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Distance, flexibilité et nouveaux modes d'enseignement

University Lecturers' Experiences from the Classroom to a MOOC. Are they ready?



De la salle de classe à un MOOC : les enseignants universitaires sont-ils prêts pour cette expérience didactique ?

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Résumés

English Français

This article explores the experience of contributors to a MOOC designed mainly for students embarking on second-cycle Master's degree courses. Following the COVID pandemic, university lecturers were forced to adapt their traditional courses and lecture style in order to continue teaching. This involved a sudden shift to video conferencing platforms and the transformation of the format of learning objects. Teaching staff rapidly had to become familiar with new technologies and teaching strategies. Although all educators in Higher Education had to develop these new skills, getting involved in creating asynchronous online courses was yet another step into unfamiliar territory. A departmental research group designed a MOOC which will award university credits to users completing it. An initial survey to assess willingness to be involved and create content revealed considerable interest among teaching staff. Throughout the design and production process, the drop-out rate remained low. Teaching staff remained keen to contribute to the MOOC. Our hypothesis was that the recent disruption caused by the pandemic meant that teaching staff would be more open to new methods of teaching, and this would affect their approach to the design process in the future. Through the use of surveys and interviews to evaluate contributors' attitudes, experience and knowledge, we focus on the connections between traditional F2F teaching, online teaching and asynchronous teaching via MOOC, as well as highlighting lessons for both contributors and organisers.

Cet article explore l'expérience des contributeurs à un MOOC conçu principalement pour les étudiants s'engageant dans des cours de deuxième cycle de maîtrise. À la suite de la pandémie de COVID-19, les enseignants universitaires se sont trouvés dans la nécessité d'adapter leurs cours traditionnels et leur style de conférence afin de pouvoir continuer à enseigner. Cela a



entraîné un passage soudain à des outils de vidéoconférence et l'adaptation du format des objets d'apprentissage. Les enseignants ont dû rapidement se familiariser avec ces nouvelles technologies et modifier leurs propres stratégies didactiques. D'ailleurs, la plupart d'entre eux n'avaient jamais été impliqués dans la création de cours en ligne asynchrones. Un groupe de recherche départemental a conçu un MOOC qui délivrera des crédits universitaires aux étudiants qui le valideront. Une enquête initiale visant à évaluer le désir d'être impliqué dans ce projet a révélé un intérêt considérable parmi les enseignants-chercheurs et les professeurs du département. Tout au long du processus de conception et de production, le taux d'abandon est resté faible. Le personnel enseignant s'est avéré désireux de contribuer au MOOC avec une certaine continuité. Notre hypothèse de départ est que les récentes perturbations causées par la pandémie ont rendu le personnel enseignant plus ouvert aux nouvelles méthodes d'enseignement, ce qui influencera leur approche du processus de conception des cours à l'avenir. Par le biais de questionnaires et d'entretiens nous évaluons d'abord les attitudes, l'expérience et les connaissances acquises par les contributeurs. Nous nous concentrons ensuite sur la relation entre l'enseignement traditionnel en présentiel, la didactique en ligne et l'enseignement asynchrone via le MOOC. Pour finir, nous proposons une réflexion sur les leçons à tirer de cette expérience aussi bien pour les contributeurs que pour les organisateurs du MOOC.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Professeurs universitaires, adaptation, création de contenus MOOC, enquêtes et entretiens

Keywords: University lecturers, adaptation, MOOC content creation, surveys and interviews

