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Assessment in Higher Education Online Open Course

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My name is Rod Cullen. I am a senior lecturer in Learning and Teaching Technologies in the Learning Innovation Team at Manchester Metropolitan University. This has been a shared experience with my colleagues Rachel Forsyth and Anne Jones. Consequently, you will find three contributions in this series that relate to this open course. Inevitably there will be some overlap in our experiences and there is some cross referencing between our reflections. In particular, Rachel and Anne have referred to the introduction and motivation sections in this document as they are common to all of us. We have however, written independent reflections on our experiences of facilitating the course.

Introduction to the course

Assessment in Higher Education is a 15 credit optional unit on the Postgraduate Certificate or Masters in Academic Practice (PGCAP/MAAP) at Manchester Metropolitan University. Having run this unit with my colleagues Rachel Forsyth for many years, exclusively for colleagues at MMU, in 2014 we decided to take the bold step of making it available as a fully online course open to anyone in the UK Higher Education Community and beyond.

To begin with, I think it is important to review the starting point from which the open course was developed. This has had a big impact upon later reflections on the experiences of developing and delivering the online open offering.

Original unit aim and delivery model

The overall aim of the unit is to engage participants in a review of their current assessment practice and facilitate the development of action plans that build on strengths and address any weaknesses
identified. Consequently, the summative assessment is set in the context of the participants’ own practice and provides what is intended to be a tangible and useful output in the form of a revised assessment strategy.

The format and content of the unit have evolved over several years but have generally adhered to a web enhanced, blended learning model. In brief, participants are required to engage in formative online activities, via the institutional VLE (MMU Moodle), that prepare them for activities which take place in weekly face-to-face sessions. The classroom sessions are activity based, with the participants sharing the outputs of their online preparation within small groups and providing comments and advice on each other’s work. The classroom sessions are followed up with additional formative online activities upon which the participants receive individual and personalized feedback that they use in preparation for the following classroom session. This cycle repeats over the duration of the course as shown in Figure 1. The overall approach is similar to that of the flipped classroom.

![Figure 1 - Delivery Model for Assessment in Higher Education unit](image)

Although the unit is an accredited part of the PGCAP/MAAP, colleagues at MMU do not have to enrol on the programme to study the unit as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). These colleagues have several options:

- Complete the same assessment as PGCAP/MAAP participants and receive 15 Masters level credits
- Complete a CPD record of learning form for use in institutional Professional Development and Review (PDR)
- Undertake no formal assessment or record of CPD
Assessment in Higher Education has proved to be very popular in terms of enrolments, has been successful in achieving teaching and learning aims, and has received very good feedback from both participants and external examiners.

**Motivation for “opening up” the unit**

Rachel and I had been thinking about developing and offering online versions of Assessment in Higher Education and other units on PGCAP/MAAP for some time. This was mainly in response to feedback from participants who thought that attendance at face-to-face sessions could be difficult given that MMU was (at that time) a multi-campus institution and required a lot of time-consuming travel. We were both aware of the open courses offered by Chrissi Nerantzi and colleagues (FDOL and BYOD4L) and I had some first-hand experience as an informal observer of an iteration of BYOD4L early in 2014. I think it is fair to say that we were both a little curious about the idea of an open course. We were also perhaps looking to freshen up the Assessment in Higher Education Unit and challenge ourselves to deliver it in a different way to a different type of audience. In addition, we also felt that this particular unit had something to offer the wider Higher Education community and we hoped that it might provide an opportunity to develop collaborative contributions from expert colleagues at other institutions.

It is also worth pointing out that the timing was good. For an institution of its size, MMU offers a relatively small number (less than 10) of established fully online distance learning (ODL) programmes. However, there is considerable interest in expanding this form of provision from individuals, programme teams, departments and faculties across the institution. Despite significant investment and expertise in providing campus-based blended learning, institutional experience and understanding of fully ODL provision is limited. Repackaging Assessment in Higher Education as a fully online open course seemed like a good opportunity to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with this type of provision.

