Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

Innovative pedagogies series: Integrating a MOOC into the MA in English Language Teaching at Coventry University

Innovation in blended learning practice

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Introduction

I am the Course Director for the MA in English Language Teaching at Coventry University (CU) and teach theories and methods of language learning and teaching to students who are either practising teachers or aim to become teachers – they come from around 15-20 different countries from all over the world. I aim to provide them with a varied learning experience that will enable them to select and adapt the most suitable teaching and learning approaches for their specific educational contexts. I agree with Kumaravadivelu when he argues that:

> If we expect teachers to produce context-specific pedagogic knowledge, then they must be equipped with the knowledge, skill, attitude and authority necessary to become autonomous individuals. *(Kumaravadivelu 2011).*

I have been exploring ways of enhancing learner autonomy through blended learning for a number of years, linking the development of autonomous language learning and teaching to the acquisition of critical digital literacies (Orsini-Jones 2010 and 2015).

The innovative pedagogical practice discussed here was triggered by a serendipitous encounter I had at an e-learning symposium at Southampton University in January 2014. I happened to attend the session introducing the FutureLearn Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) 'Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching' (Davis 2014). I was struck by the amount of thematic overlap the content of the MOOC had with the content of my MA module *Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching (T&MoLL&T*) and decided that it would be interesting to integrate the MOOC into my module. I found the prospect of offering my MA students the opportunity to engage with a globally connected discussion forum on teaching and learning quite appealing. An added advantage of the MOOC integration consisted in the fact that the level of the FutureLearn MOOC appeared to be appropriate for my students' needs, as it was designed as a 'taster' for the online MA in English Language Teaching[1] run by the University of Southampton in conjunction with the British Council (British Council 2014). The integration of the MOOC into the MA curriculum also provided the opportunity to explore how learner autonomy could be developed through the engagement with an online course used in conjunction with a face-to-face module.

This report focuses, therefore, on an innovative curricular initiative that, in its first phase, blended the delivery of an existing module on the MA in English Language Teaching in the Department of English and Languages at CU with a FutureLearn MOOC. In its second phase, the blend was amplified by the addition of an online international knowledge-sharing exchange on the MOOC with CU partners in Turkey, at the University of Boğaziçi (BU), Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Language Education (Istanbul). This MOOC curricular integration 'experiment' was carried out as a joint staff/'expert'-student reflection - and meta-reflection – that is to say, reflection on how we reflected on our cognitive journey - on this new learning experience. Like all my previous curricular interventions, this one too was underpinned by the "students as partners" ethos illustrated by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014). I also utilised part of the National Teaching Fellowship funding I received in 2013 to hire some of my students as

[1] **https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/southampton-universitybritish-council-ma-english-language-teaching-online**

research assistants. The 'expert' students' involvement in this project was in keeping with the role-reversal model of threshold concept pedagogy I designed for my PhD in 2011 (see Figure 4).

In line with institutional priorities at CU, that are also shared across the higher education (HE) sector, this project addressed current key themes, such as the internationalisation of the curriculum, the development of critical intercultural digital competences and the promotion of active learning. At a subject-specific level, it aims to encourage future teachers of English to reflect on innovative and possibly disruptive ways of learning and teaching, and to engage them in a joint meta-reflection with staff on autonomous language learning and teaching. On a personal level, the project resulted in a re-think of my understanding of blended learning. My experience of this curricular journey, which was partly auto-ethnographical, as I was one of the staff participating in it, well reflects my favourite definition of what learning is, that is to say a 'dance' between collaboration and autonomy. As Ackermann states: "without connection people cannot grow, yet without separation they cannot relate" (Ackermann 1996, p. 32).

New blended learning horizons: integrating a FutureLearn MOOC into the MA in English Language teaching curriculum at Coventry University

Module theories and methods of language learning and teaching

My understanding of what blended learning is has evolved over time. Blended learning can be interpreted in many ways and take various forms as illustrated in Bonk and Graham (2006) and Valiathan (2002). I used to associate it with a blend of face-to-face delivery with online delivery in variable percentages, but mostly constrained within the pass-worded areas of the university server, with a few links to external Open Educational Resources (OERs)[2]. Web 2.0 platforms have 'disrupted' my understanding of blended learning and opened up pedagogical horizons I had not previously contemplated.

Lamy and Zourou (2013) provide examples of how Social Media has been integrated successfully into language education. Bonk *et al.* (2015) and Kim (2015) report on the creation of new types of 'blends': a number of courses already blend either commercial or tailor-made MOOCs with both face-to-face and other online course delivery. Godwin-Jones (2012), Bruff *et al.* (2013) and van Mourik Broekman *et al.* (2014) discuss how Open Education (OE) platforms are fostering a re-conceptualisation of e-learning design and pedagogy. Siemens, the MOOC pioneer, outlines the difference in e-learning design in the emerging MOOC models (2012) and stresses that he favours MOOCs where knowledge is co-constructed. I, too, find the globalised co-construction of knowledge that can happen on social media and MOOCs quite appealing.

I am of the opinion that MOOCs should not be seen as a challenge or a threat - the 'demonisation' of MOOCs is discussed for example by Mulder (2015). MOOCs provide an opportunity to create new e-learning design frameworks like those discussed by Conole (2013) and make the most of the blurring that is occurring between 'open' and 'closed' educational

[2] See Mossley 2013 for further information on OERs in general.

systems, bearing in mind that it is the pedagogy that should drive creative disruption, not technology[3]. Further support for the integration of MOOCs into the curriculum is provided by a study by Bone and McNichol (2014), commissioned of the National Union of Students (NUS) and NUS Services by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), which reports that students have a rather positive attitude towards the integration of OERs into their learning experience at university.

For all the above reasons, I decided to integrate the previously mentioned FutureLearn MOOC 'Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching' into the mandatory module *T&MoLL&T* that carries 15 of the 180 credits on the MA in English Language Teaching (MA in ELT). Its aim is:

> [...] to give students an in-depth understanding of the theories of second language acquisition and illustrate their links to approaches and methods of language teaching which they inform. The theories examined will look at second language acquisition and learning from linguistic, psychological and sociological perspectives. *(Module Information Directory 2015).*

The module's learning outcomes are that, on completion, students should be able to:

1. critically appraise the major theories of second language acquisition (SLA);
2. discuss the relevance of SLA theories to the development of teaching approaches and methodology;
3. discuss and appraise the implications of sociocultural theories for the development of second language learning and teaching approaches and methodology;
4. 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: one essay (at home) and one seen in-class test (the students receive the questions a fortnight in advance). Before the integration of the MOOC into its syllabus, the module was delivered with a blend that included face-to-face contact (33 hours) and support provided through online activities in a dedicated Moodle website where students could access information on lectures, view relevant videos, engage in interactive tasks and discuss the material covered in class in discussion forums before, during and after the face-to-face sessions. Figure 1 illustrates how the MOOC was integrated into Moodle module website as a link into the content section I wanted to associate it with: learner autonomy.

[3] See Furneaux, Wright and Wilding 2015 on this point.

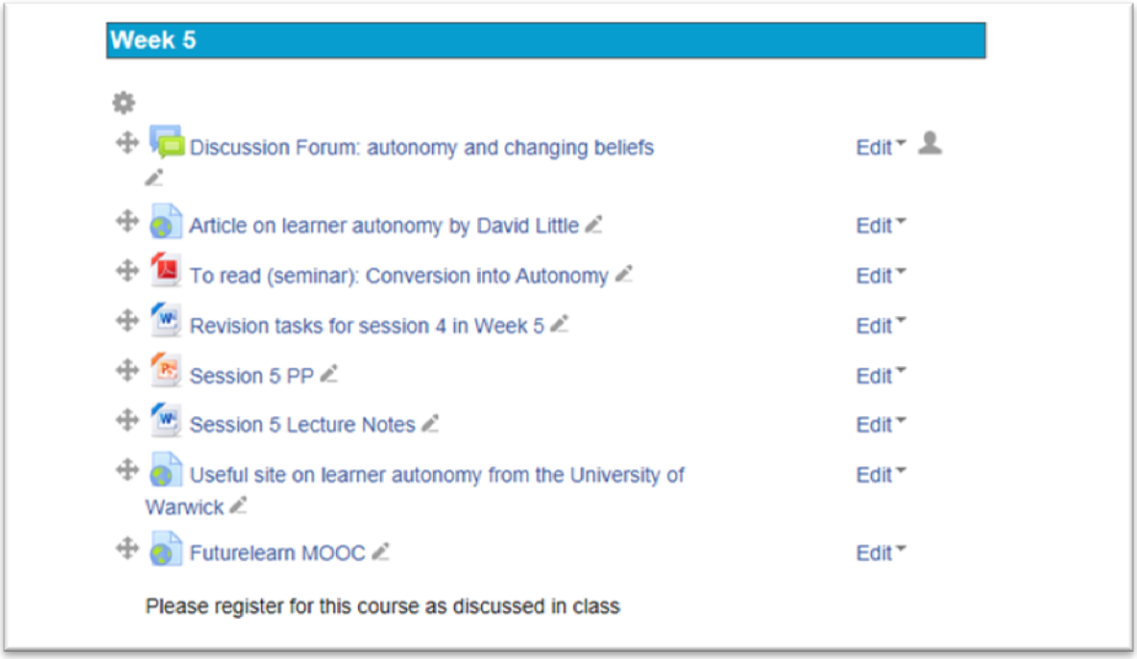

FIGURE 1: SCREEN-SHOT OF THE FIRST SECTION ON LEARNER AUTONOMY IN MODULE *THEORIES AND METHODS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING – T&MOLL&T* (CU MOODLE WEBSITE 2015).

