

Facilitating social learning through learning design: A perspective of collaborative academic development

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In the field of technology-enhanced learning design, the rise of Web 2.0 has been the filip needed to accelerate the emergence of socially-connected global learners. These highly social learners now use the web to engage with knowledge and skill development and as such, online education has moved irrevocably beyond simply the finding and sharing of information among learners.

The higher education sector is responding to this learning landscape. This is particularly relevant to the massive open online courses (MOOCs) environment where there is the potential for thousands of participants to learn through multiple open source tools with minimum intervention from educators. This social learning perspective can present a challenge for some educators.

In this paper we present a work-in-progress collaborative project designed to respond to the professional development of teaching academics newly engaged in designing and teaching from a social learning perspective. We, in a central learning and teaching unit, designed and developed a professional development (PD) course that sought to build the capacity of academics going through this change: they were about to teach on a MOOC platform. Our purpose was to model the social learning framework as a method of capacity-building, but we also aimed to distil authentic social learning for the academics themselves. This resulted in creating a community of practice among educators. Further research is required to measure the impact of this capacity-building course in order to further enhance the learning experiences of academics preparing to teach on a MOOC platform.

Introduction

The work-in progress professional development (PD) project described in this paper arises out of three key higher education curricula challenges for online learning:

- Developing replicable learning design that effectively delivers learning outcomes at scale and learning environments which facilitate active and collaborative learning (Laurillard, 2012; Toetenel & Rienties, 2016)
- Enabling technology-enabled strategies that transform learning experiences rather than replicate or merely enhance existing strategies (Kirkwood & Price, 2013)
- Building staff capability across each of these dimensions

We outline the learning design underpinning a PD course on facilitating social learning. This course was developed to support a large university-wide strategic project that delivered a suite of postgraduate degree courses through

a MOOC platform (called FutureLearn) as a world first initiative. The Deakin Degrees at FutureLearn project offers postgraduate degrees through the global social learning platform with an innovative business model where the first component of a course is offered as an open, free taster course introducing the degree program. This provides new pathways into the university's courses and allows our fee-paying degree students to learn with a large cohort of global learners across sections of their course. This project seeks to position the university as an international provider of postgraduate education but it was also conceived as a way of triggering further growth and addressing the challenges outlined above.

New approaches to learning design have recently attracted increased attention within higher education (Bennett, Agostinho, & Lockyer, 2016; Johnson et al., 2016). Toetenel and Rienties (2016) for example reported on how the implementation of a visual learning design at the start of a unit design process successfully impacted on educators incorporating a variety of learning activity types



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into their units. Re-investigating the role of learning design is particularly important given the exponential development of educational technology which has transformed the boundaries of what and how learners learn in digital learning environments (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2014). The advancement of Web 2.0 tools for the purpose of creating and cultivating meaningful social networks for all users is a key part of this change. As Toetenel and Rienties (2016) have noted, “social media support forms of knowledge consumption and knowledge construction that are very different to the epistemological principles of formal education and individualized instruction (p. 3)”. Effective use of these tools therefore demands a social design for learning. The concept of social learning is not new and is at the heart of social constructivist approaches to learning and early theories of online and distance learning which emphasised communities of practice. However, social learning needs to be rethought in the context of both the new digital learning environment and new Web 2.0 teaching and learning tools. It is particularly relevant now for universities seeking ways to harness the potential of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC) where thousands of learners are enrolled and engaged in (social) learning.

In moving to this new model of learning and teaching, we identified the need to build the capacity of our academics teaching in these new courses on FutureLearn. In responding to this need, we, the university central learning and teaching unit, developed a PD course within the same platform that aimed at building capacity of academics to move from a standard teaching delivery model to one that emphasises ‘facilitating social learning’. In developing this course, we employed the same principles of learning design that we applied to our other degree courses within this project. This was not only to model the practice and principles that we were advocating as an innovation for learning design, but also to test the model's effectiveness first hand.

Why adopt the FutureLearn MOOC platform? – context to the PD course

A decision to evaluate and select educational technology ought to be motivated by pedagogical reasons (Toetenel & Rienties, 2016). So why then, was FutureLearn chosen to deliver this curriculum innovation? This is largely due to the fact that the platform itself already has robust learning design built-into the platform which promote social learning as part of their call to authentic and active learning. Some good examples of this include:

- Simple and clear step-by-step interface design which leads to better learner experiences and creates a clear course narrative
- Learner and educator profiles which participants can ‘follow’– cultivating connected networks among large numbers of learners

- Comment/discussion section in line with every step where content is presented - provoking timely conversations with others at the point of learning

The role of educators as facilitators of learning is a critical component not only in digital but all learning environments. This is of particular interest in MOOC environments where potentially the balance of learning opportunities shift for educators where thousands of global learners with diverse backgrounds engage more among themselves, compared to a limited number of educators.