Texte intégral

Introduction

- 1 This article describes the experience of academic staff creating content for a MOOC designed to attract prospective students to second-cycle, Master's degree studies at an Italian university. It was the first time such an activity had taken place as a collaborative initiative within this particular university Department. The first stages of the project were described in detail in Johnson, Thune and Caruso (2022). This paper completes the study by summarising the project, reporting the final stages, drawing general conclusions in relation to our research questions as described below, and providing suggestions for ways forward.
- 2 A small departmental research group set up a MOOC to 'showcase' topics and themes related to the Department's mission. Students who complete the MOOC gain 'credit points' in order to enrol on a Master's degree within the Department. An initial evaluation of the willingness to contribute among departmental teaching staff revealed a surprisingly high rate of interest, with over 30 staff members (almost 50% of the lecturers in the department) volunteering to create content. In subsequent phases in the design and creation process, the contributor drop-out rate remained low or non-existent.
- 3 The COVID pandemic led to university lecturers worldwide being forced to adapt their traditional courses and lecture style (e.g. Luporini, 2021; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, and Koole, 2020) in order to continue teaching. This involved a sudden shift *en masse* to video conferencing platforms and the transformation of the format of learning objects, as well as radical changes in course assessment and in classroom management. The impact was particularly strong in a country like Italy where the main pedagogical model is still the frontal lecture (Ciliberti and Anderson, 1999) and online learning in general has so far been considered of secondary importance (Silari, 2019). Suddenly faced with huge differences between online teaching and their other modes of operation (Rapanta et al., 2020, p. 925), teaching staff at many universities had to familiarise themselves rapidly with new technologies



and teaching strategies. However most had never been involved in the creation of asynchronous online courses and lacked both formal instruction in teaching online (Redmond, 2015; Cutri and Mena, 2020) as well as experience in pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and digital competence in incorporating technology, content and teaching practices (Softić, 2022). The uncertainty of the situation and the fact that many lecturers felt forced to adapt their teaching style, triggered fears of professional vulnerability (Cutri and Mena, 2020; Kelchtermans, 1996).

- 4 Given the comparative lack of research reporting on academics' perceptions of their own readiness to teach online and their beliefs in the effectiveness of the online learning environment (Downing and Dymont, 2013, though see McQuiggan, 2007), our research questions were designed to investigate the 'readiness' of contributors in developing and providing asynchronous online teaching (Downing and Dymont, 2013; Cutri and Mena, 2020) in the specific context of Italian Higher Education (HE), as embodied by the networks of connections between traditional F2F (face-to-face) teaching, online teaching and teaching via MOOC. Contributors were asked to complete surveys at different stages of the MOOC production process in order to evaluate their attitudes, experience and knowledge with relation to the MOOC. Follow-up interviews were carried out once the MOOC was on general release in order to permit a degree of triangulation between survey responses. Quantitative analysis followed by qualitative analysis and interpretation of the responses provide useful feedback for both contributors and organisers.

The MOOC Project

- 5 The MOOC project was developed by the University of Bologna's Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures (LILEC). This Department offers 17 languages, literatures and cultures for study and is one of only 5 university departments in Italy offering such a wide linguistic spectrum. This ambitious programme has won important recognition from the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research with the inclusion of LILEC among the departments of excellence. This meant that the department received a special grant to finance further cross-disciplinary research by LILEC members, which was focused around a common theme. The focus in question is Linguistic and Cultural Diversity, and Inclusion and Diversity in the area of Citizenship, which is also in line with broader international and European cultural objectives promoting diversity and intercultural dialogue, as described in a series of important international declarations.¹ Given the specific research competences within the department, these macro-objectives are being investigated through the analysis of texts and discourses both in a diachronic and a synchronic perspective, while pedagogic applications will seek to take full advantage of technologically innovative learning systems.