The students who started the MA in ELT in September 2014 registered for the FutureLearn MOOC that ran between 17 November 2014 and 14 December 2014, while those who started in January 2015 registered for the one running between 20 April 2015 and 17 May 2015 (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 SCREEN-SHOT OF THE FUTURELEARN MOOC 'COVERPAGE'.

Once a participant has registered, the MOOC will stay active for them even after the MOOC is finished. Many students and staff involved in the project elected to take the units in the MOOC at their own pace after the MOOC had finished. None of the 42 students on the MA at CU had ever engaged with a MOOC before this project took place while three members of staff out of the six involved had previously engaged with a MOOC. None of the nine Turkish students or the member of staff who participated in the second phase of the project had ever experienced a MOOC. Around 58,000 people were enrolled on the first occurrence of the MOOC and around 42,000 on the second (Borthwick 2015, email communication). The units covered on the MOOC, were:

- 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.

Some of the topics covered in each of the FutureLearn MOOC sub-units, such as What is Language? and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) were already part of the syllabus of the *T&MoLL&T* module, but I decided to edit its content in 2014 to include topics covered on the MOOC that I had not incorporated previously (e.g. Content and Language Integrated Learning – CLIL). Also, in view of the difficulties that my MA students had encountered in previous years in dealing with the concept of 'autonomy' in language learning and teaching, I decided that the opportunity provided by the joint staff-student reflection on the MOOC was ideal to encourage students to explore this troublesome concept while at the same time experiencing the online course and learn about it in a new way and developing their digital literacy.

In their TEC-VARIETY (**T**one, **E**ncouragement, **C**uriosity, **V**ariety, **A**utonomy, **R**elevance, **I**nteractivity, **E**ngagement, **T**ension and **Y**ielding) framework, Bonk and Khoo (2014) discuss how the engagement with MOOCs integrated into a 'traditional' curriculum can enhance an autonomous approach to learning. I was hoping that my students, through their engagement with the MOOC, could take a critical stance on the topic of learner autonomy and evaluate the pros and cons of integrating a MOOC into their future curricula. I had always covered the topic of 'learner autonomy' on my module (that had been running for five years before the introduction of the MOOC). The difference in academic year 2014-15 consisted of the fact that I made sure that 'learner autonomy' was discussed in the weeks before the start of the MOOC, both in face-to-face seminars and through tailor-made online activities in Moodle. The 'pre-MOOC' questions discussed in the relevant seminar on learner autonomy were the following:

1. How can we define learner autonomy?
2. How can we create an environment that promotes learner autonomy?
3. Are there any problems with the concept of learner autonomy?
4. What might be some positive outcomes of promoting learner autonomy within the classroom?

The first level of 'blended learning' on the module consisted of the following stages for students at CU:

1. face-to-face lecture/workshop on learner autonomy with questions assigned as homework for the taught session that followed;
2. online posts to the relevant discussion forum on learner autonomy posted before the second workshop on learner autonomy;

3. face-to-face seminars based on the Moodle forum posts and face-to-face and online discussion forum group work to discuss learner autonomy (the module was delivered in a PC lab for some of the face-to-face contact hours);
4. delivery of formative group presentations on the topic face-to-face;
5. individual reflections on the seminars and on the group activities to be posted either in Moodle discussion or to the tutor via email as homework.

The extra 'blend' of the engagement with the online MOOC was added to the above blended learning delivery. A 'MOOC orienteering session' was delivered in a PC laboratory as soon as the MOOC started, since, as it happens, the relevant face-to-face class was scheduled on a Monday, which is when both MOOC occurrences opened.

Once they had enrolled on the MOOC, students started posting messages about their language learning beliefs and experiences in each of the relevant 'REFLECTION/DISCUSSION' forums on the MOOC. They were sharing their thoughts with a global 'community of practice' in Wenger's terms (2006) on the MOOC, while at the same time still engaging within the original CU blended learning setting through further online postings in the dedicated Moodle forums and in face-to-face seminars.

Together with stimulating a deeper reflection on learner autonomy on my module, I was hoping that the MA students could reflect on their own motivation for enhancing their knowledge about the topics covered on the MOOC and on the CU course in collaboration with 'peers' from all over the world. The CU students in the second cohort of the project (Spring 2015) also discussed their MOOC experience with their exchange peers in Turkey via a closed group Facebook area set up by their partners at BU (more on this below). This exchange further amplified their blended learning experience, which culminated in a face-to-face discussion held in Istanbul on occasion of the study trip linked to the project that I organised with my Erasmus partner (see Figure 12).

As for the planning of the assessment component linked to the MOOC, the students were informed from the beginning of the module that a question on the MOOC project would become part of the summative assessment of their in-class test. This took the form of an optional question on the experience of engaging with the MOOC in relation to autonomy in language learning and teaching that was incorporated into the summative in-class test for each of the two cohorts of students who registered on the *T&MoLL&T* module in 2014-25 (e.g. Appendix A, question 3, part 2). The question relating to learner autonomy and the MOOC experience was selected by 10 out of 31 students in the first cohort (32%) and six out of nine students who took the test in the second cohort (67%). This is a significant result, as none of the students had ever enrolled on a MOOC before they experienced it on module *T&MoLL&T.* The fact that the proportion of students who chose the autonomous learning/MOOC question in the test increased considerably for the second occurrence of the project might be explained by the fact that the January cohort was a small one (only 11 students), which made it easier to explore the themes covered on the module in greater depth during the seminars. Another motivational factor justifying the popularity of the MOOC question on the test for the second cohort could be the addition of the intercultural exchange with Turkey.

A distinctive feature of this curricular intervention was that it was carried out as a joint staff-student action-research project underpinned by threshold concept pedagogical principles (see below in the relevant section), which helped with evaluating its impact. Staff and a self-selected group of students agreed to reflect on their experience of learning on the MOOC both while 'in action' (Schön 1983), while participating on the MOOC, and after each weekly unit was completed as well as at the end of the whole course ('on action', Schön 1983).

The joint staff-student evaluation of the experience required ethics clearance. As a trained ethics assessor for the Faculty of Business, Environment and Society and 'Ethics Leader' for the Department of English and Languages at CU, I was fully aware of the ethical issues surrounding the work presented here. The 'closeness' of lecturers with the students participating in action-research-driven curricular change could at times be perceived as threatening by students, particularly if, as in this case, the Principal Investigator is also the module leader and is involved in setting and marking assessment. For this reason it was made clear to all students in writing in the 'Participant Information Form' (attached in Appendix B) that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without any 'repercussions'. The other risk involved in this process related to the fact that ethics clearance can be time-consuming, but I managed to obtain ethics approval in time, before the MOOC started.

The action-research project included the administration of online surveys (one for staff and one for students) to evaluate the participants' MOOC integration experience. The surveys were created using The Bristol Online Survey tool (BOS 2015)[4], which complies with Data Protection Act requirements. The online survey link was emailed to all participating staff, distributed via the forum in Moodle for the students at CU and posted in the Facebook closed group area discussion for the students in Turkey.

I formulated the survey in collaboration with one of the expert students hired as a research assistant. We included a mixture of Likert-scale type statement and open-ended questions based on recommendations on survey design provided by Dörnyei (2003) and Mackey and Gass (2005). For the Likert scale section we decided to adopt the same format as the internal module evaluation questionnaires scale that students were already familiar with: "strongly agree"; "mostly agree"; "neither agree nor disagree"; "mostly disagree"; "strongly disagree"; "not applicable") and adapted the post-MOOC weekly questions from the participant information form (see Appendix B). Fourteen students out of 42 (33%) responded to the survey at CU, which is a good return rate in view of the fact that it was voluntary and students were asked to fill it in July after the end of their taught sessions. All the CU staff who took part in the MOOC evaluation filled in the survey (six). Two out of the ten Turkish participants (nine students and one member of staff) completed it.

In terms of the results obtained from the CU students, the following figures are pleasing and demonstrate both that the project appears to have been well received by students and that they believe the experience supported them in their journey as reflective practitioners, while at the same time pushing them out of their comfort zone (Figure 7).