A variety of ways to facilitate social learning have been identified by Ferguson, Sharples, and Beale (2013), academics working at FutureLearn, who report various types of social learning observed within the platform:

- Direct learning: one learner replies to another’s note/question
- Knowledge sharing: a learner shares knowledge via a note
- Conversational learning: happens via notes and replies and group discussion
- Vicarious learning: through seeing conversation on delivered content and in the activity feed and by following others
- Implicit learning: taking part in activity groups
- ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development): following and learning from learners with more knowledge or experience.

Literature review and conceptual frameworks – learning design

A strategy to build the social learning design knowledge of teaching academics “is to sharpen focus on students’ activity’ in order for them to take greater control over the design of their own learning tasks and learning environments” (Goodyear, 2015, p. 27). This is not unlike Bigg’s view of quality teaching and learning in that it is what the students are doing that is important to learning (2007) and this perspective provides a critical, familiar scaffolding for academic developers and teaching staff in approaching the innovative learning design practices we find ourselves exploring in highly social digital spaces. Schon (cited in Cross, p. 46) emphasised the messy problematic situations that exist in the world of design and technology, and in this context, practitioners working and teaching in this world benefit from a community membership engaged in reflective practice. So while university academics are “obligated to help students locate, access and configure the (...) resources they need for the activity in which they are engaging, and to help them find good ways of working with their peers” (Goodyear 2015, p.33), those who are responsible for assisting academics to develop their capacity to design

and facilitate MOOCs need to mirror those same obligations. In other words, we aim to engage academics as collaborative learners and in learning contexts “where pedagogies are made visible through dialogue” (McLoughlin, 2010, p. 117). This is consistent with the idea that ‘academic learning involves a continuing and iterative dialogue between teacher and student’ (Laurillard, 2002, cited in Krause and Coates 2008, p.501), though, who takes the role of teacher is a purposefully fluid concept of facilitation in highly social learning contexts.

Our learning design model for this PD course (and the FutureLearn courses we were developing) drew on [Diana Laurillard’s](#) conceptualization of “teaching as a design science” (2012) that builds on the relationships between teachers, students and peers. Our project further extends on her work that effective learning designs must provide opportunities for inquiry, discussion, practice, collaboration and production beyond just presenting information (acquiring). Laurillard proposes that teachers capture their design as “pedagogic patterns” that can be created, shared and refined as a community of practitioners working together.

This type of pattern format is semi-structured, where the headings are used to elicit text and diagrams from the teacher-designer to represent their pedagogy for others.... Some kind of structured and formalizable design pattern is needed for expressing pedagogic ideas, as the basis for the teaching community to collaborate in building its own knowledge of what learners need, how to teach, and what to demand of the technology. (Laurillard 2012, p.8)

Shared patterns simplify design and allow teachers to re-allocate their time and creativity. Laurillard argues this is more important than ever because rapid uptake of technologies for learning often lead to default (transmission) learning designs being adopted.

Because technology is changing both what and how students learn we can only lead educational innovation by being clear about the principles of designing good teaching and learning, and therefore what education needs from technology. (Laurillard 2012, p.8)

Shared education design patterns, or learning routines, situated within social learning principles and practices, ensure courses provide a varied, rich social learning experience that focuses on collaborative activity rather than content provision and consumption. This notion of "sharing pedagogic patterns" is critical to both the design and implementation of this PD course as it is designed to enable academics and other members of teaching teams

to share and reflect on their practice within an explicit pedagogical framework.

What particular pedagogical challenge for educators was addressed in the PD course?

The notion of facilitator in social learning might come as a challenge to some academics - to step back and allow learners to engage with (social) learning with minimum interventions. The idea of educators providing and transmitting knowledge at all times as a primary mode of teaching in a MOOC does not work for two reasons. Firstly, it is simply impossible to monitor, intervene, connect and respond to thousands of learners and their comments in MOOC environments with a limited number of educators. Secondly, the continuous and prominent intervention of educators may not model what happens in real-world. In this rapidly changing global society, the capacity to work collaboratively with peers and to apply evaluative judgement in making decisions independently with minimum guidance from experts or supervisors is a highly desirable trait in 21st century citizens.

Based on this, we identified the need to develop a PD course that transformed educators driving social learning with their learners in the specific context of FutureLearn courses. The course had multiple purposes:

- To create an immersive environment where academics are learners within the new platform while learning quick tips and pointers for facilitating social learning themselves
- To learn further about the theories and principles of social learning
- To establish a space for the community of practice where academics currently involved with the FutureLearn project could safely share their own experiences and insights with other educators

The development process of ‘Facilitating social learning: Enlivening Deakin FutureLearn degrees’ for new teaching academics

In order to develop our PD course, we have applied the same learning design principles and techniques that we employed in designing and developing FutureLearn degree courses with academics. This was intended to be a just-in-time crash course on facilitating social learning within FutureLearn with expected completion time being no more than three hours. The approaches we incorporated were highly iterative and collaborative in nature. First, we adopted the same ‘Learning Design Map’ (Figure 1) template used for Deakin FutureLearn courses

to outline the design of sequenced learning with well-balanced learning activity types.

