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Pre-induction supports for flexible learners: The Head Start Online MOOC pilot. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This practice report discusses the development of the Head Start Online MOOC. This initiative targeted flexible learners, defined as adults engaged in part-time or online distance learning, during the initial stages of the study life-cycle. Drawing on the literature, the experiences of major international Online and Distance Learning (ODL) providers, and a set of overarching design principles, the MOOC (Massive open online course) was developed with a suite of digital readiness tools at its heart. These tools were combined with other supporting materials in order to deliver a comprehensive pre-entry socialisation course. A small pilot of Head Start Online ran over five weeks with 150 people enrolled and 50 going on to receive a certificate of completion. The feedback received, albeit limited by the numbers of respondents, indicates that a course that strategically uses digital readiness tools can have a positive impact on new and prospective flexible learners.

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Background

The Head Start Online MOOC was developed as part of the Student Success Toolbox project (<http://studentsuccess.ie>), funded by the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. This project produced a suite of digital readiness tools, as Open Educational Resources (OERs), for the higher education sector. Head Start Online harnessed these tools to create a cohesive resource for new/prospective learners. The MOOC is designed to assist flexible learners in the early stages of the study lifecycle by tackling the prominent issues of effective transitions and the foundations for student success. Although flexible learning is somewhat difficult to define; we refer to a definition proposed by the Irish Department of Education and Science (2000): “mature adult participation [in higher education] through flexible options which can be combined with family and work responsibilities” (Flannery & McGarr, 2014, p. 424). Head Start Online utilised an inclusive definition of a flexible learner as an adult engaged in part-time or online distance learning.

The creation of Head Start Online was vital as flexible learners have lower completion rates than their on-campus counterparts (Gaille, 2005; Levy, 2007; Stone, 2012; Tello, 2007; Woodley & Simpson, 2014); this highlights the need to enhance the retention rates of this vulnerable student population. Students are most likely to withdraw in their first year (Jones, 2008; Quinn et al, 2005; Yorke, 1999; Yorke & Longden, 2007). However, active support of students during the transition period, can develop skills needed for success in the longer term (Armstrong, 2015; Nash, 2005; Nichols, 2011; Thomas, 2012, Thomas, Hill, O’Mahony, & York, 2017). Given that the transitional period is a phased process, both pre-entry and on-entry supports should be utilised (Shillington et al. 2012; Stone, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al. 2017). Given that

many students who withdraw do not return (Woodley & Simpson, 2014), this emphasises the importance of targeted support in the early stages of the study lifecycle, when students are thinking about study, making decisions, and preparing themselves (Anagnostopoulou & Parmer, 2008; Shillington et al. 2012; Stone, 2012). The specially designed digital readiness tools, along with the additional specific content (e.g., videos, text) within Head Start Online, provide flexible learners with much-needed support at a crucial stage.

Method

As part of the Student Success Toolbox project, Head Start Online was developed using a design based methodological approach. Such a process is iterative in its nature; it not only evaluates an innovative intervention, but also systematically enhances the innovation while producing guiding design principles for subsequent research and development endeavours (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Vitaly, design-based research strives toward establishing a link between educational research and real-world environments. Firstly, a comprehensive analysis of existing empirical work was conducted in order to establish ‘what tools work?’, and this was supported by analysing 22 websites of international universities in order to develop a database of existing readiness tools (Brunton et al., 2016).

The aforementioned process led to the creation of the relevant digital readiness tools, and established the foundations from which Head Start Online was developed. In planning the design and development of the course the team drew on a number of factors such as: pre-existing knowledge of how to create larger, credit-bearing online courses; MOOCs taken on different platforms; review of other pre-induction socialisation MOOCs; an intensive MOOC design workshop; and through trial and error while developing the MOOC. The decision to have the first run of the MOOC as a pilot with

a small number of participants (approximately 150) allowed the pilot be part of the MOOC development process according to the iterative development approach of design-based research.