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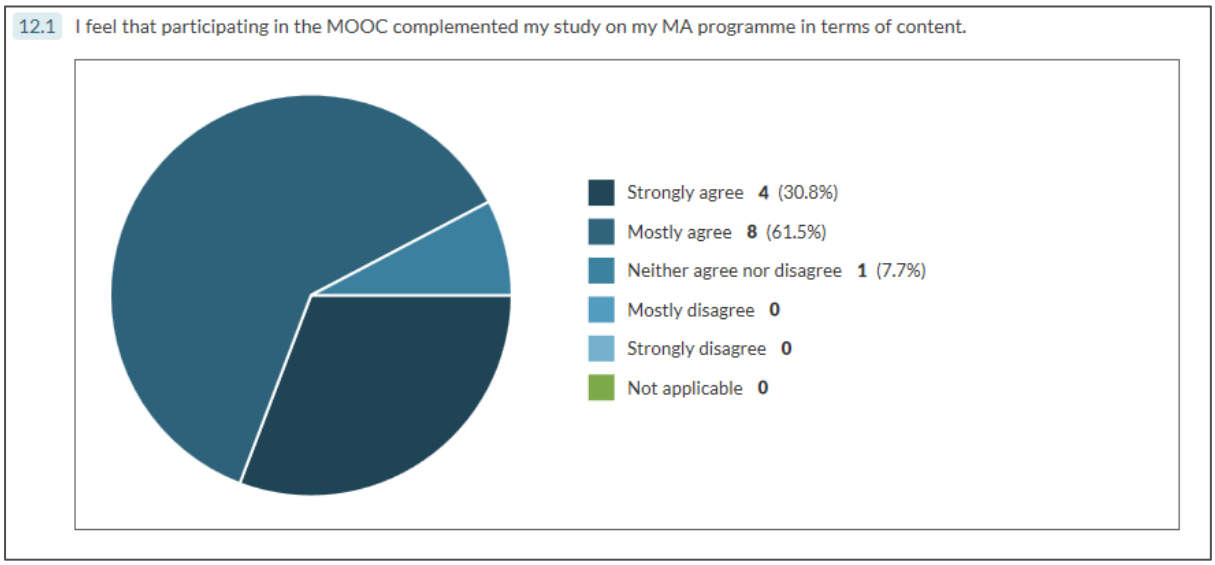


FIGURE 3: CU STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS FOR STATEMENT 12

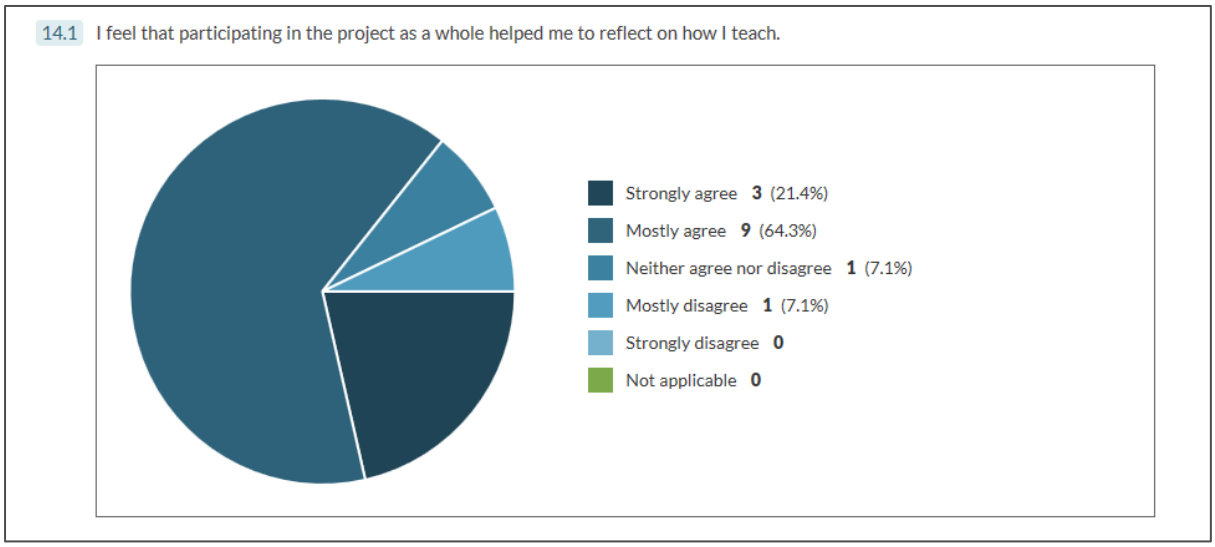


FIGURE 4: CU STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS FOR STATEMENT 14

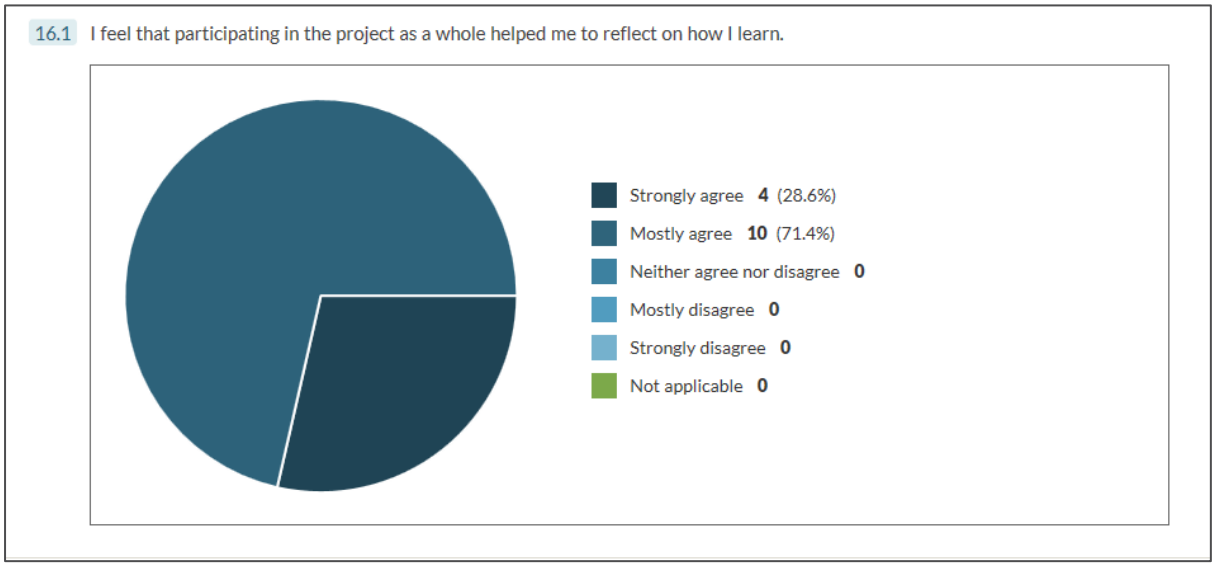


FIGURE 5: CU STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS FOR STATEMENT 16

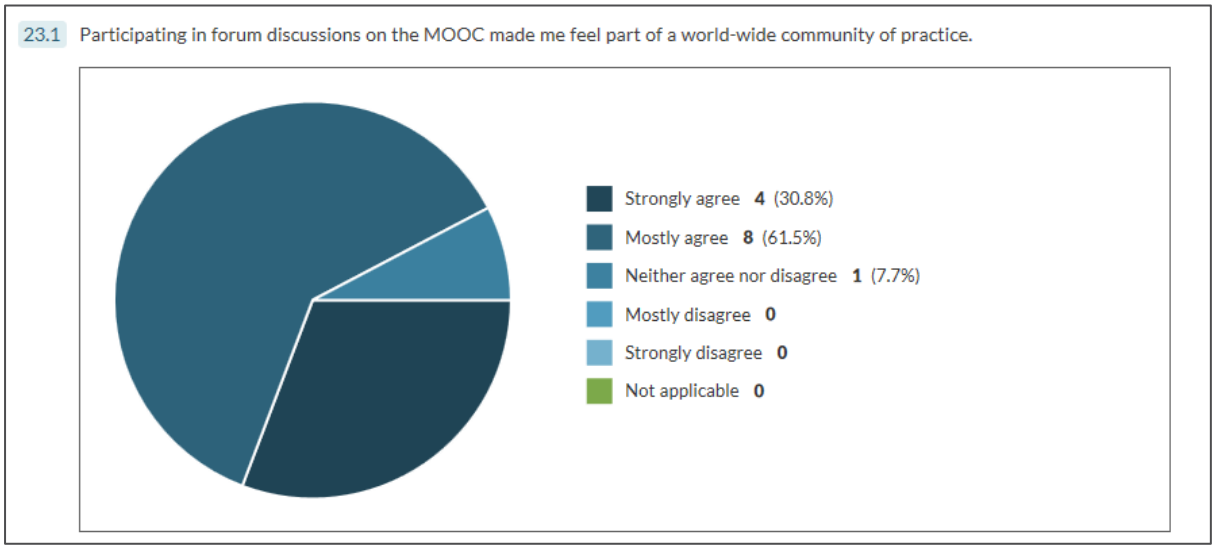


FIGURE 6: CU STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS FOR STATEMENT 23