Learning Activity Type	Watch: Video Step	Read: Text Article Step	Collaborate: Groupwork Step	Investigate: Active Learning Step	Produce: Artefact Creation Step	Assess: Assessment Step	Additional Activity Types: including other steps	Discuss: Discussion Step	Reflect: Integration Step
Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	Course 4	Course 5					
Week 1	Week 1	Week 1	Week 1	Week 1					
Activity 1: Introduction	Activity 1: Introduction	Activity 1: Introduction	Activity 1: Introduction	Activity 1: Introduction					
1.1 Let's get started • Introduction to the big question • Meet the team • Certificates and PD	1.1 Let's get started • Introduction to the next big question • Moving from open course to closed course	1.1 Let's get started • Introduction to the next big question • Placing the next section of the course in the context of journey so far	1.1 Let's get started • Introduction to the next big question • Placing the next section of the course in the context of journey so far	1.1 Let's get started • Introduction to the next big question • Placing the next section of the course in the context of journey so far					
1.2 Learning online with Deakin • Standardised text for all open courses	1.2 Assessment Preview • Brief introduction to Assessment 1 • Signaling how the following sections will equip you to complete it	1.2 Study Group • Checking in with your own learning plan, reflecting on progress. • Share with your study group what have you found most challenging and most interesting so far. What are your key open questions?	1.2 Assessment Preview • Brief introduction to Assessment 2 signaling how the following sections will equip you to complete it	1.2 Study Group • Checking in with your own learning plan, reflecting on progress. • Share with your study group what have you found most challenging and most interesting so far. What are your key open questions?					
1.3 Discovery Discussion • What do you already know? • How can we link this course content to things learners already know and experience. • Or how can we test out myths and facts in the area.	1.3 Developing your own learning plan. • Why are you here and what do you hope to achieve? • What are your key open questions? Share in Study Group	1.3 Discussion Share common themes and questions from study group	1.3 Study Group • Checking in with your own learning plan, reflecting on progress. • Share with your study group what have you found most challenging and most interesting so far. What are your key open questions?	1.3 Discussion Share common themes and questions from study group					
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Figure 1: The Deakin FutureLearn 'Learning Design Map' template

This allowed us to map out and consult with others on the overall design of learning that took place within the PD course. The colour-coding of each activity type helped us identify the balance and weighting of learning activities that academics undertook in achieving the learning outcomes.

To further reinforce and model social learning, we incorporated key design techniques. Firstly, we created a number of high quality videos of the two authors/educators engaging in a conversation about the key topics. These dialogic videos were designed to encourage prolonged learning conversations between the academics. Secondly, we modelled best practice use of various external digital tools (e.g. Padlet, WordCloud) that the enrolled academics could practise using during the course. Thirdly, as a method to encourage participation and the cultivation of a community of practice, we designed the PD course to elicit gradually emerging action plans created by each academic, thereby providing a scaffolded, authentic task to support the academics' learning. At the end of the course, academics were asked to share their action plans through Padlet.

Once the PD course development was completed, a total of 40 educators involved with developing and teaching degree courses with FutureLearn were invited to enrol in the course. Predominantly, they were academics and academic developers from all faculties teaching in the postgraduate courses about to launch in Deakin FutureLearn (e.g. IT, diabetes education, humanitarian assistance).

This PD course then became a digital hub or community of practice bringing academics across all faculties together. By embedding plenty of opportunities to share their current practice and experiences this PD course encouraged educators to come together to learn about facilitating social learning with more knowledgeable others (such as ourselves from the central learning and teaching unit), but also with others who were going through similar challenges. Even though this PD course was only recently delivered to a limited number of 40 academics, there is evidence in the course postings of shared practice and offers of support for each other as members of a community of practice.

Conclusion and future implications

In this paper, we have reported on a work-in-progress professional development collaborative project concerned with building the capacity of academics going through a curriculum transformation project with a newly implemented MOOC platform. Given the increased importance on learning design and its relationship with social learning, we have identified the need to address possible gaps in some academics' capacity to enact their teaching as social learning facilitators. In so doing, we modelled the social-learning design framework and highly collaborative processes of developing FutureLearn courses. While the observations and findings we outline here are preliminary, the approach we took is applicable and relevant to other tertiary institutions thinking about or developing social digital learning and teaching experiences with MOOC platforms.

Our future work will extend this project. Firstly, there will be a larger enrolment for this PD course as more academics come on board to teach through FutureLearn in the next trimester. We aim to gather explicit feedback from participating academics to better understand what worked from a learning design perspective and what can be improved for the next iteration of the PD course. We also intend to expand this PD course by creating a subsequent course targeting learning design. This new course will focus on how design thinking may influence learning design and how its principles work within the context of this project in transforming our degree courses.

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Please cite as: Adachi, C., Savage, J. & O'Donnell, M. (2017). Facilitating social learning through learning design – a perspective of collaborative academic development. In H. Partridge, K. Davis, & J. Thomas. (Eds.), *Me, Us, IT! Proceedings ASCILITE2017: 34th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education* (pp. 7-11).

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.