- 6 The title of the MOOC described in this study—***Diversity and inclusion. Languages, literatures, cultures and social cohesion***—reflects the macro-objectives of the LILEC project, and more specifically 'the phenomenon of linguistic, literary and cultural diversity as a condition that is intrinsic to civilisation on the one hand, and our aim to create an inclusive debate on that diversity on the other' (Ascari and Turci, 2021, p. i). Its structure represents the full range of research potential present in LILEC. Colleagues volunteered to contribute original work connected to the five broad themes² making up a total of 30 units, 6 units per 'week' over five weeks of study. Some contributors worked in collaboration with others. The resulting contributions take different forms: some consist of videos with keywords and some consist of text only. The outcome is a MOOC that is multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary, offering a total of 105 minutes of video recordings, and about 25,000 words of text. Each unit requires about 40 minutes for completion by the user. The format is of the 'X-MOOC' type, with contents defined and produced by the



course creators (Baggaley, 2013), available openly, asynchronously and on demand. Users are required to read, watch or listen to some content, and then invited to answer multiple-choice questions to earn potential university credits. The MOOC does not include instructor moderation, interaction with and between users, or any feedback beyond automatic correction of the multiple choice questions.

7 The MOOC was released to the general public on schedule in September 2022. Since then, as of April 2024, 537 users have enrolled (of whom 40% were from outside the University of Bologna), with 53 completing the course and gaining the credits. Given the distinctiveness of its design and the fact that it was mainly delivered in Italian, this is an encouraging figure.

Our Hypothesis and Research Questions

8 The recent disruption due to the pandemic, leading to greater flexibility in teaching and research practices, has perhaps made teaching staff more ready to experiment with new methods of teaching, and this may affect their approach to the design process (Lowes, 2010; Gynther, 2016). The constraints of the pandemic may also have revealed a latent need among HE teachers to attempt a further dissemination of ideas through online courses. Indeed, one of the triggers for this study was that the Department had previously sought feedback on colleagues' experience during the pandemic with regard to their online synchronous teaching. While comments and opinions initially tended to be overwhelmingly negative as the effects of the pandemic were just beginning to be felt, respondents gradually became much more positive and relaxed about teaching online as time went by. Our aim with the present study was to investigate the experience in more detail by drawing on the experiences of department members in constructing the MOOC. To do so, we were guided by the following research questions (adapted from Redmond, 2015):

- What changes in pedagogical practice did instructors report after designing their contribution to be accessible online?
- What influenced changes as the instructor moved from face-to-face to asynchronous online teaching mode?
- What will be the impact on their future teaching after this online experience?

9 To answer these questions, our study makes use of online surveys of contributors' attitudes, beliefs and perceptions as research instruments, administered prior to, during, and after completion of the MOOC, as well as follow-up interviews after release to the public. The results are analysed using an inductive approach in which responses will be coded thematically (e.g. Creswell, 2012).

Methodology and Background Information

10 This section briefly describes the MOOC team, the contributors themselves, and the surveys and interviews administered.

11 A team of 7 researchers, including the authors of this paper, proposed the draft layout for a Department-wide MOOC. Production was constrained by limited timing, with the need to conclude within twelve months. Support and technological infrastructure was provided internally by the university's IT department so that budget constraints were not an issue as regards the technical aspects of scripting, storyboarding, video recording and editing, assessment and reviews, infrastructure



setup, uploading and management.

12 Members of the Department were invited to participate and 34 members of staff (27 tenured staff, 3 short-term contract holders, 2 language assistants and 2 doctoral students) agreed to take part. Information about how the theme of diversity and inclusion would be elaborated as well as general guidelines about contribution layout were provided at an initial meeting, but practical details with information about exactly how to create the individual contribution were unavailable at that time. In the meantime, the research team prepared three surveys to be administered at strategic points in the project: at the beginning of the project (Survey I), after individual contributions had been created (Survey II), and at the end as the MOOC was about to be released to the public (Survey III). Contributors were asked to select a position on a Likert scale or a response from a pre-set list, or write a free response.

13 As the project began, contributors were each invited to provide an abstract outlining their contribution relating to one of the themes of the MOOC. After receiving these abstracts, the research team issued the first online survey in order to gather initial information about contributors' attitudes, experience and knowledge in relation to the MOOC.