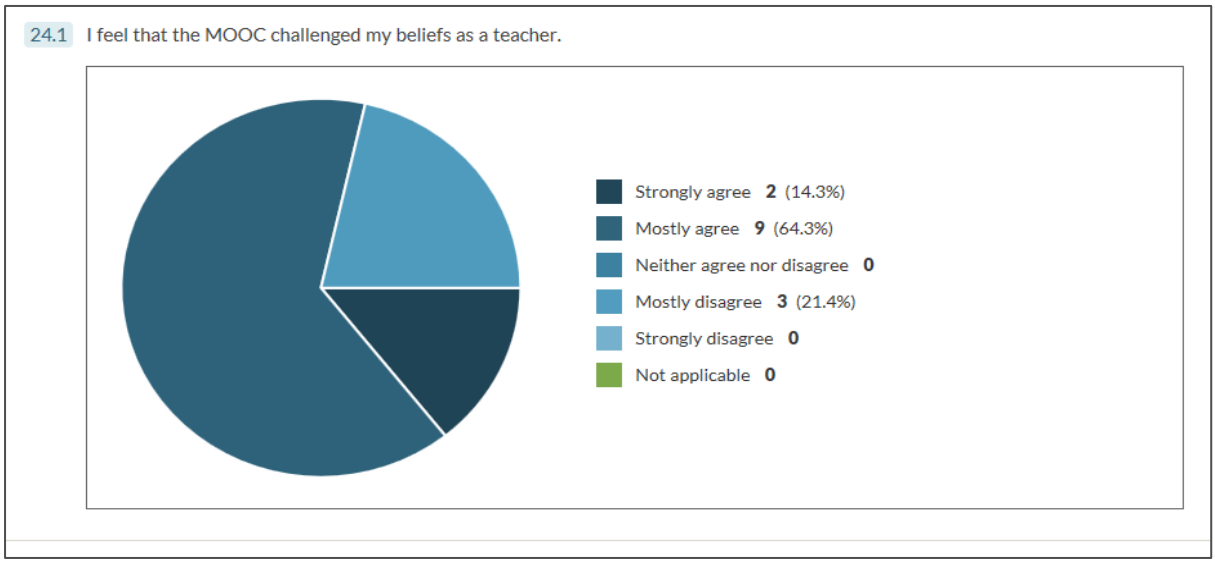


FIGURE 7: CU STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS FOR STATEMENT 24

There were also interesting results relating to the use of Facebook for the exchange with Turkey. They are particularly significant for me, as many colleagues do not understand why I have a certain resistance to the exclusive use of social media for academic purposes.

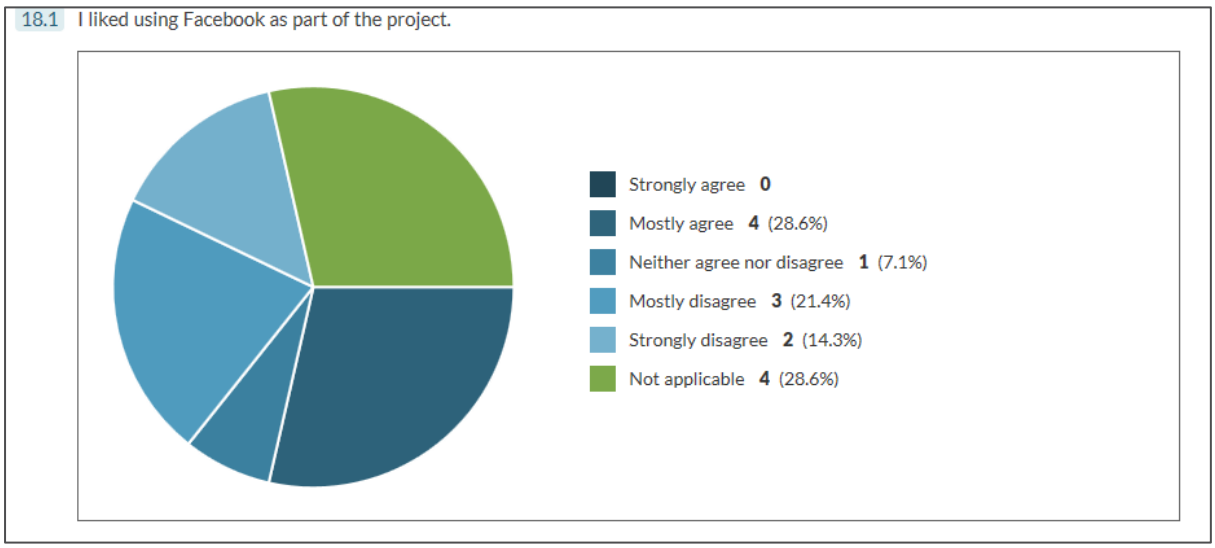


FIGURE 8: CU STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS STATEMENT 18

The student research assistant volunteered the following insight to add to the reading of the above chart (Leinster, email communication, 2015):

> Productive discussion proved difficult on Facebook. I echo the sentiments of another participant who stated in their post-MOOC survey response that the use of Facebook 'didn't feel right'. I felt a strange disconnect between academic discussion and the platform I use for social networking. I found discussing my progress on the MOOC face-to-face with my peers much more helpful in terms of motivation and meta-reflection. I was also motivated to engage with the MOOC due to wanting to investigate its potential for supplementing my own classroom practice.

There were also interesting replies in the open-ended questions, for example, in response to the question: "Have any of your beliefs about the areas of troublesome language teaching changed? If so what and how?" a student stated that they had now realised that face-to-face learning might not be the best option to adopt for all contexts and that sometimes online learning would be better.

As for the results from the staff survey (where the statements/questions were formulated in a slightly different way), all staff appeared to be in favour of encouraging their students to enrol on a MOOC, see figure below:

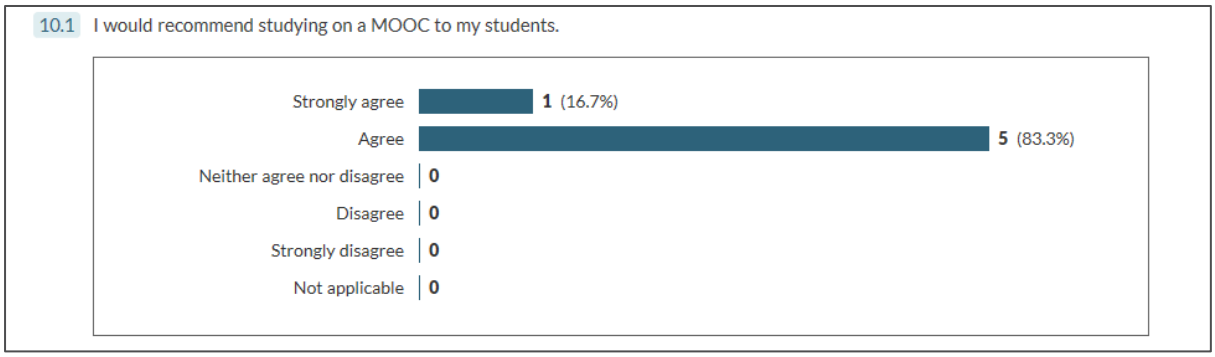
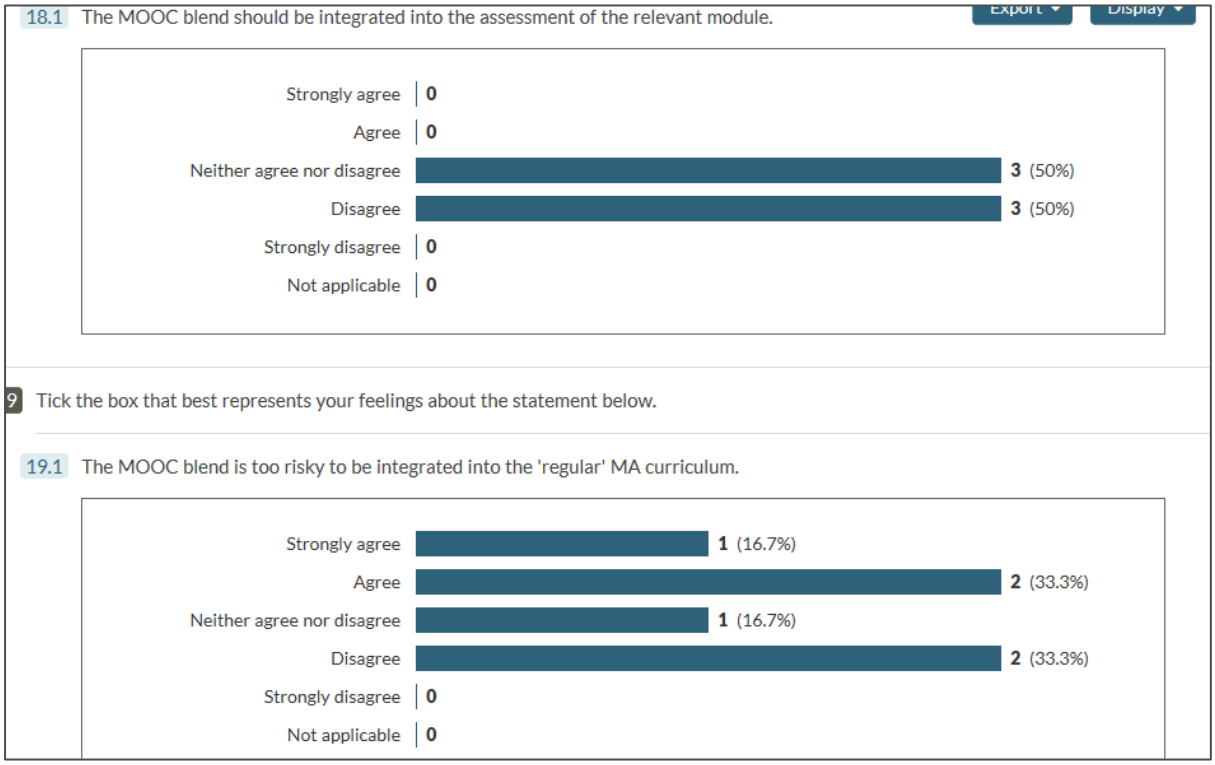


FIGURE 9: CU STAFF SURVEY RESULTS STATEMENT 10

I had not realised in the face-to-face weekly meetings that there was resistance to the incorporation of the MOOC into the MA curriculum among my colleagues (see the answers for questions 18 and 19 below). As Course Director for the MA I will need to triangulate these results (which have just been submitted at the time of writing in July 2015) with interviews. Although the results are limited by the fact that this was a small-scale project, it could be argued that the students' positive response to this project would appear to make a case for the integration of MOOCs into the MA curriculum and confirm the results of the previously mentioned study on the integration of OERs into the HE curriculum by Bone and McNichol (2014).