The Structure of Head Start Online

The Head Start Online pilot was developed on a new MOOC platform built by Moodle Academy. The MOOC was designed to run over a total of five weeks. Before week one a welcome area was provided containing a course overview and instructions for setting up a course profile. The time commitment for participants was two hours per week. At the beginning of each week, a new section of the course was released and made available to participants. Even though the sections of the course were released on a weekly basis, participants were not expected to complete the course so stringently. Participants were free to complete the course at their own pace, or begin the course later than the initial launch. There were five sections to the course:

1. A good beginning - What is this course about? Who else is here?
2. What to expect - What should you expect of part-time/online learning?
3. Time is precious - How much time do you have for study? What supports do you have in your life?
4. Skills for success - What computer skills do you need? What is required to produce a successful assignment in your first semester of study?
5. Next steps - Where next? Is online learning for you? What will you decide to do?

Contained within week two, the 'Am I Ready for Study?' activity provided participants with an opportunity to self-assess whether they were ready to commence part-time online/distance study. A quiz with six sections addressing relevant issues was presented, and after completion of the quiz, feedback was provided

from two distinct standpoints: (i) the educational institution and (ii) former/current flexible learner. Week three offered a self-reflective 'life calculator', 'Do I Have Enough Time?', which helped the participants assess the time they were spending on various activities in a typical week. This enabled them to gain a realistic perspective on whether they had enough time for study, balanced with other life commitments. Also within week three participants interacted with the 'Who Can I Ask?' tool, designed to get them thinking about supports they have to assist them in their progression through their studies, for example from friends, family, employers etc. Examples of students in supported and unsupported scenarios were displayed, and advice for those lacking in support was provided. Lastly, a series of typical student issues, coupled with information on how various supports may be of assistance, were demonstrated. Week four granted course participants the opportunity, in the 'My Computer Skills' tool, to hear from a student narrator regarding the vital computer skills required for higher education. Guidance was personalised, in that users indicated their level of computer skills at the beginning of the tool, and this produced a particular pathway through the tool. Week four also saw participants, in the 'My First Assignment' activity, being guided by a student narrator through what it is like to tackle an assignment in higher education. Four pathways through the tool were provided for users depending on their previous experience with higher education assignments. Information on developing and planning an assignment was communicated.

During the development stage, members of the research team observed similar MOOCs to gain insight into what elements were necessary to include. Vox pops detailing stories from existing students were found to be a beneficial feature. With this in mind, 'graduate voices' videos were developed to establish a comparable advantageous element for Head Start Online. Here, via videos embedded in the MOOC, course

participants accessed advice from graduates and learned how they navigated their progression through online study.

Each week, before participants explored that week's content, they encountered a recap video. The video is a reminder of what was covered in the prior week and allowed users to reflect on their completed activities and what they had learned. The recap video also aims to ease participants into the new week as opposed to immediately presenting them with new content.

Live discussions, whereby course facilitators would interact with participants, were conducted every Friday, providing a platform for participants to raise queries they had and receive an immediate response. Equally, it granted course facilitators the opportunity to access immediate feedback about various elements of the course.

Evaluation of the Head Start Online MOOC

Head Start Online, and specifically the digital readiness tools, were evaluated through the collection of feedback during, and at the end of, the pilot. This feedback indicated that learners were positively impacted through engagement with a course making strategic use of the digital readiness tools. The pilot had 150 individuals enrolled, with 45 failing to take further action in the activity. Of the remaining 105 participants, 50 completed the pilot and received a completion certificate. Participants were prospective flexible learners considering a flexible learning program and a cohort of prospective learners recruited through a German organisation, Kiron Open Higher Education, who support refugees in accessing higher education.

Feedback was gathered from participants in two ways. Firstly, when participants engaged with the tools they were prompted to provide feedback related to: 1) how useful they found

the resource, 2) their perception of the assistance it provided in preparing them for study, and 3) their perception of how likely they were to follow the messages contained in the tool. Secondly, feedback was sought when participants reached the end of the course. Nine aspects of the MOOC were assessed:

1. Impact on a decision to become a flexible learner.
2. Perceived readiness to begin study.
3. Whether they would recommend the course to others.
4. Perceived impact on time management ability.
5. Awareness of the importance of support.
6. Appreciation of core computer skills.
7. Readiness to undertake a first assignment.
8. Perceived usefulness of graduate videos.
9. Opportunities provided for interacting with other flexible learners.