Survey I

14 Questions asked in Survey I were aimed at identifying gaps in knowledge with regard to prior teaching experience and in relation to creating content for the MOOC. Contributors were asked how familiar they were with MOOCs, as well as their previous experience with MOOCs as contributor or user. Details of the relation between their proposed contribution and the courses they teach were asked, with a view to evaluating readiness through the degree of flexibility as well as their attitudes towards combining technology with content and teaching.

15 After completing Survey I, contributors received information about contribution format and length as well as brief technical and conceptual details, and given a deadline for their contribution. Two possible formats were available: video with accompanying text, or text only. Texts and video storyboards were collected and revised by the MOOC team.

Survey II

16 Once all the contributions had been collected, contributors were sent a second survey to evaluate the preparation process so far, focussing in particular on their awareness of differences between MOOC and F2F material as regards content preparation and creation (McQuiggan, 2007). Questions were also designed to explore whether or how contributors would make use of the same techniques for future teaching, thus providing corroboration or rejection of initial evidence from Survey I.

Survey III

17 After contributions had all been uploaded and contributors were finally able to view the entire project, including the units created by their colleagues, the final survey was circulated. This aimed to evaluate the experience as a whole, to further probe contributors' awareness of differences and similarities between F2F and online teaching, and to investigate the potential for change in their own F2F teaching once they had seen the possibilities designed by others.

A predefined questionnaire is necessarily limited with regard to understanding



why certain answers were given. For this reason, a degree of triangulation (Jick, 1979) was introduced in the form of individual interviews post-MOOC release in order to delve further into the reasons for certain responses and comments.

Interviews

- 19 Contributors were invited to take part in a face-to-face semi-structured interview with a member of the research team once the MOOC was released. The interview, 'one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings' (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 645), was used to probe further into contributors' responses to the three surveys and invite general and frank considerations about the experience. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis to stimulate free expression, and were also recorded.

Findings and Discussion

- 20 Individual responses to the survey requiring written answers were coded conceptually by seeking similar thematic groupings. This was initially done by all three researchers individually, followed by collaborative discussion and analysis. Interview recordings were viewed and discussed collectively by all three researchers.
- 21 Response rate to Survey I was high (32 out of 34 respondents: 94%), with slightly fewer responses received for Survey II (74%) and Survey III (79%). Of these respondents, the great majority were tenured teaching staff. Six contributors were available for interview.

What Changes in Pedagogical Practice did Academics Report after Designing their Contribution to be Accessible Online?

- 22 Initially, 67% said the MOOC experience would bring about no change in the way they teach their F2F course at the moment, and 44% would not develop the chosen format for a future teaching module. Likewise, although 78% said they would recommend creating a MOOC to a colleague, almost 50% of respondents (including those who had given positive feedback) claimed that the experience would have little or no impact at all on their future teaching. However, by the end of the study, all of the respondents could find at least one way to reutilise the material, suggesting that a change in attitude had indeed taken place.
- 23 The main change reported was awareness of the need to render the material much more concisely in order to clarify dense concepts and key points without sacrificing the details, with an additional effort to avoid ambiguity, which in the F2F classroom could instead be remedied through dialogue. Indeed, a number of respondents lamented the lack of interaction and loss of immediate student feedback as a particular disadvantage. Combining video with text was also a new experience for many of them. By the end of the project a number of respondents stated they would incorporate more multimodal resources into their teaching practices.

What Influenced Changes as the Instructor Moved from F2F to Asynchronous online Teaching Mode?



24 There was a growing awareness of the teaching and learning potential of different formats on the part of some but not all contributors as well as a more positive attitude towards inclusion of elements less familiar to many as teaching tools, such as multimodal features and video recording.

25 The need for conciseness was mentioned by many respondents as being the main issue behind the changes made. Some saw conciseness as a necessary skill to be acquired in order to create a successful contribution, others remarked that conciseness was not necessarily a value in teaching. The latter comments implied that conciseness was diametrically opposed to 'proper' teaching (implicitly referring to F2F), and thus it was undoubtedly a negative aspect or disadvantage of the MOOC format. The area of expertise initially also appeared to influence changes, in that contributors from the literature section were more negatively disposed towards conciseness than those from linguistics, though they became less critical as time went on.