FIGURES 10 AND 11: CU STAFF SURVEY RESULTS STATEMENTS 18 AND 19

How this practice has evolved

This practice is very new (it is in its first year of implementation) and the actions that will be taken following its full evaluation will be implemented from October 2015. Some changes have, however, already occurred, following the feedback received from participants at the end of the first MOOC integration phase that took place in the first semester of the academic year 2014-15. For example, it was decided to select the topics to recommend to the students who started in January following the recommendations by the students and staff who had taken the MOOC in the Autumn. There was nevertheless a major change that occurred, as previously mentioned, in the second phase of the project when a further dimension of online international knowledge-sharing was added to it.

An intercultural exchange to discuss the MOOC integration into the curriculum was set up with a partner institution in Turkey, the University of Boğaziçi, in Istanbul. A closed group discussion area was set up in Facebook by the partner tutor in collaboration with her students. The January cohort of the MA in ELT at CU was therefore able to add an extra reflective dimension to their experience of engaging with the MOOC. Their Turkish partners were on the final year of an undergraduate course on Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The Turkish partners agreed to fill in the participant information sheets for the project and the pre- and post- MOOC questions and share their reflections in Facebook with the CU students.

Another feature that distinguished the first occurrence of the project from the second was that the online international exchange was followed by a study visit to Turkey. A joint staff/student conference on intercultural communication was organised with the partners and took place in Istanbul on 12 May 2015. The students on the January cohort had the opportunity to discuss their learning journey on the MOOC in a blend that included four different 'modes':

1. within the blended learning setting at CU;
2. online with the global community of practice on the MOOC;

3. online with their peers in Turkey through Facebook;
4. face-to-face with their peers in Turkey.

The CU students had the opportunity to present their reflections on the MOOC project both at the conference held in Turkey (Alhamed, Altamini and Alnajjar 2015) and at the annual teaching and learning staff conference held in Coventry (Alhamed *et al.* 2015). In their talks the students discussed the positive aspects of the experience, namely that the MOOC was free, that it consolidated their learning experience on the relevant module in particular and their course in general, that they enjoyed the freedom to be able to carry out the tasks anytime and anywhere they wanted and that they had also enjoyed the aspect of feeling part of a global community of practice (Alhamed, Altamini and Alnajjar 2015). However, they also pointed out that:

- they felt a MOOC is not truly universally accessible as it requires computers and the Internet (so it is not as 'open' as is claimed in its acronym);
- the content on the MOOC was a bit simple and repetitive in places;
- there could have been less stress on the marketing of the Southampton/British Council MA attached to the MOOC;
- they missed the lack of summative assessment on the MOOC.

Figure 12 illustrates how the project had evolved by its second phase and how it had developed an innovative 'meta-blended', meta-reflective, multimodal approach to the professional development of English teachers that enabled them to experience a variety of learning modes, often running in parallel: face-to-face reflections in seminars, blended discussions face-to-face and in Moodle forums, online exchanges on the MOOC and Facebook and face-to-face knowledge-sharing at the joint conference. The Figure was created in collaboration with the 'expert' MA students who have participated in the project (Alhamed *et al.* 2015).

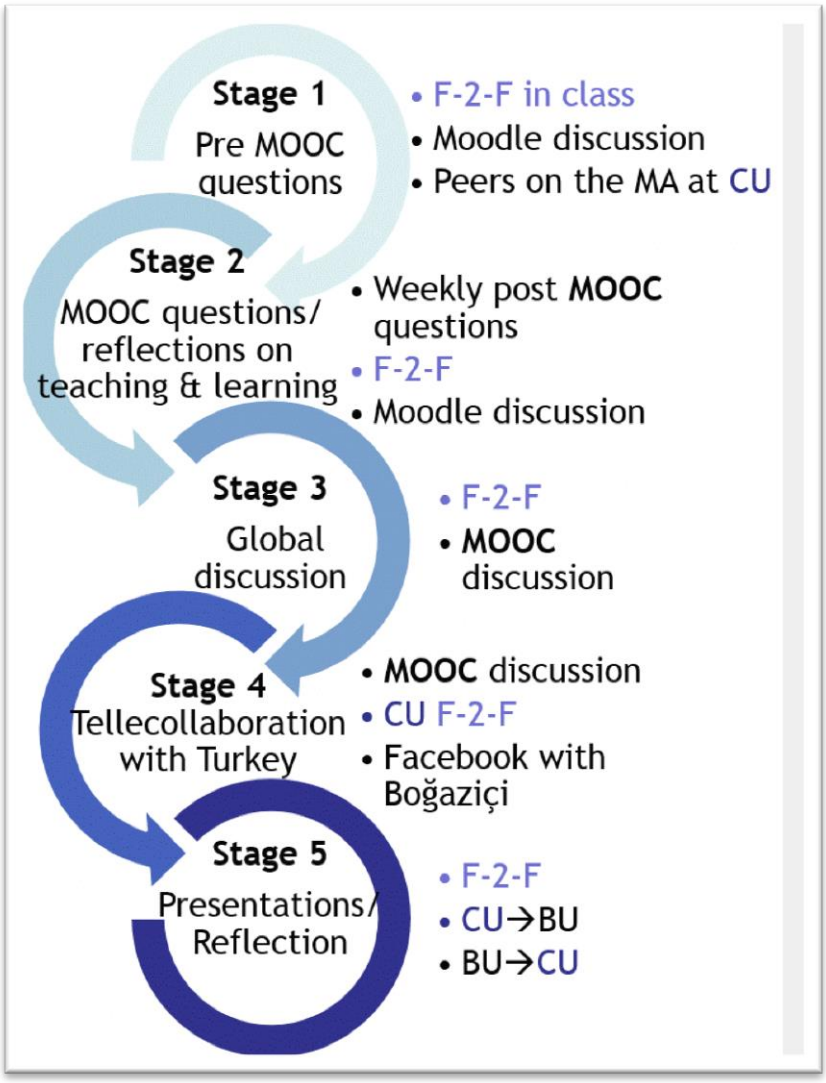


FIGURE 12: THE MOOC PROJECT META-BLENDED AND META-REFLECTIVE REPRESENTATION OF THE FIVE STAGES IN THE SECOND PHASE OF THE PROJECT.

The 'weakest link' in the above multimodal meta-blend was the Facebook closed group. As the data is still 'raw' it would be premature to draw too many conclusions on why this aspect of the project did not work. Many factors are likely to have affected its lack of effectiveness and the lack of interaction on Facebook. The 'expert students' and I have attempted an initial speculative 'postmortem' and identified the following factors:

1. motivational factors (the Turkish students were not assessed on any aspect of this project);
2. ownership factors (I had initiated the project, but the Facebook area was owned by the Turkish partners);
3. different study levels of the students involved (postgraduate at CU and undergraduate at BU);
4. the use of Facebook for an action-research project.

