# #OPENTEACH: OPEN COURSE, OPEN ONLINE TEACHING, OPEN TEXTBOOK

*Orna Farrell, James Brunton, Caitriona Ní She, Eamon Costello, Dublin City University, Ireland*

## Abstract

This paper will explore 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 had a number of phases, which included a needs analysis of online students and educators about effective online teaching, the publication of a review of the literature 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. The final phase of the project involves the creation of an open textbook bringing together all of the project outputs, due for publication in summer 2021. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected from online educators pre and post the initiative, this paper reports on two aspects of the #Openteach project in detail: the design, development and delivery of the open online course and the process of creating the #Openteach open textbook.

## Introduction

The #Openteach: professional development for open online educators project aimed to develop a flexible and evidence based approach to support professional learning for those who teach online. 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.

Figure 6. #Openteach channels

The #Openteach project aimed to develop a flexible and evidence based approach to support professional learning for those who teach online, see figure 1 above from project channels. The project targeted two groups of educators in particular: part time educators and online educators. 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, an important gap exists in the provision of CPD for part-time and online teachers. As they rarely have the opportunity to avail of campus-based resources they may consequently have limited access to professional development. The #Openteach project sought to address this gap by creating a flexible online open access course about teaching online which was grounded in evidence based practice.

## Project phases

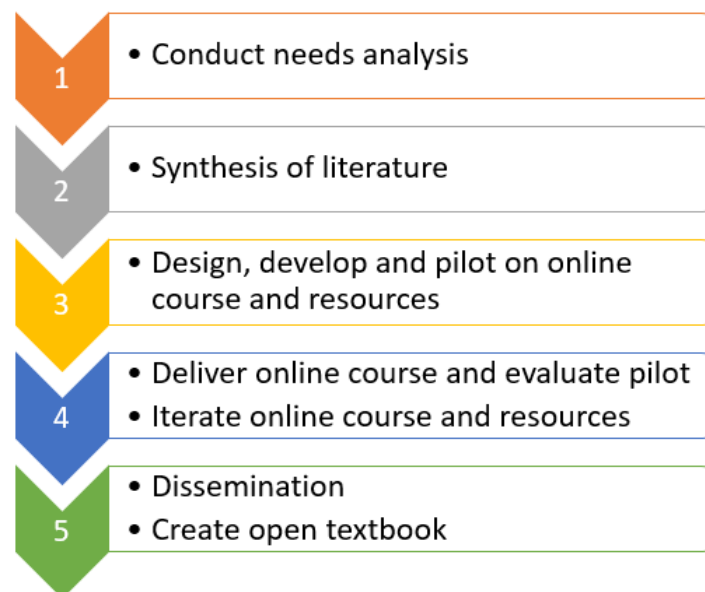The #Openteach project had five phases, see the Figure 2 below:



Figure 2. #Openteach project phases

## *Phase 1*

In phase one, we conducted a needs analysis of online educators and online students based in Dublin City University. Data was collected through online focus 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, Brunton, Costello, Donlon,Trevaskis, Eccles, & Ní Shé, 2019). Key findings from this report were five key areas that educators identified to enhance through professional development:

1. Technical skills for teaching online;

2. Online learning & teaching pedagogy;

3. Online facilitation skills/approaches;

4. Encouraging online interaction;

5. Community of online educators.

Further, the findings indicated that both online educators and online students found that interpersonal professional skills and clear communication were key features of effective teaching online.

## *Phase 2*

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, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, & Eccles, 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.

## *Phase 3*

In phase three, we used the information from the needs analysis report and literature report to begin design 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, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, 2019). You can read more about the design process in our ABC case study. The course focused on five aspects of teaching online:

1. Presence;

2. Collaboration online;

3. Synchronous teaching;

4. Asynchronous teaching;

5. Supporting online students.

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.
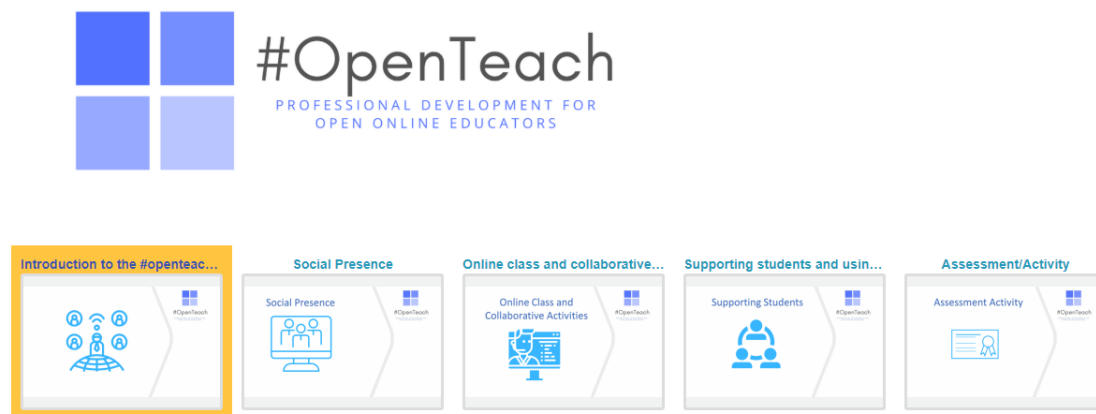