**Rod’s Reflections**
Initial challenges

The delivery platform

Our first major challenge related to participant enrolment and the online delivery platform. At MMU, the institutional VLE (MMU Moodle) is integrated closely with the Student Records System (SRS) and other institutional IT infrastructure (Video Streaming Service, Library systems [Taslis Aspire Reading lists, Equalla content repository e.g. exam papers], and Coursework Receipting System). Only students who are formally enrolled via the SRS are subsequently enrolled into the MMU Moodle course areas for the units on their programmes of study and only MMU staff (holders of MMU IT network ID) can be added as tutors. Once enrolled in Moodle, students and tutors have single sign-on access to the other integrated services. From the start, it was clear that we were not going to be able to use the SRS to enrol non-MMU participants on the unit meaning that we would not be able to use MMU Moodle as the delivery platform for the open course.

We decided to make use of a range of freely available online tools to support different aspects of the delivery of the course. This included:

- Setting up a Wordpress site/blog.  
  https://aheo14.wordpress.com/
- This was set up as an open access site. We used it to share the main content and as a communications tool.
- Creating a Google + community in which participants could sign up. Our intention was to use this as a communications and collaboration channel.
- Use of Twitter hashtag #aheo. We arranged several tweetchat sessions during the course.
- Ensuring that participants knew that they could eMail us about any aspects of the course.
- Timetabling weekly Webinars (using Adobe Connect). This was actually an afterthought. Our initial intention had been to focus our interactions with participants using the posting and forum tools (text-based) on the Wordpress site and in the Google+ community. However, both Rachel and I had access to Adobe Connect meeting rooms and we felt that it was a good opportunity to do something with a more immediate and personal interaction with the participants.
We shared advice with the participants on contributing and engaging via the Wordpress site: https://aheo14.wordpress.com/contributing/

**Teaching & Learning Focus**

For obvious reasons the Assessment in Higher Education Unit has previously been set very much in the MMU context. However, we needed to factor in that we were opening the unit up to a wider audience. We decided to run the course over a six-week period constructed around the main stages of an assessment life cycle model that, although developed at MMU, has been adopted as a framework by JISC for its ongoing engagement with the HE community on assessment and feedback practices.

Each week we introduced a new topic in the assessment life cycle and set participants a task to complete and share with the tutors and/or peers for discussion and feedback. This allowed all participants to reflect upon the weekly topic in the context of their own practice in their own institution. Further details of the course structure are on the Wordpress site: https://aheo14.wordpress.com.

Expert colleagues from other institutions were asked to contribute to the course. Dr Anne Jones, who at that time was at Queen’s University Belfast, became a tutor. Gwyneth Hughes and Holly Smith from the Institute of Education in London contributed and supported an activity as guest tutors on the topic of feedback during week 5. These colleagues made a valuable and interesting contribution that I think added some freshness and richness to the course. It also spread the load when it came to providing feedback and supporting participants in the course. Several other colleagues were unable to contribute due to other commitments at the time but expressed an interest in contributing in the future.

**Assessment**

Despite the changes in the delivery format the unit still needed assessing as a 15-credit option for PGCAP/MAAP participants. In this respect the assessment options and requirements remained the same as in previous versions of the unit for MMU participants.

To manage the formal assessment of the unit for MMU participants we made use of the designated Moodle unit area. We used the area to make the unit handbook and formal assessment brief available to
eligible participants and to set up formal online submissions using Turnitin. Although this worked reasonably well, it did introduce another technology for the MMU participants and we have had some (justifiable) comments that the range of technologies started to get a bit unwieldy for participants.

We did consider allowing non-MMU participants to enrol on the unit for accreditation but due to the tight timeframe there were too many issues around fees and enrolment to resolve before the course began. Ultimately, we decided that the unit would only be available to non-MMU participants for their own personal Continuing Professional Development; they would receive the same formative experiences as MMU participants but would not be able to take the formal summative assessment.

**Experiences of delivery**

**Who participated in the course?**

With only a minimal amount of advertising the unit provided to be quite popular. In total 48 participants enrolled, 31 from MMU and 17 from the wider HE community. Of the MMU participants, 19 enrolled for formal accreditation (17 PGCAP/MAAP participants and 2 personal accredited CPD)

I think it is fair to say that the greatest level of engagement and contribution throughout the course was by MMU participants who were taking the unit for accreditation purposes. We received only a handful of formative task submissions from non-MMU participants, whereas MMU participants (particularly those being formally assessed) submitted and received feedback on the majority of the weekly formative tasks. In general, non-MMU participants dipped in and out of the course and their participation was most evident in the weekly webinars, although stats from the Wordpress site suggest that these were frequently viewed by both MMU and non-MMU participants, before, during and after the main delivery of the course. An issue worth noting is that at least one participant was not happy to share his formative work, or indeed any information, via the public forums that we had set up in Google docs. He had perfectly valid reasons for this and we gave him the option of submitting his work and receiving his feedback directly via email. It is also worth noting
that he told us he would have been happy to share his formative work and feedback with other participants had the forum been set up within the formal Moodle unit area as this was more secure.

