



#OpenTeach

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR
OPEN ONLINE EDUCATORS

Openteach Pilot Evaluation Report

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NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY



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Government of Ireland


The [#Openteach](#) Professional Development for Online Educators project is funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

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Please cite as:

Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S., Eccles, S., Ní Shé, C. (2020). Openteach Pilot Evaluation Report. Dublin: #Openteach Project. Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.3929263



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Introduction

This report arises from the [#Openteach: Professional Development for Open Online Educators project](#), which is funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The #Openteach project team are based in the Open Education Unit (OEU) at Dublin City University (DCU).

The main aim of the #Openteach project was to produce, and evaluate, evidence-based open professional development for part-time online educators. In an earlier phase of the project a literature review called [Teaching Online is Different: Critical perspectives from the literature](#) was completed in order to identify online educator roles and the associated competencies for effective online teaching (Ní Shé, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, 2019). Concurrently, we conducted a [needs analysis](#) report of the target population, online students and their online educators (Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, Ní Shé, 2019). These reports were used to guide the development of the professional development resources for the #Openteach open online course.

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. The course was designed following the ABC Learning design approach which resulted in a ten hour fully online professional development course (Ní Shé, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, 2019). The pilot run which took place from 23rd of March to the 10th of April, with 450 participants from a variety of Irish and international higher and further education institutions. The pilot run coincided with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting pivot online, so participant numbers for the course far exceeded our expectations due demand for professional development about online pedagogy.

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. There were two live synchronous sessions for the purposes of building community held via Zoom. The course was 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.

The aim of this evaluation report is to evaluate the pilot run of the #Openteach course in order to explore, understand and evaluate its impact on the professional learning experiences of the participants and to inform the iterative design process.



Methodology

The evaluation study adopts a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014) using qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. The study is framed by the following overarching research question:

What were the #Openteach participants' experiences of professional learning in the #Openteach course?

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (REC Approval number: DCUREC/2019/072). Two data collection methods were adopted: an anonymous online survey, and online semi-structured focus groups.

An anonymous online survey was conducted at the end of the course. The survey structure was adapted from an existing instrument (Campbell, Reedy, Baird, Baird, 2018). The survey included questions about participants learning experiences, knowledge of online pedagogy and the #Openteach course design and engagement approach (See appendix 1). The survey created using Google Forms and participants were recruited at the end of course via email.

Three focus groups were conducted in real time online using a private Zoom room. An interview schedule was created, which included questions about participants' learning experiences, knowledge of online pedagogy and the #Openteach course design and engagement approach (See appendix 2).

Participants were selected based on purposive sampling; all course participants were invited to participate. 101 people participated in the evaluation questionnaire and 10 people participated in the online focus groups.

The quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel. The qualitative data were analysed using a data-led approach following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, which involved a number of cycles of coding, generating candidate themes, reviewing and refining themes, and assessing themes for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. During the analysis, the qualitative questionnaire dataset and focus group dataset were combined and analysed thematically using Nvivo 12. These themes are reported in the findings section below.

Findings

In this findings section, the combined findings from the questionnaire and focus group data sets are reported and presented thematically in the following sections.

Online Teaching- knowledge & understanding

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

Do you think you have increased your knowledge of online teaching through participation in this course?

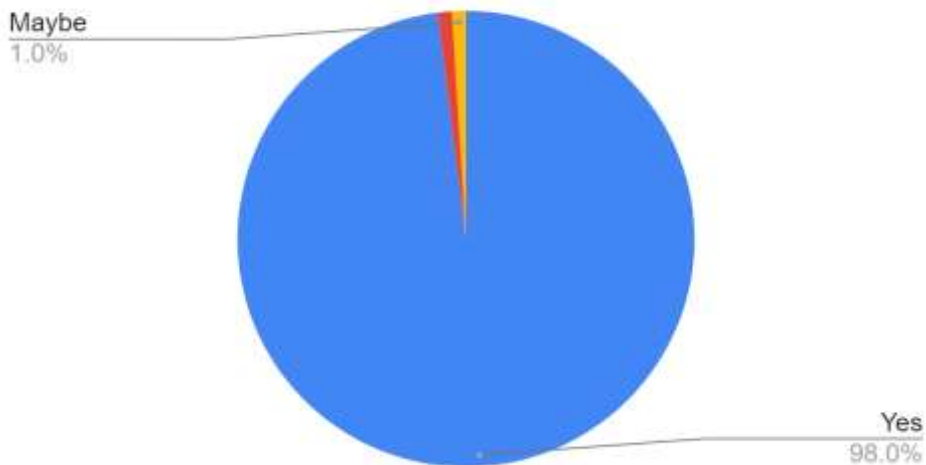


Figure 1. Openteach impact on knowledge of online teaching

When asked whether the Openteach course had an impact on their understanding of teaching online, 96% responded yes, 2% responded no and 2% responded maybe, see figure 2. below.

