Universität
Basel

Vizerektorat
Lehre

Online Courses (MOOCs)
Guide for Online Learning Support

Educational technologies, 27/01/2020

Background

Content pre-processed for learning purposes and presented on an online platform cannot on its own guarantee the learning success of the course participants. To ensure that online learning is successful, we need professional learning facilitators; their most important role is to reach-out to the students across the divide and to create a positive learning environment. The opportunities of such online learning support lie in the possibility to reduce the depersonalisation of computer-mediated learning through communication and co-operation opportunities of students and teachers to a large extent (cf. Behrens, 1999). Therefore, the aspect of learning support – as a part of the didactic concept – should already play an important role in the planning phase of an online course.

This guide includes the following aspects of learning support: (1) Roles, (2) Tasks, (3) Facilitation, (4) Moderation, (5) Social Media and (6) Course Notices. It was developed for the pilot phase of the university-wide MOOC project and is intended to support the teachers in creating a course-specific learning support concept also in the future. This guide is based on the following concepts:

Learning as Conversation (Laurillard, 2002)

According to Diana Laurillard, complex learning requires a continually iterative dialogue between teacher and student in order to make the different perspectives on the learning content explicit and thus negotiable. She summarises her approach in the 'conversational framework' model: First of all, she distinguished four phases of the learning process (discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective); based on this, she develops a typology of learning activities and finally, she provides a list of criteria to assign suitable educational technologies to the learning activities.

Visible Learning (Hattie, 2009)

In his highly respected, controversially discussed and very broadly based study, John Hattie systematically summarises the finding of research into teaching and learning. He determines and compares factors that influence educational learning success. In doing so, he ascertains that successful learning takes place in particular if teaching and learning become visible, eg if teachers give their students appropriate, prompt feedback. Vice versa, the students are also supposed to evaluate the teachers' influence on their learning progress. In addition, teachers should use every opportunity to get an idea of their own teaching through continuous exchange with their colleagues.

Computer-mediated communication (various authors, see below)

Virtual teaching and learning scenarios, such as online courses, are characterised by a lack of physical co-presence and thus by the reduction of social cues (facial expressions, gestures). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) or online communication substantially determines the interaction between the communication partners in the still primarily text-based virtual teaching and learning scenarios. The distinctive features and impact of CMC on the development and success of teaching and learning processes were and still are the object of numerous research activities (eg Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis & Valacich, 1999; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984; Walther, 1996; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000).

Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000)

According to this approach, which has resulted from an extensive study, the social dimension of learning is of particular importance: Communication facilitates a continuous analysis of the educational content and ultimately creates a community in a shared environment, in which a collaborative learning culture with equal participation is cultivated and where both individual and collective knowledge is built up (cf. Czerwionka & de Witt 2006). The prerequisite for learning success is the interaction of three components described as core elements by the authors: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence.

1. Roles

The partner for the MOOCs at the University of Basel is FutureLearn, an international platform based in the UK. FutureLearn is a MOOC distribution platform with a clear didactic foundation that comprises three elements: (1) Storytelling, (2) Social Learning, and (3) Visible Learning.

FutureLearn distinguishes three different roles within the team of facilitators:

— **Educator** (lead educator, supporting educator, guest educator): an academic with a specialist knowledge of the course subject
— **Mentor**: a more junior academic with knowledge of the course subject, enlisted to help guide discussions
— **Host**: a facilitator who understands the FutureLearn platform and can help to guide use of social functionality and be a friendly guide to users.

We recommend

— that you clarify in due time who in your team will take on which role,
— that you agree which precise tasks will be assigned to the various roles (see section 2). In formal terms it should be noted that the name of the lead educator must appear on the course description page, at the end of the course notice e-mails and in the feedback on the quizzes and multiple choice tests.
— that you advise the students in the weekly course notices to follow their facilitators and that you specify the links to the relevant profiles.

It is also possbile to include the students at Basel in the learning support for the online students (hereinafter referred to as 'learners') by letting them give feedback on comments and contributions to discussions as 'junior experts' and/or present their own learning outcomes to the other course participants.

We recommend

— that you clearly define the roles of the students at Basel and the affiliated tasks in advance,
— that you consider whether the students are able to take on the role of the 'host' as intended by FutureLearn,
— that you prepare the students for their tasks (eg in one of the first in-class lectures),
— that you weigh up whether the 'special role' of the students at Basel within the course should be made explicit and possibly even whether the curricular integration should be made transparent (for instance by stating in the course which lecture the online course is assigned to).

2. Tasks

Whilst the course is running, through its online presence, the team of facilitators is able to contribute significantly to an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and create a situation in which the learners feel in good hands in the course and enjoy learning. The following subject-specific, social, didactic, organisational and technical tasks are to be mastered during the course:

— Clarification of content-related questions concerning the learning resources
— Subject-specific support in group discussions
— Linking suitable course content or additional learning resources within comments
— Creation of a positive working environment
— Establishment of social relationships among the course participants (creation of a 'learning community')
— Communication support, eg in order to return to the topic or in the case of conflicts among the learners
— Support and encouragement in the case of problems (motivation, time management etc.)
— Pursuit and possibly documentation of learning activities for subsequent feedback
— Weekly summary of the discussion
— Hosting of live events (if planned)
— Assistance with minor technical issues (if possible) and with using the platform

3. Facilitation[1]

In particular with respect to the large number of learners to be expected, the fulfilment of the above-mentioned tasks involves a number of challenges that should not be underestimated:

Challenge	We recommend
Scope and extent of the learning support services How much time should be spent on the learning support and how should it be used?	— that you specify, in the run-up to the course, how much time should be spent on the learning support and how this time should be used, — that you anticipate which steps require a greater degree of attention and appropriate intervention, and which require less, — that you consider whether for certain steps or even an entire course week, a 'guest educator' can be enlisted.
Absence and illness within the team Who fills in?	— that you agree a policy of substitution in the case of absence (eg conferences) or illness of a facilitator.
Division of work Have the responsibilities of the facilitators been clearly defined? Communication and networking in the team of facilitators Is there a concept in place for this?	— that you make arrangements regarding the division of tasks, clarify communication channels within the team and appoint a person as a co-ordinator prior to commencement of the course.

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[1] By 'facilitation' FutureLearn means the 'course support', i.e. the supervision and support of the learners during the course by the team of facilitators.

Challenge	We recommend
<u>Summary of 'key issues' for the learners</u> How does the team reach a consensus as to which aspects are important for such a summary?	— that you define a place in which valuable contributions to discussions (incl. permalink) can be documented and collected, which can then be analysed for summarising course notices, FAQs and subsequent evaluations (eg an Excel file, ADAM or a web-based system such as Google Docs in order to collect information).
<u>Time management</u> How do you successfully rifle through the 'jungle of comments'?	— that you use the filter systems offered by FutureLearn (followers, 'most liked', own comments) and other social features ('pin', 'like', 'bookmark') and that you recommend the same to the learners so as not to lose track during the flood of comments to be expected, — that you prioritise when reviewing the comments: current course week before previous course weeks, discussion steps before other steps, 'most liked' comments before other comments, — Monitoring: daily; feedback: at least once a week (ideally more often).
<u>Quality of your own comments</u> How can we manage to promptly reply to the learners and at the same time give them substantial feedback over the entire course?	— that you generally focus more on quality than quantity in the case of interventions.
<u>Motivation of the learners</u> What can be done to keep the learners on task?	— that you communicate in an appreciative and friendly manner, using comprehensible language ('netspeak', 'plain English' etc.), — that you remember that things can easily be misunderstood in online communication (eg irony or ambiguity), — that you remain aware that you serve as a role model for the learners through your interventions, — that you communicate clearly to the learners what they can expect of the team of facilitators (and indeed also what the team of facilitators expects of the learners), — that you provide not only feedback on the content, but also make the roles, tasks, objectives and response times explicit in order to provide guidance to the learners (meta-communication), — that you clarify within the team how and where such meta-information can be placed in the course (eg in comments, in the mailings) and when information on this will be shared.

Challenge	We recommend
'Difficult' learners How do we manage to solve conflicts that may arise?	— that with dominant learners (eg 'grumpy learners', 'uninvited guest educators', 'chatterboxes' and 'self-promoters'), you initially keep calm and wait to see whether potential conflicts can be solved among the learners themselves, — that you intervene if the course atmosphere is on the verge of toppling over and that you point out that the climate in the learning environment needs to stay positive and conducive to learning, — that, in the case of 'copycats' (ie with learners who violate copyright), you proceed as follows: Report the comment as inadequate by using the flag function (see chap. 4) and, in addition, explain the violation of copyright to the person concerned.
Other questions arising whilst the course is running	— that, first of all, you take a look at the FAQ of FutureLearn: https://about.futurelearn.com/about/faq/?category=course-sign-up-and-completion — to refer all questions regarding platform and FutureLearn (e.g. certificates) to feedback@futurelearn.com .

4. Moderation

In contrast to 'facilitation', by 'moderation' FutureLearn means how to deal with the comments reported as inadequate. This task has been assigned to an external company by FutureLearn. The moderators work 24/7 in shifts and decide whether a reported comment will remain visible or shall, within three hours, be removed. The user concerned is subsequently informed of the deletion by e-mail without finding out who reported the comment as inadequate. The decisions made by the moderators are checked on a daily basis by FutureLearn.

Should you or your students come across a comment that is in breach of the code of conduct (https://about.futurelearn.com/terms/code-of-conduct/), please report this via the flag function in the relevant contribution.

5. Social Media

In addition to the 'follow' and 'like' functionalities supported by the platform, FutureLearn endorses the use of social networks, social sharing tools and other web-based tools in order to promote the establishment of a learning community and to support both synchronous and asynchronous communication between the learners.

Aims and recommendations by FutureLearn

— **To raise awareness and encourage discussion** – get people talking about your course on social media before it's even started.
— **To motivate and connect new learners** – encourage your learners to find and support each other on their social networks.
— **To demonstrate value to a wider audience** – share expertise, topical commentary and news stories in relation to the course subject, which is of value to both your existing learners and potential future learners.

Please note: Please consult the New Media Center if you are considering using a Social Media Tool for a specific learning task.

6. Course Notices

In addition to the platform's comment function, also use the Course Notices that FutureLearn offers as another means of communication between teachers and learners. These are emails formulated by the Lead Educator and sent to all enrolled Learners by the New Media Center via the FutureLearn platform.

Please note: Please coordinate with the New Media Center on the deadline for Course Notices to be submitted so they can be mailed on time.

In addition to the course notices, the learners receive further e-mails from FutureLearn, e.g. regular news with information about new course offers or new functionalities of the platform.

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Further reading

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