi was one of these 'expert students'. After having experienced the MOOC blend herself as a student in its second curricular cycle in 2015 (Orsini-Jones, 2015), she decided to adopt an inquiry into threshold

concepts for her dissertation. She focused on a previously identified troublesome area in ELT pedagogy, i.e. teachers' beliefs (Klapper, 2006), and investigated how the MOOC blend could enable students on the September 2015 cohort of the MA in ELT to reflect on their beliefs.

MA in ELT students are not always aware of the impact that their beliefs can have on their teaching practice. This lack of awareness raises two areas of concern. The first one is that beliefs can act as a barrier or filter when these teachers (or future teachers) are attempting to further their own professional knowledge and pedagogy (Klapper, 2006). Therefore, they need to be made aware of their own beliefs and perceptions, while they are still undergoing teacher training and education, in order to explicitly develop their own pedagogical beliefs and assumptions with the underpinning of relevant research, and develop professionally as a result. The second concern is that teachers' personal learning experience is likely to influence what their teaching is going to be like (Klapper, 2006). This is not to suggest that all teaching based on personally experienced models is bad or ineffective; trainee teachers might have had positive role models who have influenced their beliefs and perceptions in a positive way. However, arbitrary and random transfer might yield problematic results when teachers adopt methods and practices unsuited to a certain group of learners or contexts (Klapper, 2006). Although it may be argued that there is no correct way to teach, teaching requires the flexibility needed to know what approach to adopt for a certain group of learners, in a specific curricular circumstance in a specific cultural setting (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Thus, engaging in meta-reflective practices underpinned by research on language learning and teaching can be one way of achieving beneficial transfer. The research questions investigated by Altamimi were therefore the following:

- What constitutes 'troublesome knowledge' in English language learning and teaching for students on the MA in ELT?
- Would engaging with the MOOC-blend project change students' beliefs on language learning and teaching and related 'troublesome knowledge'?

Altamimi modelled her research design on previous work carried out by Orsini-Jones on the MOOC-blend on the MA in ELT (Orsini-Jones, 2015). She designed a pre-MOOC and a post-MOOC survey with the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) tool⁵, but unlike Orsini-Jones (2015) who had explored learner autonomy, she focused on learners' beliefs. The BOS was selected because it allowed the gathering of a large amount of information quickly and is Data Protection Act-compliant. Both surveys consisted of mainly close-ended Likert scale questions with the inclusion of a few open-ended questions following guidelines provided by Dörnyei (2003) and were piloted by the researcher and her supervisor before being administered to the participating students. Altamimi also organised a focus group after the completion of the post-MOOC survey which enabled her to triangulate the participants' quantitative (multiple choice) and qualitative (open-ended) survey answers.

2.2. Sampling

12 self-selected students, out of the 18 who were enrolled on the MA in ELT in the 2015 September cohort, agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1 below). Participants with previous teaching experience had taught General English (GE), Academic Writing, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and Literature courses.

Table 1. Demographics of pre-and post-MOOC survey sample

Participant	Mode of study	Nationality	L1	Sex	Level of Proficiency	Teaching experience	Length	Subject
1	FT	British	English	F	C2	Yes	>1	ESP
2	FT	British	English	F	C2	Yes	>1	Writing
3	FT	Norwegian	English	F	C2	No	0	
4	PT	British	English	F	C2	Yes	5	ESL/EFL
5	FT	British	English	F	C2	Yes	>1	GE

5. Available from <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/fcccognqeh36gdcflw509zxdelqfv5zt>

6	FT	Taiwanese	Chinese	M	B2	Yes	>1	ESL
7	FT	Chinese	Chinese	F	B2	No	0	
8	FT	Chinese	Chinese	F	B2	No	0	
9	FT	Chinese	Chinese	F	B2	No	0	
10	FT	Chinese	Chinese	F	C1	No	0	
11	FT	Nigerian	Yoruba	F	C1	Yes	1	Literature
12	FT	Indonesian	Bahasa	F	C1	No	0	

3. Results and discussion

3.1. General perceptions

Regarding the blended aspect of the project, in the focus group participants agreed that, in line with previous results (Orsini-Jones, 2015), the MOOC was a useful open educational addition to an existing module. They stated that they had enjoyed the flexibility in the access to extra materials afforded by the MOOC, and they were particularly complimentary of how it supplemented the module in various ways, including extra references that they could use in their coursework, and providing summaries of topics discussed on the module in class.

The fact that the blend was perceived as a positive addition to their curriculum was also reinforced by the answers to the relevant questions in the post-MOOC BOS. Table 2 below illustrates a noticeable shift in beliefs on online learning in the ‘agree’ column, even if there is a small increase in the ‘disagree’ percentage in the first question reported.

Table 2. Attitudes towards online learning in the pre- and post-MOOC surveys

Learning a language online can motivate learners.			
Time	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Pre	58%	34%	8%
Post	75%	8%	17%
Learning about language learning online can motivate teachers.			
Time	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Pre	42%	33%	25%
Post	75%	8%	17%

While participants were on the whole positive about the MOOC blend experience, they found the MOOC discussions after each topic difficult to navigate, due to the number of postings. This might call for better scaffolding in Bruner's (1983) terms of the dialogic aspect of the MOOC.