Overall the feedback collected was positive indicating that the MOOC, and the digital readiness tools strategically placed within it, have the potential to impact positively on prospective/new flexible learners.

Weekly digital readiness tools feedback

Response rates varied for tools with a peak for 'Am I ready?' in the first week (n= 28), and the lowest for 'Study Tips for Me' in the final week of the course (n=11). A possible cause of this decline is that a number of participants dropped out of the course. Participants' reactions were observed to be consistently favourable toward the tools (see Table 1).

Table 1*Percentage of favourable reaction to the tools (Strongly Agree or Agree)*

Tool	Usefulness of the Resource	Preparation for Study	Likelihood to Follow Advice
Am I Ready?	96	79	100
Do I have enough time?	100	78.95	84
Who can I ask?	92	83	92
My Computer Skills	72	61	89
My first assignment	94	83	100
Study Tips for Me	82	82	100

Table 2*Percentage of favourable reaction (Strongly Agree or Agree) to conclusion of MOOC feedback items (n=25)*

Question	%	Question	%
I feel more ready to become a flexible learner after taking this course	96	The course helped me appreciate the computer skills I would need for higher education	92
I would recommend this course to others	84	I now understand better how I would do an assignment in my first year	92
I now feel better able to manage my time	92	The videos of graduates helped me understand the flexible learning experience	88
The course developed my awareness of different sources of support	92	Helped me interact with flexible learners	60

Feedback at conclusion of the MOOC

Of the 50 completers, half (n=25) provided feedback at the end of the course. Again, feedback received was positive, indicating that the pilot can reasonably be seen to have achieved its learning outcomes (see Table 2). Positive feedback was received in relation to whether or not the course had aided participants in deciding to engage in flexible learning and whether participants would recommend the MOOC to others.

Most respondents indicated that their awareness of sources of support available to them had increased. Respondents indicated that they better appreciated the skills they would need to succeed in higher education. The supporting content created for the MOOC received positive feedback, specifically graduate videos. A mixed response was received on the item exploring whether or not the MOOC aided participants in interacting with other flexible learners, with only 60% agreeing/strongly agreeing, and 16% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Summary and conclusions

The Head Start Online MOOC pilot indicates that a strategic implementation of digital readiness tools, focused on the pre-entry period, may have a positive impact on prospective flexible learners. This adds to the existing literature showing the potential impact of new technologies to support student transition. However, this indication must be viewed in the context of the small number of participants in this pilot, which is a limitation of this study. The small-scale pilot appears to show impact on prospective flexible learners that extends to making an informed decision about becoming a flexible learner, being exposed to information that encouraged realistic expectation setting, and being better able to assess one's readiness for study in a number of key areas: time management; support networks; computer and

academic skills. There is less indication of the impact the Head Start Online MOOC pilot had on the facilitation of a sense of belonging. Although the MOOC contained weekly discussion fora, only 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the MOOC had helped them to "interact with flexible learners". Respondents may not yet have viewed themselves, or the other MOOC participants, as flexible learners. As this course was not designed to prepare learners for a particular program or institution, its decontextualised nature may not have facilitated a strong sense of belonging to a community of flexible learners beyond the confines of the MOOC. This point will need specific attention in further iterations where strategic delivery of the digital readiness tools is connected to a specific institution, program, discipline area etc. Overall, further research is needed on a larger scale in order to further examine these facets of the transition experience.

Additional notes:

The digital readiness tools and related documentation, developed by the Student Success Toolbox project (studentsuccess.ie), are available for customisation ([from the project Github webpage](#)) and for use by institutions, program teams, etc. (Brunton, 2016). The Head Start Online MOOC is being prepared for full operation in a different MOOC platform from that in which the pilot took place.

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