I have already hinted at the CU students' feeling of 'disconnect' when using a social media platform for this academic project. All these points will be explored in a future study. There is, however, one aspect that has emerged in the MOOC project exchange with Turkey that reflects my previous experience of online international learning engagement with other countries

> With reference to both ourselves and our peers in other countries, what is becoming apparent is that the 'languaging' we are using [...] has different semantic connotations. Even if the words used are the same, we often discover that we do not interpret them with the same meaning and it is not just a translation issue. The pedagogical interpretation of certain expressions and words, such as 'digital literacies', 'task', 'student-centred' and 'student autonomy' would appear to differ considerably in the UK and in Mexico, for example, at least in our experience. [...] I feel that we need more research in this sensitive area of 'pedagogical intercultural issues' in telecollaboration exchanges to better support tutors in their journey to become global citizens and 'global pedagogues'. *(Orsini-Jones 2015, pp. 53-4)*

The theoretical background: towards an action-research-supported role-reversal model of curricular innovation through the expert students' looking glass

> There was a book lying near Alice on the table (...), she turned over the leaves, to find some part that she could read, 'for it's all in some language I don't know,' she said to herself.
>
> It was like this.
>
> YKCOWREBBAJ
>
> sevot yhtils eht dna,gillirb sawT'
> ebaw eht ni elbmig dna eryg diD
> ,sevogorub eht erew ysmim llA
> .ebargtuo shtar emom eht dnA
>
> She puzzled over this for some time, but at last a bright thought struck her. 'Why, it's a Looking-glass book, of course! And if I hold it up to a glass, the words will all go the right way again.
>
> This was the poem that Alice read.
>
> JABBERWOCKY
>
> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.
>
> *(Lewis Carroll, Alice through the Looking Glass, and what Alice Found there, pp 13-4)*

There are various theoretical strands informing this project**.** Like in much of my previous work (e.g. Orsini-Jones *et al.* 2010; Orsini-Jones 2014) the first one of them is the adoption of the action-research-informed role-reversal threshold concept pedagogy model I designed for my PhD in 2010 (see Figure 13, Orsini-Jones 2011). I have previously discussed (2014) how Cousin (2009, pp. 209-11) describes threshold concept pedagogy as a partnership among educationalists, tutors and students who 'tackle' together the scene of difficulty occasioned by the encounter with troublesome knowledge. While the role-reversal model presented below (Figure 13) is dialogic and stems from Cousin's, the identification of threshold concepts is driven by student researchers, who, having embraced threshold concept pedagogy for their own research, help staff with discovering nodes of troublesome knowledge and help tutors to approach such nodes from the students' perspective.

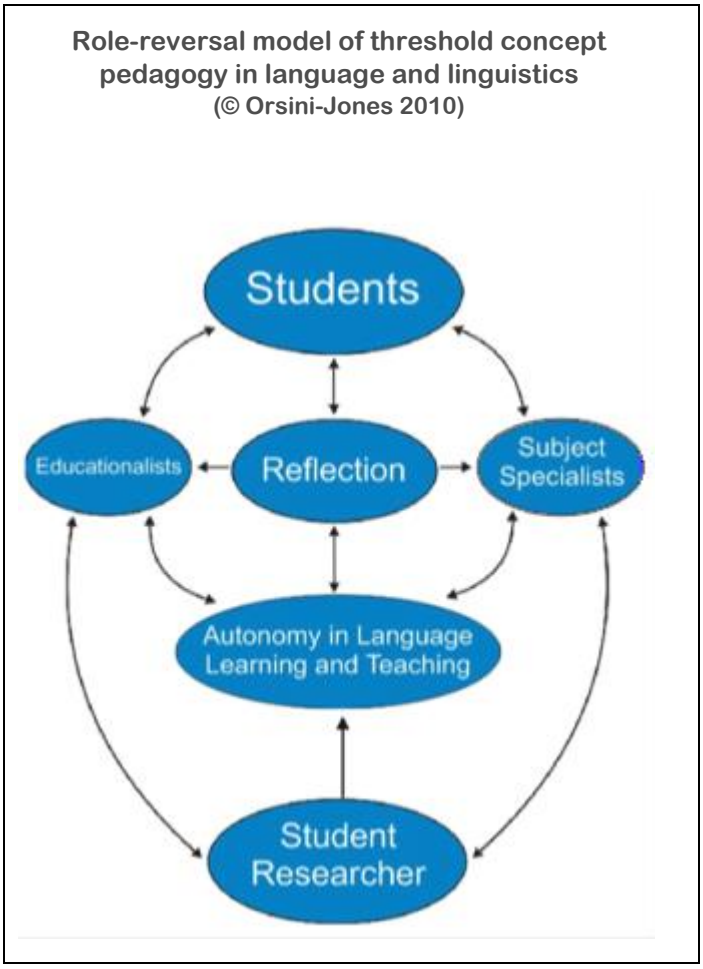


FIGURE 13: THE ROLE-REVERSAL MODEL OF THRESHOLD CONCEPT PEDAGOGY IN LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS. ORSINI-JONES (2011).

This model helps tutors to see their curricular interventions through the eyes of 'expert students' in a way that could be compared to Alice's view of the world in *Through the Looking Glass*. The quotation also expresses well the bewilderment that students can experience when faced with 'alien' knowledge. In the case of my module the 'alien' knowledge is the understanding of the concept of autonomy in language learning and teaching (e.g. Little 2007; Dam 1995). It was the student research assistant who is supporting me with the evaluation of this project that suggested that the concept of autonomy in language learning and teaching fits well with the definition of what a threshold concept is (Land and Meyer 2010, and Flanagan 2015), that is to say it is:

- **troublesome:** the learners will often find it problematic;
- **transformative:** once understood, its potential effect on student learning and behaviour is to occasion a significant shift in the perception of a subject;
- **integrative:** it exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of concepts that were not previously seen as linked;
- **irreversible:** the change of perspective occasioned by acquisition of a threshold concept is unlikely to be forgotten;
- **bounded:** A threshold concept will probably delineate a particular conceptual space, serving a specific and limited purpose;
- **discursive:** the crossing of a threshold will incorporate an enhanced and extended use of language.;
- **reconstitutive:** Understanding a threshold concept may entail a shift in learner subjectivity, which is implied through the transformative and discursive aspects already noted. Such

reconstitution is, perhaps, more likely to be recognised initially by others, and also to take place over time (Smith 2006 in Flanagan 2015).

Land, Meyer and Smith (2008, pp. ix-xxi) stress that threshold concept curricular interventions go beyond the 'constructive curricular alignment' proposed by Biggs (1999 and 2003). Biggs' alignment has some value, as it helps with making the links between intended learning outcomes, evidence of achievement and assessment processes and criteria more transparent for the purpose of giving students feedback (Race, Brown and Smith 2005, pp. 12-13, first published 1996).

However, it has been applied in a very mechanical way to the design of module and course syllabi across the HE UK sector (e.g. a common requirement is that each learning outcome must be matched to a piece of summative assessment). This does not normally allow for the acceptance of 'liminality' (Meyer and Land 2005, p. 379), i.e. the transitional spaces students can inhabit in the process of acquiring knowledge that is 'alien' to them. In threshold concept literature it is accepted that students can oscillate between understanding and misunderstanding for longer than is allowed by the straight-jacket constraints of pre-set termly learning outcomes and 'aligned' curricula. Meyer and Land state that it is necessary to try to identify the sources of the 'transformational' blocks students encounter in their learning journeys and to tolerate what could be called ontological and epistemological 'stammering' (2005, p. 379) for longer than would be allowed by a mechanistic application of curricular alignment.

The joint use of action research with threshold concept pedagogy provides a unique opportunity for a constructivist staff/student exploration of the transformational challenges learners face when they encounter troublesome knowledge. I believe in involving my students in collaborative action research aimed at tackling together troublesome concepts. It is important to note that troublesomeness is linked to 'alien' knowledge that is not just alien in terms of language and epistemology (e.g. understanding what autonomy in language learning and teaching means) but also alien in terms of the identity of the learner. A threshold concept forces the learners to question their assumptions, to reconfigure their learning landscape.

As Perkins states, a threshold concept can be 'counterintuitive' (2006) and displace the learner. The questioning of the learner's subjectivity brought about by the encounter with a threshold concept, can also result in resistance to 'embracing' the concept, not because the concept is difficult to understand for them, but because the learner does not believe in it. Resistance to a threshold concept can come from high achieving learners as they are not willing to engage in the transformational process that can be initiated by the engagement with troublesome knowledge, because they resist a change in identity. The challenge is therefore also ontological and relating to 'becoming an autonomous language learner' or 'transforming into a teacher, promoting autonomous language learning'.

There are a variety of action research models (e.g. see Carr and Kemmis 1986; McNiff 1988 and 1993; McNiff and Whitehead 2005; McKernan 1992; Zuber-Skerritt 1996; Burns 2010). My favourite reflects Kemmis and McTaggart's 'participatory action research' (1988 and 2005, Figure 14) that is inspired in turn by educational research principles proposed by Argyris and Schön (1974) and Schön (1983). The model – Figure 14 – is seen as a 'classic' in action research literature (Burns 2010, p. 8) and is, according to Burns, also the best known one, as it succinctly summarises all the phases of the action research cycles:

- a problematic issue is identified;
- change is planned collaboratively to address the issue;

- the change process is implemented: 'acted out';
- all agents involved in the change process reflect upon its outcomes, both while it is happening and at the end of the first phase of implementation;
- a new cycle starts.

