Professional Learning for Online Educators

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Abstract: This case study describes the experiences of the #Openteach project team in developing a flexible and evidence-based approach to support professional learning for those who teach online. The project targeted online educators in particular. The rationale for this was Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is recognised as crucial to the upskilling of educators to enhance the student learning experience. However, teaching online requires different pedagogical approaches and staff require specific CPD opportunities relating to online learning in order to teach effectively in that context. The #Openteach project sought to address this gap by creating a flexible, online, open access course about teaching online that was grounded in evidence-based practice. The project had a number of phases, which included a needs analysis of online students and educators about effective online teaching, the publication of a literature review entitled Teaching Online is Different, and a pilot evaluation report. The #Openteach open course ran in March 2020 and focused on five key aspects of teaching online: social presence; facilitating discussion; collaboration online; live online teaching; and supporting online students. Following the first run, an evaluation study was conducted to explore and understand participants' learning experiences of the course. Our findings indicate that professional learning about online teaching should be situated online, and the experience of being an online student is invaluable for online educators as it facilitates empathy with students learning in online contexts. Time management and workload are major challenges for educators, therefore professional learning should allow for flexible engagement. Building confidence and reducing the fear of online teaching is an important aspect of professional learning related to online education. Developing understanding and knowledge of online pedagogy is an important element of professional learning about teaching online. Finally, confidence and competence with the tools and technologies for teaching online are important threshold digital competencies for online educators. The #Openteach project has had a significant impact on the professional learning of educators at a number of levels: at a local university level, at a national level; and at an international level.

1. Introduction

This case study details the journey of the #Openteach: professional development for open online educators project, which aimed to develop a flexible and evidence based approach to support professional learning for online educators. The #Openteach: Professional Development for Open Online Educators project, was funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Ireland from 2019-2020 and was based in Dublin City University (DCU) in Ireland. The project targeted two groups of educators in particular: part time educators and online educators. The rationale for this was that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is recognised as crucial to the upskilling of educators to enhance the student learning experience. However, teaching online requires different pedagogical approaches and staff require specific CPD opportunities relating to online learning in order to teach effectively in that context. Additionally part-time educators do not often have access to CPD opportunities. The #Openteach project sought to address these gaps by creating a flexible, online, open access course about teaching online that was grounded in evidence-based practice. See figure 1 below for details of the project communication channels.

Figure 1. #Openteach project channels

2. The infrastructure

The #Openteach project was based in Dublin City University, Ireland. The primary aim of the project was to support the professional development of approximately one hundred online educators working within our fully online DCU Connected programmes. DCU Connected has a thirty-year history of delivering online distance education to mature adult learners. The #Openteach project team was comprised of seven people based in DCU Connected and from a variety of roles and backgrounds: academics, online educators, a learning designer, and an online student.

The #Openteach project targeted DCU Connected online educators, who were both part-time faculty and teaching fully online based in Irish higher education. The cohort of approximately one hundred DCU Connected online educators were geographically dispersed around Ireland and come from diverse backgrounds in academia, industry and teach in a variety of disciplines such as humanities, management, psychology and IT. The cohort had a mix of experienced online educators and novices.

The technical infrastructure adopted in the #Openteach was a wordpress project website, the DCU Moodle site to host the course, H5P and Moodle tools to create content and activities, Videoscribe, Camtasia and Youtube to create and host video content. The Pressbooks platform was used to create the final output, the open book. For research and data analysis purposes, Nvivo, Qualtrics, and Excel were used.

3. Project phases

The #Openteach project had five phases, with each phase producing useful resources (see the figure 2 below)

Figure 2. Project phases

groups and several questionnaires. We then produced a report detailing our findings called *An investigation of effective online teaching: a needs analysis of online educators and online students* (Farrell et al, 2019).

Key findings from this report were four key areas that educators identified to enhance through professional development:

1. Technical skills for teaching online
2. Online pedagogy
3. Online facilitation approaches
4. Encouraging online interaction

Then in phase two, we examined the literature around teaching online and conducted a literature synthesis. Following this we published our literature report called *Teaching online is different: critical perspectives from the literature* (Ní Shé et al, 2019). The report examined the literature about online teaching since 2010 and examined the roles and competencies which characterise effective teaching online, as well as approaches to supporting the professional development of online educators.