26 Other changes were due to a growing awareness of some of the differences between the purpose of the MOOC contribution and that of the content of the F2F lesson. One contributor in particular spelt this out clearly:

I had to spend quite a bit of time thinking what sort of things a student can absorb also autonomously through video, and instead what sort of things really need me to be present in the classroom (language assistant).

27 However, few others showed an awareness of the need to rethink the lessons given the medium, suggesting a generalised lack of awareness of how the medium affects the way learners process the information.

28 The changing needs of the younger generations, for whom teaching modes which were once novel are now becoming mainstream, were also cited as reasons for adaptation. It is noteworthy however that the frontal lecture in F2F mode is still considered fit for purpose for such students in Italian HE.

29 Other changes were due to the inclusion of elements unfamiliar to many as teaching tools, such as multimodal features and video recording, since '[c]hanging media means changing the communication patterns' (Rapanta et al., 2020, p. 934). In this regard, a number of contributors suggested that the practical experience of creating the MOOC itself was instrumental in the changes made, as an endorsement of the practice of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938). The MOOC project also enabled contributors to become familiar with the practical resources available at Departmental level.

30 To sum up, by the end of the study there was slightly better awareness of the purpose of the MOOC and its complementarity to—rather than substitution of—F2F teaching. This was mainly due to individual reflection and learning by doing.

What Will be the Impact on their Future Teaching after this Online Experience?

31 A number of respondents stated they would be more ready to incorporate more multimodal resources in their teaching practices, using recorded material to present topics, and using the MOOC to provide supplementary material. The learning-by-doing experienced by the contributors would be put into practice in their own classrooms by involving students in building MOOC-style units as part of the learning process. Others mentioned a better use of material through building on existing MOOC material rather than creating ex novo. Still others noted a heightened awareness of the affordances of different types of communication on their teaching practices. Another positive aspect emerging from this experience was collaboration and content creation with colleagues, which contrasted with the traditional single



lecturer-based format and would impact on future teaching. Exercises in conciseness and clarity of exposition were mentioned as useful even for F2F teaching, while an enhanced focus on their communicative strategies would also influence their classroom practices.

Conclusions

32 This study was designed to monitor the experience of first-time contributors to a university MOOC on a macrotopic of interest to the entire Department, designed to provide a showcase for teaching activities for potential future students. Our aim was to evaluate the 'readiness' (Downing and Dymont, 2013; Cutri and Mena, 2020) of contributors for this type of teaching format and to assess their ability to be inspired and explore new forms of communication and teaching.

33 Surveys pre- and post-contribution as well as interviews provided insights into the perceptions and attitudes of these contributors as regards F2F and online teaching. While contributing to this MOOC could have been an example of 'intellectual courage' (Redmond, 2015, p. 128) in department members' willingness to try new ways of thinking and acting, since 'teaching on line is a departure from the traditional cultural norms of academia' (Cutri and Mena, 2020, p. 367), the responses gathered actually suggested that many participants were not 'ready' for this transition. While some of the reasons for this could be traced back to lack of training and specific technical instructions, as regards successfully combining video and text, the conflicting opinions of the benefits or drawbacks of conciseness suggested that contributors' views of the teaching process were somewhat inconsistent and rigid. Downing and Dymont note that many of the teacher educator participants in their study 'felt the pedagogical skills required in the online environment were different and thus not overly transferable from the face-to-face to the online environment' (2013, p. 102). In our case, many teacher contributors gave the impression of considering such skills to be rather reductive when compared to a lecture in the F2F environment, one of them openly stating that conciseness was tantamount to simplification and thus not to be recommended for the lecturer. This opinion became less generalised as the project went on.