Do you think the Openteach course had an impact on your understanding of teaching online?

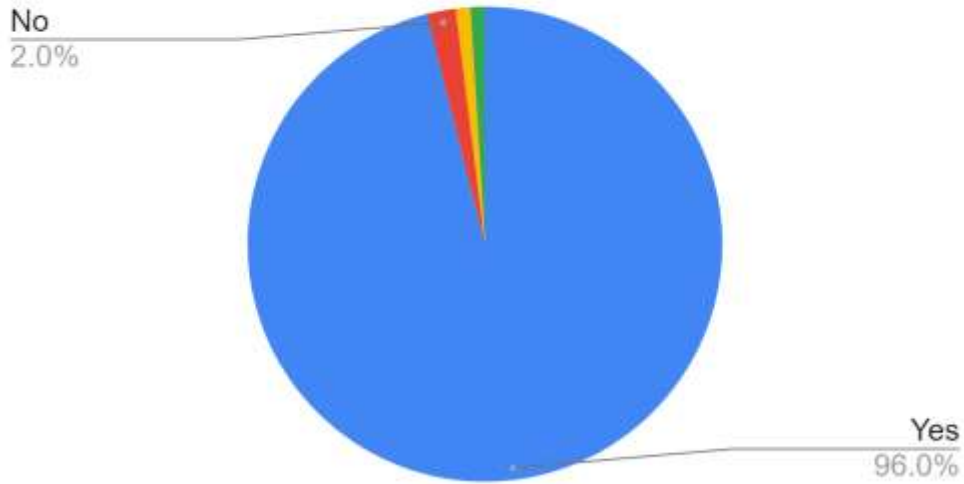


Figure 2. Understanding of Teaching Online

When asked whether participants would apply their new knowledge and skills in their teaching practice, 97% of respondents answered yes, 2% answered no and 1% answered maybe, see figure 3 below.

Will you apply your new skills/knowledge in your teaching practice?

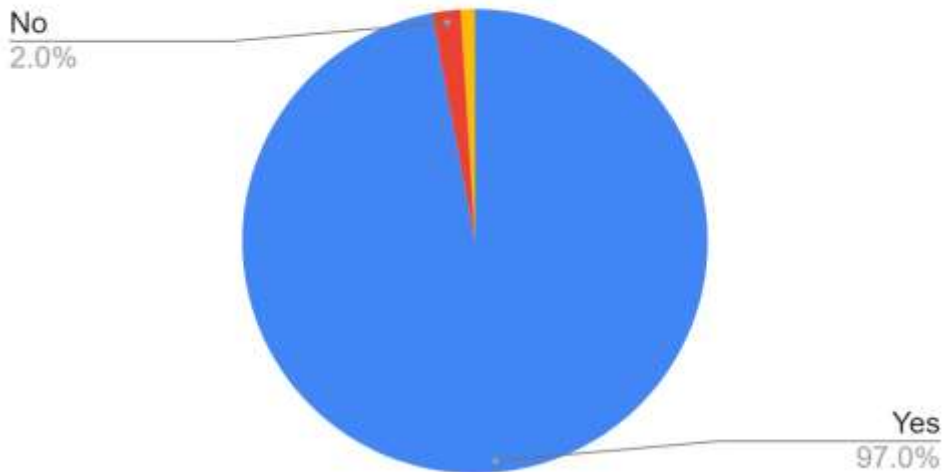



Figure 3. Openteach application of new skills/knowledge in teaching practice



The data revealed that the openteach course impacted participants' knowledge and understanding of teaching online in a number of ways:

- Built 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.”

“Learning about how I might teach online with my learners, something I have never done before. Demystifying the concept of online learning.”

“Making the unknown familiar and less daunting”

- Developed new knowledge about online teaching including key theories, technology, and strategies for encouraging student interaction.

“I gained very valuable advice, information, reference-sites, tools, best-practice, both from the deliverer's of the course/ module and the participants”

“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”

- Gained insight 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”

“Reminder of key principles about online teaching - and a chance to think through things from the student and tutor's perspective”

- Gained ideas and strategies about engaging students in 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”

Openteach Community

When asked if during the openteach course participants felt part of the course community, 69.3% responded yes, 15.8% responded no, and 14.9% responded maybe, see figure 4 below.