In terms of summative assessment, all 18 MMU participants enrolled for accreditation submitted assignments. The work was of a high standard and compared well with previous cohorts. We are satisfied that there were no negative impacts of changing the format of the course in this respect.

**Reflections on the webinars**

I think both Rachel and I were surprised at the way in which Webinars became the focal point of the course. These were generally well attended but again I think it is fair to say that the most regular and consistent attenders were MMU participants. Rachel, Anne and I had regular weekly meetings (in the webinar room) to plan and agree on content and participant activities for the webinars. We used the start of each webinar to review experiences from the previous week’s formative tasks and discuss issues arising from the feedback provided with participants. My feeling is that this really helped to build relationships between the participants as well as fostering ongoing engagement. Overall, I think we used the webinars very effectively to team-teach. At any given time during the webinar one of us would take the lead role as presenter, introducing and choreographing activities while the other two monitored the chat tool and responded to questions directly or drew the lead presenter’s attention to specific questions. The robustness of the Adobe Connect video conferencing tool contributed to the success of the webinar sessions.

**Some reflections on points of principle**

My role at MMU is primarily in staff development and training in the effective use of institutional technologies for learning, teaching and assessment. In this respect, I have previously, as a point of principle, designed, developed and delivered units (including Assessment and HE) only using technologies that are available to colleagues as part of the MMU standard technology platform. I have always considered that my own teaching provision should provide exemplary use of the technologies available to colleagues on their MMU computers. In
using a wider suite of technologies that are not on the MMU standard platform and outside of the institutional VLE there are some potential issues that I am uncomfortable with. These include:

- All undergraduate teaching at MMU is supported via the institutional VLE. In not using Moodle, we are missing the opportunity to lead by example and give participants an insightful experience of the VLE from the student perspective.
- In using non-MMU standard platform technology, we are encouraging participants to adopt inconsistent practices outside of the VLE and this is at odds with institutional desire to improve consistency of provision for students.

I do concede that exposing colleagues to a boarded suite of technologies might help to develop a wider digital literacy but my gut feeling is that from a purely strategic MMU perspective it represents a missed opportunity.

A second point of principle is that MMU employs me to provide staff development and training for MMU staff. I suspect that at some point someone higher up the management chain is going to ask “Why are we paying you to spend time advising and developing staff from other universities”. Although I think that there are good arguments about the value of the collaborative experience and the sharing of knowledge and expertise, from a purely financial point of view, this valid question requires some consideration.

**And Finally**

I really enjoyed this experience. In particular, I enjoyed the collaboration with colleagues from other institutions, which I think brought some fresh ideas to the unit and broadened the discussion to the wider Higher Education context. It was also interesting to have participants from other UK institutions and Higher Education in other countries sharing their experiences and commenting upon examples. I do think that this allowed MMU participants to think outside of the “MMU box”, although with the small scale of this programme this kind of interaction was limited. Overall, I am still not fully convinced that the way that we utilised non-MMU platform technology was in the best interest of staff development and training for my institution. Building digital literacy is in my experience a question of building confidence, primarily through practice. Using the institutional VLE would have engaged colleagues directly with the tools that they are
required to use with their students. It is a much smaller step to subsequently use these tools in their own teaching. Google docs and Google + are very different from our VLE based tools and I believe that for some colleagues the leap back into the VLE may be too big.

Ideally, in future it will become possible to deliver open courses at MMU using the institutional VLE and associated technologies on the MMU standard platform. This would enable staff to design and deliver open courses that not only broaden their own experience through collaborations and contributions from expert colleagues at other institutions, but also from engagement with a wider national/international audience that broadens learning experience for MMU participants. At the same time, MMU participants would gain important experience of the technological tool kit that they will be expected to use in their own practice.