34 While a small number of contributors mentioned collaboration and content creation with colleagues as a positive discovery which contrasted with the traditional single lecturer-based format, and would impact on future teaching, there was a general inflexibility towards new teaching practices. Most contributors appeared reluctant to move away from the idea of teacher as actor/protagonist typical of the traditional F2F classroom. This suggests that it is the lecturers themselves who are the main obstacle to new forms of communication. Those who start out with a negative view of the new practices tend not to change their minds. Initially the majority claimed that the experience would have little impact on their future teaching, though attitudes changed as contributors viewed other contributions, and we suggest that another important factor leading to this change was the experience of learning by doing.

35 It is conceivable that survey results might have been impacted by concerns around status and professional vulnerability, but no consistent differences were found in the responses of staff with secure, permanent contracts and those in temporary or early career positions. While initially the area of expertise seemed to make more difference to attitudes and practice than status, such differences disappeared as the project went on.

36 What emerged clearly was a need for cognitive support for contributors in order to enable them to communicate effectively in this new format, including speech techniques, instruction about possible or ideal audio-video formats and the



advantages and disadvantages of each, as well as the best use of digital technology (Softić, 2022). More specifically, there should be more attention to which topics, style and format could be usefully rendered as multimedia objects and how these should be implemented. Responses show that technical instructions alone are not sufficient to create a MOOC contribution. There needs to be prior discussion of how the cognitive process of teaching and learning itself is affected in and by the different format.

37 Lowes (2010, p. 36) noted that the migration/transfer of F2F experience to and from contribution to a MOOC could be beneficial for HE teachers, giving them an opportunity to experiment with new ideas and formats and rethink their teaching practices. Indeed, the benefits of experiential learning were picked up by some contributors whose opinions changed or developed after taking part. We may add that in order for the migration from F2F to online to be a positive experience, we must address not only technical but also conceptual issues before the process begins, otherwise contributors' prior teaching ideologies may prevail and the migration will only be partial.

38 Through creating content for the MOOC, our contributors have in some way overcome their previous bias/perceptions about this tool, but since they have not received any training in doing so and still have some misconceptions about its effectiveness, there is a continuing tendency to perceive 'proper' teaching as F2F. Thus it is important to emphasise and focus on the purpose of the MOOC as a complement to rather than as a substitute for F2F teaching.

39 Indeed, impressions gained particularly from the interviews with our MOOC contributors suggest that a learning-by-doing process (in MOOC-oriented learning object production) could lead to more useful insights with regard to best practices in teaching in this 'brave new world', giving first-hand experience of collaboration and learning-by-doing, with the hope that the advantages of this may be extended to the students. It would also be important to bear in mind that the relationship between 'traditional' and 'innovative' teaching and learning should be much more about an understanding of the appropriate use of this medium.

40 From this theoretical point of view, collecting and sharing data with regard to trial and error experiences would greatly benefit the definition of where and when asynchronous activities could be used effectively or otherwise, while it is important also to be aware of the ideal cognitive/motivational mix between synchronous and asynchronous activities in general.

41 These issues are all the more relevant in today's world, where the COVID-19 pandemic may be understood as 'a catalyst that highlighted the need for educational change towards more flexible models and practices that best respond to the complexity and unpredictability of today's fast and interconnected but [...] still fragile society' (Rapanta et al., 2020, p. 941). Given the additional stimulus that online learning in higher education is becoming increasingly normalised (Lederman, 2018) and predicted to become mainstream by 2025 (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner and Sindhi, 2018), it is of tantamount importance to be able to provide practical and conceptual support to contributors to help them overcome possible barriers represented by their existing views of teaching.

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Notes



¹ See for example the European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World; the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue; the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity; Societal Challenge 6 'Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies' of Horizon 2020.

2 The five themes were: *Words, Languages, Times, Meanings, Practice*.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

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