During the Openteach course did you feel part of a community?

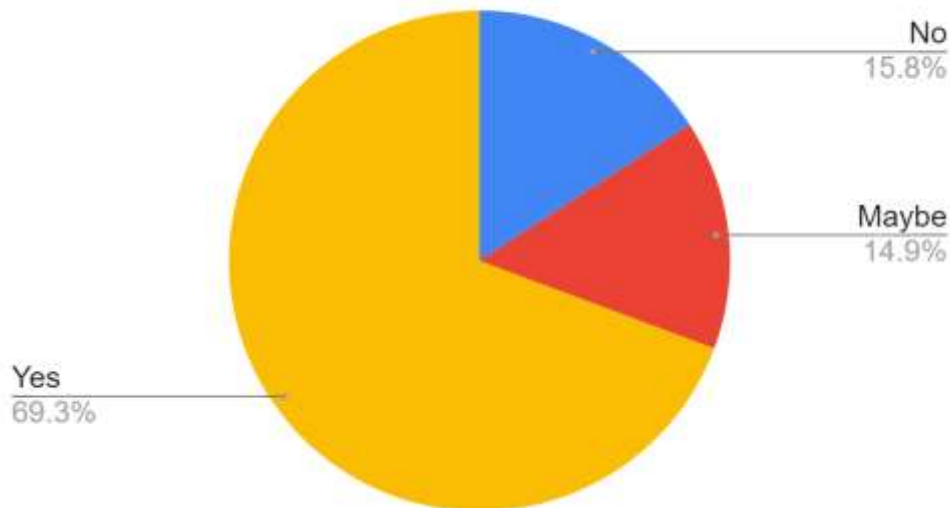


Figure 3. Openteach community

As indicated in the quantitative data reported above in figure 3, the majority of the Openteach course participants felt part of the course learning community. Activities such as the icebreaker, the live online sessions, and the interaction on the discussion forums were reported by participants as making them feel part of a learning community.


“Yes the first session gave everyone a chance to ‘get to know one another’ and I really enjoyed the icebreaker. During the discussion forums you also felt as if you were getting to know people. The one webinar I attended was terrific and it was great to get to really talk to people”.

“Already at the beginning I felt that we are a community, everybody is learning for themselves, but we are part of a team at the same time. And this is a feeling I would like to create in my own online teaching”.

“It enabled me to reach out from my COVID isolation and connect with other educators across a variety of disciplines, share practices and learn some extremely useful tips”.

For a minority of course participants, they did not feel part of the #Openteach community.

“The course was very short to feel properly part of a community but I appreciate the attempts that were made and am confident that these would work in a course of longer duration.”



“Not really. The course was too big to really connect to individuals especially beyond the initial introductions.”

Course design

The #Openteach course design was perceived by participants to be interactive, well-structured and easy to follow.

“The layout of the course was easy to follow, it was very well laid out and easy to follow”

The scenario based learning approach using online educator dilemmas taken was perceived positively by participants and encouraged engagement.

“I liked working on the dilemma's. It made me really reflect on what I was learning and put it in practice.”

The flexible asynchronous self-paced chunking of content into short units incorporating animated video and discussion was described in positive terms by participants.

“Being facilitated to work through the course in a way that made it seem so easy because it was broken down in to such small little chunks of learning. This made everything very manageable in terms of getting through each topic and task. I also loved the animations that were used to accompany the script relating to the scenarios. I thought they added such meaning to the script. They really were fantastic - actually they were probably my favourite part of the whole course.”

Ways to improve the course


Participants indicated a number of course design issues which can be incorporated into the next iteration of the #Openteach course.

The recommended time to complete the course of ten hours was reported by a number of participants as insufficient time.

“It was a lot more work in a short space of time than I anticipated. Ideally I wanted to be able to read and engage with all of the discussions but with all of my work commitments found that I was spending hours more on the additional activities and resources than I thought I would. I read everything supplied and really I feel another week would have been needed to fully engage with and digest the material. The final group activity was a really valuable exercise, but again, the timing meant it became a real stressor”

The interaction in the course discussion forums was perceived to be a little unstructured and overwhelming due to the number of course participants. Further scaffolding and prompting of the discussions and the use of smaller groups was indicated as areas to improve.

“It would also be helpful if the writers of this course asked participants to return to previous forums and reflect on another participant's post by a particular time, thus putting into practice one of the suggested formats for forums: WHAT, WHO and WHEN”.



A more user friendly course navigation and a clearer schedule of the course engagement requirements were further areas indicated for improvement by participants.