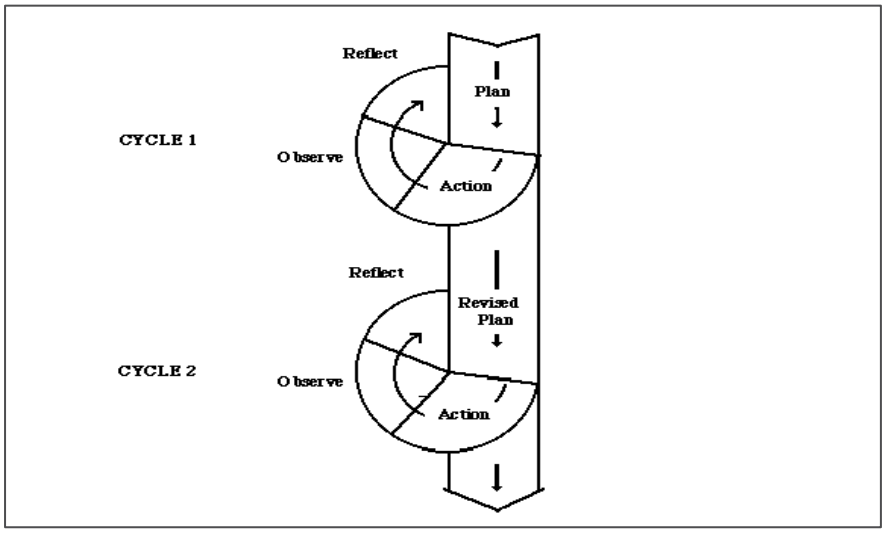


FIGURE 14: THE ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE, AFTER KEMMIS AND MCTAGGART, 1988, P.14 AND 2005.

I also subscribe to the definition of action research provided by McNiff (1988):

> It is research WITH rather than research ON. (...) (It) encourages teachers to become adventurous and critical in their thinking, to develop theories and rationales for their practice, and to give reasoned justification for their public claims to professional knowledge. It is this systematic ENQUIRY MADE PUBLIC which distinguishes the activity as research. *(McNiff 1988, pp. 4-6).*

Participants become engaged in cycles of reflection that are both *in-action* and *on-action*, as initially proposed by Schön (1983). The adoption of a metacognitive approach, i.e. reflection on learning (Flavell 1979; Schön 1983; Moon 2004; Efkedis 2006) on the part of both the learner and the lecturer is therefore also required for an effective implementation of the action research cycle. In this project participants were engaging with metareflection on various levels (see Figure 12) and using a variety of different e-learning tools.

Although there are issues surrounding action research and some researchers dismiss it as a 'soft' research methodology option (e.g. Dörnyei 2007), I maintain it is the best possible approach for the purpose of improving your curriculum with students, identifying troublesome knowledge and helping students with understanding challenging threshold concepts that can be both subject-specific and generic. The 'research with' model offered by action-research also provided me with the opportunity to directly involve students in the research work. There is a considerable amount of literature that evidences that action-research is established as an accepted and rigorous approach to research-led curriculum inquiry and change (e.g. Wallace 1998 and Burns 2010). As argued by Cousin (2009), what is particularly appealing is the opportunity that action-research offers to produce transformative practice that is not constrained by what can sometimes be the reductionist lens of a positivist research method and draws instead on rich and dynamic qualitative data, albeit without excluding the use of quantitative data to triangulate the research findings.

Winter (1996, p. 14), quoted in Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, pp. 228-9) defines the six key principles of action research:

- *reflexive critique*, which is the process of becoming aware of our own perceptual biases.
- *dialectical critique*, which is a way of understanding the relationships between the elements that make up various phenomena in our context;
- *collaboration*, which is intended to mean that everyone's view is taken as a contribution to understanding the situation;
- *risking disturbance*, which is an understanding of our own taken-for-granted processes and willingness to submit them to critique;
- *creating plural structures*, which involves developing various accounts and critiques, rather than a single authoritative interpretation;
- *theory and practice internalised*, which is seeing theory and practice as two interdependent, yet complementary phases of the change process.

All the above principles are of fundamental importance for teachers who aim to engage with autonomy both at a personal level (their own learning and continuous professional development) and in their practice (their teaching).

A key feature of my action-research-informed role-reversal curricular change model is its underpinning with education technology. It is empowering for students to be equipped with e-learning multiliteracies. When debating the concept of literacy, I like to draw on Freire and Macedo's definition (1987): they maintain that literacy is the *ability*, the *possibility* and the *will* to read the world. The development of critical thinking and autonomous learning can be fostered in an educational environment that makes effective use of the available technology while at the same time raising students' awareness of the new digital genres that are emerging (Orsini-Jones 2010; Orsini-Jones 2015). The metareflection carried out by the participants in this project utilising the e-learning tools that were part of its 'blend' was integral to the development of their professionalisation as future teachers of English and of their critical digital literacy development. I agree with Beetham (2007, p. 33) that technology will enhance the learning environment only if the necessary support measures for learners to make the most of it are put in place. For this reason, when implementing the curricular intervention evidenced here, measures were put in place to support the MA students in:

- *taking responsibility*, thinking about what they were doing and why;
- *planning*, setting targets and identifying the means to achieve them;
- *reflecting*, thinking about what they had done, were doing and were aiming to do.

The 'expert students' (phase 2) thoughts on their reflective gains from this metablended project are summarised below (Alhamed *et al.* 2015):

- in class and on Moodle discussion: effective teacher-scaffolded and guided reflective questions;
- on the MOOC: some reflective prompts; benefit of peer scaffolding on a global scale;
- on Facebook with Turkey: productive discussion difficult; assessment as motivation at CU but not at BU; would it have been better on a VLE?

How others might adapt or adopt this practice

There are various facets to this curricular intervention. I believe that the easiest to adapt or adopt is the integration of a relevant MOOC into an existing curriculum, as this could be easily adopted and adapted by other institutions and for many other subjects too. There is a wealth of MOOCs freely available to all and there has been an increase in the publications on pedagogical advice on how to integrate MOOCs into the curriculum (Kim 2015; Bonk *et al.* 2015; Ross *et al.*

2014). A 'friendly peer' who moderated the first draft of this work that I wrote at the relevant HEA writing retreat, suggested to me that I should also stress the cost-effectiveness of this initiative in this final report (Wicaksono, personal communication 2015). It is true that I managed to 'expand' the content of my module at no extra cost to me, my students or my university with Open Educational material that was 'fit for purpose' for my students. The MOOC integration was a valuable free addition to my module according to the (mostly) positive students' replies to the online evaluation survey administered to them in July 2015.

Editing the syllabus of a module can be time-consuming, but I personally found it quite interesting and stimulating to add some topics to my module that could be 'extended' by the FutureLearn videos and materials as an extra line of support freely added to my own Moodle-supported curriculum. I am intending to add extra links to other FutureLearn MOOCs that I have taken and that I believe could be of relevance to the students on the MA in ELT course (e.g. Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching, Cultural Studies and Modern Languages, Exploring English and Corpus Linguistics: Methods, Analysis, Interpretation).

A recommendation I would like to make is to view these MOOCs with an open mind and avoid making comparisons with face-to-face courses in institutional settings. They are different and often provide 'tasters' in a subject. Also, in view of some of my colleagues' dismissive feedback on the integration of the MOOC into the curriculum because they perceived some of the units to be very superficial, I would like to recommend that we evaluate the MOOC content through the students' eyes, rather than our own, wherever possible. The answers given by CU staff in the survey also made it clear that resistance to the creation of assessment tasks based on the MOOC integration experience could be met from peers.

The reasons why I would recommend adopting the approach discussed here also relates to the fact that this project addresses many of the current priorities in the HE sector:

- students as researchers;
- students as partners;
- internationalisation of the curriculum;
- development of global citizenship competencies (including effective online communication and critical digital literacy development);
- flexible learning/innovative modes of blended learning.

Conclusion

The innovative practice illustrated here aimed to

1. explore how both expert and trainee English teachers and teacher trainers who are already engaged in metareflection on their teaching and learning practice can engage with a novel way to learn, share and discuss theories relating to language learning and teaching, by registering on a FutureLearn MOOC on this subject.
2. explore how teachers' beliefs on learner autonomy in particular and other subjects covered on the MOOC in general could be affected by a 'blended' metareflection on their knowledge and practice carried out in three ways:
    a. individually while doing the course;
    b. collaboratively in weekly meetings with peers;
    c. collaboratively with the rest of the participants from all over the world on the MOOC. (see Appendix B):

Although I am still in the process of analysing the full impact of this practice, I believe that the two above aims have been achieved. Both the students and the staff who took part in this project became more aware of context-specific issues in language learning and teaching that will be relevant to their future work settings. Students and staff also reported that engaging with the MOOC helped them with exploring their understanding of the concept of autonomous learning and realise how fundamental scaffolding is to it. All participants reported that they had been taken 'out of their comfort zone', which enabled them to review their beliefs on language learning and teaching.

Despite some of the problematic issues encountered, the overall evaluation of the initiative is therefore positive. This project has also motivated me to explore whether it would be possible to create a MOOC on the threshold concept identified - autonomy in language learning and teaching - in collaboration with staff involved in existing MOOCs and my 'expert students'.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kate Borthwick at the University of Southampton, an expert e-learning friend and one of the learning designers who created the Understanding Language FutureLearn MOOC, for providing me with information on the number of enrolled participants on the MOOC discussed here and for being supportive of this venture. I would also like to thank all my students on the MA in ELT in the academic year 2014-15 who joined me in this 'blended MOOC' journey and helped me to see my practice through their eyes. I would like to thank in particular my 'expert students' Hannah Leinster, Sreevidya Midanamura, Noof Alhamed, Shoug Altanimi and Marwa Alnajjar. I would moreover like to thank my colleagues Billy Brick, Mike Cribb, Elwyn Lloyd, Zoe Gazeley-Eke, and Laura Pibworth-Dolinski, two of whom are graduates of my MA in ELT, for sharing their reflections on this innovative practice with me. Finally I would like to thank my very patient husband, David Jones, who always ends up with the thankless job of editing my English.