In phase three, we used the information from the needs analysis report and literature report to begin designing and developing the #Openteach open online course. The course was designed following the ABC Learning design approach, which resulted in a ten hour, fully online professional development course (Ní Shé et al, 2019). You can read more about the design process in our ABC case study. The course focused on five aspects of teaching online: presence, collaboration online, synchronous teaching, asynchronous teaching and supporting online students. The learning outcomes for the course are outlined below in Table 1.

Table 1. #Openteach course learning outcomes

#Openteach course learning outcomes
Demonstrate awareness of teaching and learning pedagogy associated with online education
Facilitate online communication and discussion forums that engage students in learning
Create a supportive community of learners using online teaching pedagogy
Develop and facilitate online collaborative activities that support student learning
Design online teaching activities that encourage student participation and learning and reflect on personal learning from this activity
Use digital tools effectively to support online teaching

The #Openteach course followed a scenario-based approach and participant engagement was largely asynchronous and self-paced as this provided the flexible approach recommended in the literature. The course was designed and delivered on the DCU Moodle site called Loop, and used a variety of tools such as H5P, video, audio, discussion forums, quiz, and workshop in its design (see figure 3 below).

Figure 3. #Openteach Loop course

Phase 4 involved running the course for the first time. The #Openteach online course was free, and participation was open to anyone, from anywhere, with the capability to join an online course. The #Openteach open course ran for the first time in March 2020 with 450 participants and the second time in September 2020 with 557 participants.

In phase five, in order to make the impact of the project sustainable in the long term the project team decided to create a free open access online book using the Pressbooks platform. The book was published in June 2021.

4. Challenges

Over the course of the project, the #Openteach team faced a number of challenges, outlined below.

During the learning design phase, designing credible scenarios that were pitched at the correct level and would stimulate debate and discussion proved challenging. It took several iterations of piloting and testing to develop the optimum scenarios.

When developing the course in Loop (DCU Moodle), we experienced some technical challenges with H5P and achieving a user-friendly course navigation and experience. Further, as we had made the course open to anyone, all those outside of DCU had to manually set up and enrolled in the course, which proved very time consuming. The finishing touches of the course design and development coincided with the Covid-19

pandemic, so the final video assets had to be created at home rather than in a university media studio.

The greatest challenge was that the first run of the #Openteach course coincided with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, which resulted in a much higher number of participants than we had expected, 450. This made facilitating the course much more challenging. We mitigated this by having 5 facilitators and splitting the cohort into smaller groups so as to maintain a high touch facilitation approach. A related challenge was that, again due to the pandemic, a much more diverse cohort joined the course than we had expected. Participants came from higher education, further education, the post-primary sector, and a number of participants came from outside of Ireland.

5.   How the initiative was received

Following the first run of the #Openteach course in March 2020, we conducted an evaluation study in order to explore, understand and evaluate its impact on the professional learning experiences of the participants and to inform the iterative design process. The evaluation study adopted a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014) using qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. Data was collected via an online questionnaire (n=101) and via online focus groups (n=10). We then published *The Openteach Pilot Evaluation Report* (Farrell et al, 2020).

In this section, we present a short extract of our findings thematically from the *The Openteach Pilot Evaluation Report* to illustrate how the course was received by participants (Farrell et al, 2020).

When asked if participation in the #Openteach course increased their knowledge of online teaching, 98% of 101 respondents answered Yes, 1% responded no and 1% responded maybe (see Figure 4).
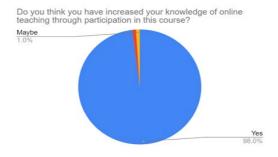

Figure 4. #Openteach impact on knowledge of online teaching

The data indicated that the #Openteach course impacted participants' knowledge and understanding of teaching online in a number of ways:

1. Building confidence about teaching online;

"I had no knowledge of online teaching beforehand and I feel I could teach online with my learners now. I have small groups and individuals so I would be comfortable working online with them now."