3.2. Grammar and CLIL

Another interesting outcome was that while grammar awareness was believed to be particularly challenging by seven of the 12 respondents in the pre-MOOC survey, in the post-MOOC survey, grammar did not emerge as a particularly troublesome area. The seven participants were therefore asked to elaborate on the change in relation to their grammar beliefs in the focus group discussion. They stated that they viewed grammar as less problematic after having engaged with the MOOC and having explored grammar issues on the relevant modules with their tutors. On the other hand, they stated that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) was difficult to understand and challenging to implement. This perception had been reinforced by watching and discussing the videos of the two sample CLIL classes in the second week of the MOOC. The perceived challenge in the understanding of CLIL could possibly relate to the fact that the topic was included in the assessed test and that the sample CLIL video illustrations in the MOOC did not appear to propose effective CLIL models.

3.3. Autonomy

The focus group discussion confirmed that autonomy (as defined by Benson, 2001) is a troublesome concept. It appeared to be alien in terms of ontology (a concept that is alien to the identity of the learner), as previously discussed by Orsini-Jones (2015). The challenge to the identity of the learner posed by the concept of autonomy can result in MA students developing a resistance to it, not necessarily because the concept is difficult to understand, but because they do not believe in it. British and non-British participants mentioned different reasons behind their resistance to the implementation of autonomy in their teaching practice. Non-British participants emphasised cultural differences

between what they had learned on the module, the MOOC, and their own local context as shown below:

“My experience was a little different [to that of British participants]. It’s because of cultural differences. My context in Taiwan – frankly speaking, I don’t want to try autonomy, to try that stuff... I think the learner over there – sometimes if the teacher doesn’t push them they don’t care. They tend to not do the extra reading, they tend to not do self-studying. So if, like, I ask them to go online and check MOOC... I think they won’t do it” (Focus Group transcription, Participant E, 3rd December 2015).

It is interesting to see the word ‘stuff’ used for autonomy with a tinge of derogatory connotation in the quote above, to signal conceptual distance from it.

The British participants, on the other hand, emphasised how pressure from the educational establishment where they were based could work against the adoption of autonomy. Participant D, who was the most experienced teacher in the sample, mentioned that ‘schemes of work’ in the British system were not conducive to the development of autonomy in learners (and teachers). However, she stated that the MOOC blend project had given her some ideas:

“I’ve learned a couple of really good ways of making my learners take control of their learning rather than me giving a lot of structure. I’m trying to take more of a “guide on the side” approach.... at the very start I will be asking them [my learners] what sort of writing they’re struggling with, and I’ll select some activities for them according to their level, but I’ll let them select some activities for them[selves] as well” (Participant D, focus group transcription, 3rd December 2015).

The extract demonstrates that Participant D understood that teachers would still have a role in an autonomous classroom, but that the nature of their role would be different: rather than them ‘dictating’ all classroom procedures and activities, they would give their students some choice and guide them through

their learning journey. On the other hand, MA students who had no teaching experience viewed an autonomous classroom as one that would not have enough teacher involvement, and be full of chaos.

4. Conclusion

Concluding remarks are reported here with reference to each one of the initial research questions posed in the methodology section.

- What constitutes ‘troublesome knowledge’ in English language learning and teaching for students on the MA in ELT?

Some troublesome areas of knowledge identified by the MA students were similar to the ones identified in previous related literature, i.e. grammar (Orsini-Jones, 2010). However, CLIL emerged as a new troublesome one. This was an unexpected outcome that will require further investigation and validation with a bigger sample of participants.

- Would engaging with the MOOC-blend project change the MA students’ beliefs on language learning and teaching and related troublesome knowledge?

The pre- and post-MOOC surveys revealed that engaging with the MOOC appeared to have changed students’ beliefs regarding some areas of troublesome knowledge (like grammar) but did not appear to have clarified the majority of the participants’ beliefs on autonomy. Many appeared to associate it only with independent learning, rather than seeing its links with reflection and collaboration highlighted by Little (2001, p. 31). Also, through the tracking of individual responses to the pre- and post-MOOC survey answers and their triangulation with the focus group discussion, it appeared that participants had exaggerated the changes to their beliefs. Factors that might have contributed towards this may be related to the survey’s ‘halo effect’ (Dörnyei, 2003) and participants’ impressions being provided upon initial limited interaction with

the MOOC, hence not going beyond the technology's 'wow factor' (Murray & Barnes, 1998).

However, the results illustrated that engaging with the MOOC transformed some of the beliefs on online learning held by the students on the MA in ELT. Furthermore, the majority of the participants recommended that MOOCs should be integrated into more modules. The authors of this study are investigating how such a blend can impact on the training of teachers in different countries on a much larger scale (in the UK, the Netherlands, and China) through a British Council funded project, B-MELTT: Blending MOOCs into English Language Teacher Training. A limitation of the study reported here was the number of participants involved. As B-MELTT has over 130 participants, it is hoped that its results will make the generalisation of the outcomes of this small scale study more valid.

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Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCs and other innovations
Edited by Kan Qian and Stephen Bax

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