Figure 3. #Openteach Loop course

## Phase 4

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 and the second time in September 2020. The first run coincided with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in a much higher number of participants than we had expected, 450. Following the first course run, we conducted an evaluation study to explore and understand participants learning experiences of the course. An evaluation report was produced called *The Openteach Pilot Evaluation Report* (Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, Ní Shé, 2020).

The evaluation study yielded a number of interesting findings in relation to the #Openteach course pilot and educators' experiences of professional learning in four thematic areas:

1. Knowledge and understanding of online pedagogy;
2. Community of Educators;
3. #Openteach course design;
4. The Covid-19 Pandemic context.

We present a short extract of our findings from the *The Openteach Pilot Evaluation Report* in the next section (Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, & Ní Shé, 2020).

*Knowledge and understanding of online pedagogy*

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.
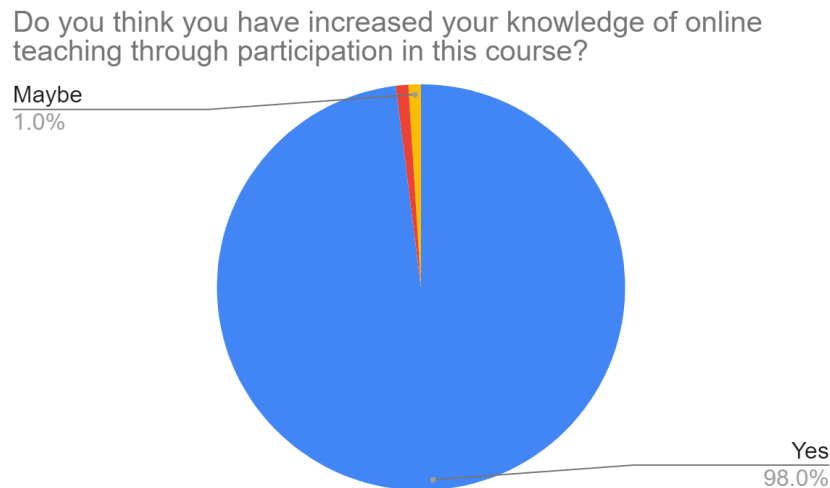


Figure 4. #Openteach impact on knowledge of online teaching

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

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."*

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"*

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"*

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"*

### 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 increased rapidly in a matter of days from 120 to 450. The sudden pivot online by those in the further and higher education sectors 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"*

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"*

### Phase 5

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. 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 is due to be published in June 2021.

The process of remixing and repurposing the #Openteach course into a textbook proved to be an exercise in backwards design. Using the Pressbooks platform, we rewrote, reorganised, rethought activities in order to adapt the course content and activities to suit the book genre. In addition, we added new content activities drawn from project blog and included participant generated content. One affordance of the Pressbook platform was the ability to integrate video and H5P content activities drawn from the course seamlessly into the book.

## Project Impact

The #Openteach project has had significant impact on the professional learning of educators at a number of levels: at a local university level, at national and international level, see table 1 below for details of the projects impact.

Table 9:      #Openteach project impact by numbers

| | |
|---|---|
| Website traffic | 28 000 unique visitors, 700 000 hits |
| Twitter | 594 followers, 475 tweets, max impressions 10 779 |
| YouTube | 5 188 views |
| Teaching online is different report | 36 citations, 5 900 reads |
| Research publications | 3 |
| National conference/workshop | 17 |
| International conference/workshop | 11 |
| Course participants | 1002 |
| Course completers | 203 |

## Final thoughts

Over the course of the project, the #Openteach project team learned numerous lessons from the design, development, and delivery of the course about online educators experiences of professional learning, and 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. 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.

# Reference

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. Retrieved from https://openteach.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Openteach-Needs-Analysis-Report-v2-1.pdf

Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S., Eccles, S., & Ní Shé, C. (2020). *Openteach Pilot Evaluation Report.* Dublin: #Openteach Project. (Version 2). Zenodo. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4599607. Retrieved from https://openteach.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Openteach-Pilot-Evaluation-Report.pdf

Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, & Ní Shé, C. (2021). *#Openteach: professional development for open online educators.* Dublin: Pressbooks.

Ní Shé, C., Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S., &Eccles, S. (2019). *Teaching online is different: critical perspectives from the literature.* Dublin: Dublin City University. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.3479402. Retrieved from https://openteach.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Teaching-online-is-different.pdf

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 Learning Design Website. Retrieved from https://abc-ld.org/casestudy/dcu-case-study2/