2. Developing new knowledge about online teaching including key theories, technology, and strategies for encouraging student interaction;

"I particularly liked the emphasis on pedagogy. The course suited my needs perfectly and allowed me to deepen my knowledge and raise my awareness of the need for carefully designed learning pathways. Online is definitely different to the traditional classroom"

3. Gaining insights into online learning by experiencing it from a student perspective;

"Experiencing a fully online course and seeing the different tips and strategies for engagement in an online environment"

4. Developing ideas and strategies about engaging students in both asynchronous and synchronous environments.

"Suggestions on how to better engage students - specifically some of the suggestions on how to use breakout activities, polls etc. Opportunity to read all the very useful suggestions from others on the course, in the various forums"

5. For those who were teaching online for the first time, the #Openteach course provided them with reassurance, support, and encouragement during a challenging time.

"I am a true beginner so my participation has been limited, but I got a good feel for what is involved in this essential area of teaching"

6. The learning outcomes

The #Openteach project has had a significant impact on the professional learning of educators at a number of levels: at a local university level, at a national level; and at an international level. The project resources and research outputs have been widely disseminated by the project team at national and international conferences. See Table 2 below for details of the project's impact by numbers as of July 2021.

Table 2. #Openteach project impact by numbers

#Openteach Impact by numbers	
Website traffic	33,000 unique visitors, 700,000 hits
Twitter	619 followers, 475 tweets, max impressions 10,779
YouTube	5,300 views
Teaching online is different report	42 citations, 6635 reads
#Openteach open online book	Since published June 21, 956 visitors, 3415 page views
Research publications	5
National conference/workshop	18
International conference/workshop	13
Course participants	1002
Course completers	203

1.1   #Openteach OER

The principle of openness was at the heart of the #Openteach project. All of the resources and intellectual outputs were Creative Commons licensed and openly shared through social media and the project website http://www.openteach.ie throughout the project phases. The #Openteach OER will continue to have impact and support educators long after the life of the project.

7. Plans to further develop the initiative

The project team aims to run the #Openteach course again in 2021 and will further iterate the resources based on feedback from participants and facilitators. Further plans involve the production and dissemination of the research data and lessons learned from the #Openteach project.

8. Conclusion

Over the course of the project, the #Openteach project team learned numerous lessons from the design, development, and delivery of the course and related research. We share these now as our final thoughts. Professional learning about online pedagogy should be situated online, and the experience of being an online student is invaluable for online educators as it facilitates empathy with students learning in online contexts. Participating in and building a learning community contributes positively to the learning experience for educators. Time management and workload are major challenges for educators, therefore professional learning should allow for flexible engagement. Building confidence and reducing the fear of online teaching is an important aspect of professional learning related to online education. In addition, confidence and competence with the tools and technologies for teaching online are important threshold digital competencies for online educators. Finally, higher education institutions need heed the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, continued investment in online education resources, infrastructure and professional learning is essential to support those teaching online and to prepare for the post-pandemic future which is likely to be far more blended

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Author's biographies

Dr Orna Farrell is Assistant Professor specialising in online and blended education in Dublin City University (DCU). She holds a PhD in Education from Trinity College Dublin and currently is Head of Open Education, which provides online education to off campus learners.

Dr James Brunton is Assistant Professor and Programme Chair of the DCU Connected Psychology Major programme at Dublin City University, which is an online, open education programme accredited by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI). James is a Chartered Psychologist (C. Psychol., Ps.S.I.; C. Work & Org. Psychol. Ps.S.I.; CPsychol BPS) and an EDEN (European Distance Education Network) Fellow.

Dr Caitríona Ní Shé is currently working in Trinity College Dublin as an Academic Developer. Previously she worked on the National Forum's Professional Development of All Those Who Teach priority. Caitríona has worked on several online teaching and technology enhanced learning projects including the #Openteach (online teaching) and the Assessment for Learning (Mathematics resources) projects.

Dr Eamon Costello is an Associate Professor in the Open Education Unit at Dublin City University. Dr Costello holds Doctorate from Trinity College Dublin. Eamon's research interests include Open and Distance Learning, Educational Technology including Virtual and Personal Learning Environments, Computing Education, Open-Source Software in Education and MOOCs.