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Appendix A: Seen in-class test

Seen in-class test for module Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching (September cohort).

12th January 2015

GE231

9.30 -12.00 (2.5 hours)

Coventry University

Faculty of Business, Environment and Society

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LANGUAGES

M01ENL Theories and Methods of Language Learning & Teaching

In-class TCA (time-constrained-assessment)/test.

Instructions to candidates:

- Switch off your phones
- Put your belongings (including bags and jackets) in the area indicated by your tutor
- Bring your ID card and put it on the desk.

You may bring one A4 page, 12 font size, of relevant references to the in-class test. N.B. References only, no notes.

You should write around 2,000 words in total. Long answers will not be penalised. Short answers below 900 words per answer will be.

Please write on every other line. You must use a pen (black or blue ink only), not a pencil.

Time allowed: 2.5 hours

There are **THREE** questions in this in-class test paper, each consisting of two sections. You must answer **TWO questions (and each of the two subsections in each of them)**.

This is a SEEN paper. You may take this question paper away at the end of the in-class test: please keep it in a safe place for future reference.

Question 1

Answer **BOTH** parts.

1.1 Discuss the Second Language Acquisition theories that underlie Task-Based-Learning and illustrate the reservations that some scholars have about Task-Based Language Teaching and why.

(30 marks)

1.2 You were asked to design various tasks as part of the work for this module. Describe a task you have designed (it could be inspired by the field trip to the British Museum) and discuss the extent to which it would be feasible to introduce this task and a task-based approach in an adult/higher education context known to you (either as teacher or learner).

(20 marks)

(Total: 50 marks)

Question 2

Answer **BOTH** parts.

2.1 Many authors have suggested that we have now moved from a method-based pedagogy to a post-method pedagogy in which teachers will develop their own 'theory of practice' informed by certain key principles. What are the major arguments put forward to support this move?

(30 marks)

2.2 What principles would you suggest are appropriate to the teaching (or learning) context in your own country? You should show how those principles take into account certain key features of that context.

(20 marks)

(Total: 50 marks)

Question 3

Answer **BOTH** parts.

3.1 In the course of module M01ENL we have discussed the concept of 'learner autonomy' and read the article by Lacey: 'Autonomy, never, never, never' (2007). Summarise the article and discuss how and why Lacey adopted Dam's views after his initial resistance.

(30 marks)

3.2 During the course of the module you were encouraged to enrol on the Southampton University MOOC on Language Learning and Teaching. Reflect on the experience of taking part in the MOOC and discuss:

1. If and how it reflects the principles relating to learner autonomy;

2. What topics you would like to cover if you were given the opportunity to teach English with a MOOC to intermediate (B2/IELTS 6.5) students;

3. Which of the four units your found most useful and why.

(20 marks)

(Total: 50 marks)

Appendix B: Participant information form for ethics clearance

COVENTRY UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT & SOCIETY

Department of English and Languages

Project:

The Blended MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) Community of Practice: a Metareflective Investigation into Teacher Cognition with Particular Reference to CPD (Continuous Professional Development) on How to Learn and Teach Languages with a MOOC.

Participant information form

PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT

Aims

This project has two main aims.

This first is to explore how both expert and trainee English teachers and teacher trainers who are already engaged in metareflection on their teaching and learning practice can engage with a novel way to learn, share and discuss theories relating to language learning and teaching by registering for a MOOC on this subject run by the University of Southampton.

The second is to explore how teachers' beliefs on learner autonomy in particular and other subjects covered on the MOOC in general can be affected by a 'blended' metareflection on their knowledge and practice carried out in three ways: 1. individually while doing the course, 2. collaboratively in weekly meetings with peers; 3.collaboratively with the rest of the participants from all over the world on the MOOC.

The **objectives** are that by registering on the Futurelearn MOOC run by the University of Southampton (details available here https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/understanding-language) and sharing their reflections on this shared experience, participants will be able to:

1. Explore how the affordances of Web 2.0 tools can impact on their Continuous Professional Development.
2. Engage in 'think-aloud-protocol' (Mackey and Gass 2005:84-85) while carrying out the tasks on the MOOC, discuss their reflections with peers on a weekly basis and collaborate to evaluate them.
3. Carry out a collaborative staff/'expert' students reflective evaluation of the experience in weekly meetings in order to devise recommendations for teaching and learning in other HEIs as a 'Blended MOOC' community of practice (in Etienne Wenger's terms, 2006).
4. Write up and disseminate the findings of the project both within and beyond Coventry University to provide an insight into learning with a MOOC in a unique 'collaborative blended mode'.
5. Discuss how the experience has affected their beliefs about learner autonomy.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS PROJECT WILL INVOLVE:

1. Registration on the Futurelearn MOOC on *Understanding Language Learning and Teaching*. The MOOC lasts 4 weeks and has two occurrences, one in semester one (17 November

2014 start-end 14 December 2014) and one in semester two (20 April 2015 start-end 17 May 2015).
2. Engagement with the MOOC for 3 hours per week with the MOOC's set activities for the four weeks of its duration.
3. Recording of the thoughts relating to the activities while engaging with such activities.
4. Sharing of the recorded material with the PI and the Research Assistant attached to the project
5. Engagement in one hour of weekly discussions with peers/participants after the weekly activities have taken place (3/4 expected meetings), normally on a Friday at 1pm.
6. Writing-up of the findings and participation at conferences (self-selected participants with the PI)
7. Filling in of the final evaluation survey attached to the project in July 2015 (created with the Bristol Online Survey tool).

FORESEEABLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS

Taking part in this project should not cause participants any discomforts and there are no foreseeable risks involved. Participants can withdraw at any stage if they feel that the above were to be the case.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART (trainee teachers)

As a student on the MA in ELT, by taking part in this study you will gain an insight into how a research project is conducted and what it is like to be a participant in such a study. You will also benefit by having the opportunity to reflect on the themes covered in module *M01ENL Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching* with staff and might want to consider this study for your dissertation. You will moreover acquire new digital literacies

POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART (staff)

It is expected that all staff involved will benefit in terms of developing an understanding of how a MOOC works and acquiring new digital literacies. Staff with also have a unique opportunity to share their practice and beliefs with their community of practice while at the same time engaging in scholarship

WHO IS ORGANISING AND FUNDING THE PROJECT?

This project has been organised by Dr Marina Orsini-Jones, who will use some of her NTF funding (project E11542) to support it.

WHO HAS APPROVED THIS PROJECT?

The project has been approved by the CU Ethics procedures (Ref.: P28390).

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR DATA

Any data collected from the study will remain confidential and anonymous unless consent is sought first. The information will only be processed by the Principal Investigator and the other members of the research team. All data will be anonymised.

Data that is stored electronically will use participant codes so that individuals cannot be identified. All data will be destroyed at the end of the project in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

Data (anonymised) will be used for publications and conference papers.

Participants can withdraw from the study if they wish to do so by 15/12/2014 (cohort 1) or 21/05/2015 (cohort 2).

If you are unhappy with any aspect of this research, you should contact the Principal Investigator, Dr Marina Orsini-Jones, m.orsini@coventry.ac.uk

Orienteering questions and post-activity questions

Students and staff

1. Do you know what a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) is?
2. What are your expectations of studying on a MOOC? (students/staff who have not completed/done one yet only)
3. Have you ever completed an online course for CPD (Continuous Professional Development) before? What was your experience of it?
4. Have you ever engaged in 'Think Aloud Protocol' for research purposes before? If yes, how did you find it, if not what do you think it entails?
5. What are in your opinion the 'troublesome' areas in language learning and teaching?
6. Which ones do you expect to be covered by the MOOC on language learning and teaching?

Weeks 1-4 of the MOOC – ideally to be done at the end of each week face to face and online

Staff and 'expert students'

1. How does learning language learning and teaching theories on the MOOC compare with your previous modes of study of the same topic?
2. What value-added (if any) do you think there is in taking a MOOC?
3. Did the content of the first (or second or third or fourth, depending on the week of study) week meet your expectations in terms of what you had predicted before you started?
4. Would you recommend studying on a MOOC to your students? If so, would you take an integrated approach or keep it separate from what you do?
5. How does interaction with peers on the MOOC differ from interaction with peers in other settings (e.g. face-to-face CPD, VLE)?
6. How are you finding the process of recording your thoughts while engaging on the MOOC?
7. Are there any aspects of the MOOC you are not happy with?
8. Would you consider writing a MOOC for English Language Teaching? If so, what topic(s) would you like to cover?
9. How are you finding the experience of taking part in this reflective project for the purpose of your CPD? And in general?
10. How does the experience of learning about language learning and teaching on the MOOC link with your beliefs on learner autonomy?
11. Any other thoughts you would like to share?

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