“I found it very difficult to navigate the course material. I am familiar with Moodle but repeatedly found it difficult to find what I was looking for, particularly anything involving a forum. As a consequence I lost interest in the course”

“I would like to see an outline/calendar of the course to see what assignments/deadlines coming and be able to manage my time better. In this case there was only one deadline so it is not super important but I like the idea of having a roadmap”.

Covid-19 Pandemic Context

The release of the Openteach course coincided with the COVID 19 pandemic in March 2020. Due to the fact that #Openteach was an open and free professional development course about teaching online, the numbers that signed up rocketed in a matter of days from 120 to 450. The sudden pivot online by the Irish education sector, thrust many educators into teaching online for the first time.

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”

“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”

A number of challenges related to the rapid pivot online were reported in the data by educators. These challenges included problems relating to working from home, poor broadband, underdeveloped digital competencies, time management issues, caring responsibilities and workload.

“Because we were in crisis, I was not able to give the time I would usually give to new learning. I was fitting this in among a hundred other demands, so I was more stretched than I would ideally be when learning.”

“I was working from home due to the lockdown and my internet is not consistent, some days I couldn't get online at all”

“Covid-19! Everything was so busy, it was hard to find time on top of my standard workload”



Conclusions

This study was undertaken to evaluate the pilot run of the #Openteach course in March 2020. This report presented the findings from the evaluation study and will be used to improve the #Openteach course for the next iteration and to further our understanding of the professional learning experiences of educators. The Covid-19 pandemic context of the first run of the #Openteach course is particularly unique, and this report adds to our understanding of educators' experiences of rapidly pivoting to online teaching during this crisis.

In summary, this report yields a number of findings in relation to the #Openteach course pilot and educators' experiences of professional learning, which are in line with the literature in the area:

1. Professional learning about online pedagogy should be situated online, the experience of being an online student is beneficial for online educators.
2. Developing a course learning community contributes positively to the learning experience for educators.
3. Professional learning experiences should be flexible in terms of engagement, as time management is a challenge for educators.
4. Building confidence and reducing the fear of online teaching is an important aspect of professional learning related to online education.
5. Developing understanding and knowledge of online pedagogy is an important element of professional learning about teaching online.
6. Confidence and competence with the tools and technologies for teaching online are important digital competencies for online educators.

Final Reflection

Teaching online can be different, and it is a challenging yet rewarding endeavour, as expressed by the quote below from an #Openteach participant:

"I am only beginning with online teaching, so I think the pedagogy section is very interesting. Hearing that yes online teaching is different, it isn't always as easy as learning a new platform and off you go - this is reassuring. I think overall, I feel more confident in my ability to interact with students and to help them get through the modules".



References

Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. London: Sage.

Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S., Eccles, S., Ní Shé, C. (2019). *An investigation of effective online teaching: a needs analysis of online educators and online students*. Dublin: #Openteach Project.

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Ní Shé, C., Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S., Eccles, S. (2020) *DCU Case Study: Using ABC to Design an Online Teaching Course for Open Online Educators*. ABC to VLE Case Study.



Appendices

Appendix 1: Evaluation Questionnaire

1. I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

2. I understand the information provided *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

3. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

4. I am aware that after five years, my anonymised data will be retained for future research *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

5. I am aware that the researchers may contact me again in the future *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

6. I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project. *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

7. Do you think you have increased your knowledge of online teaching through participation in this course? *

Mark only one oval.


- Yes
 No
 Maybe
 Other: _____

8. Will you apply your new skills/knowledge in your teaching practice? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 Maybe
 Other: _____

9. What were the benefits for you of participating in the Openteach course? *



10. What were the drawbacks for you of participating in the Openteach course? *

11. Do you think the Openteach course had an impact on your understanding of teaching online? *

12. During the Openteach course did you feel part of a community? *

13. Was there any aspect of the Openteach course that could be improved? *



Appendix 2: Focus group interview schedule

- Welcome to the focus groups, outline of process
- Verbal reiteration of information on data collection, preparation, analysis, write up, confidentiality, right to withdraw, and confirm informed consent.
- What were your experiences of the #OpenTeach course?
- Do you think the Openteach course have an impact on your understanding of teaching online?
- Did the Openteach professional development course have an impact on your approach/attitude to teaching online?
- Will you apply your new skills/knowledge to your practice?
- What was the most beneficial aspect of the Openteach course?
- Was there any aspect of the Openteach course that could be improved?
- During the Openteach course did you feel part of a community?
- Is there anything we have missed in this discussion?
- Wrap-up and debrief