

“Now we’re COOC’ing”: The Design and Implementation of a Collaborative Open Online Course (COOC) in Educational Leadership

Mark Curcher

mark.curcher@tuni.fi

Julia Briggs

juliakbriggs@gmail.com

Tampere University of Applied Sciences
Kuntokatu 3, Tampere
Finland

Abstract: This paper examines the design and implementation of a collaborative open online course in educational leadership. The paper sets out the context and need for such a course and the stated objectives and how these were then incorporated into the design. It examines the various choices that were available during the design process with regard to pedagogy and platforms and the reasons for the decisions that were made. The paper then considers the application period, the demographics of applicants and issues that emerged from the application process. The paper concludes with a consideration of how successful this open online course was at meeting the objectives of the university and students, the lessons that have been learned and identifies areas that are worthy of further investigation.

Introduction

It is now more than ten years since the New York Times announced that it was the “Year of the MOOC” (Massive Open Online Course) with much fanfare and hype about the disruption that MOOCs would cause for the future of higher education (Jordan & Goshtasbpour, 2022; Pappano, 2012). In the decade since, many of the early MOOC platforms have struggled to find a successful business model and continue to be sold and reappropriated (Martin, 2022; Shah, 2021) while universities and other higher education institutions have continued to function, making extensive use of digital technology and online learning pedagogies, as evidenced during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

In view of this, it might be appropriate to ask what purposes are served by a university offering an open online course in 2022, especially one located in a country such as Finland, where higher education is largely seen as a public good and that does not have tuition fees for domestic or EU students studying in higher education institutions. Given

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this context, which may partially explain why relatively few Finnish universities actively pursued the MOOC model in the last decade, the design and launch of a new open online course, massive or otherwise, is worthy of further exploration.

Context

Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) has been offering an online, distance MBA in Educational Leadership (MEL) since 2017 (*Educational Leadership MBA*, n.d.). The program requires that students attend an intensive week in Finland at the start of each of the first three semesters, though these were also online during the peak of the pandemic, but the remainder of the study is online and founded on a pedagogical approach that draws on authentic eLearning (Herrington et al., 2010), Connectivism (Goldie, 2016; Siemens, 2018) and collaborative and networked learning (Curcher, 2017).

The diverse participants for this program are located around the world and work in a wide variety of contexts, from early years education through to postgraduate higher education and corporate training. What they have in common is an enthusiasm to learn from each other, share their knowledge and expertise and to work as change agents to improve and develop education in their own setting.

In early 2022 it was decided to explore the opportunity for expanding the program and opening a second cohort. Like many degree programs in Finland, the MBA was already over subscribed with an approximate attraction rate between 4 or 5:1 each year. That is to say there are about 4 applicants for every one place available. The university leadership wished to increase this ratio and also explore the possibility of offering a cohort with a fully online version of the degree, where the intensive weeks take place online, as they did during the pandemic. A secondary purpose was to increase international awareness of the university and its international programs and so enhance the TAMK brand.

A proposal was made by the author to run a short, open, online course that adopted the same pedagogical approach as the MEL MBA program. This would allow prospective applicants for the degree to experience the kind of learning activities and materials that they would encounter during the degree program, including the strong collaborative approach to learning. At the same time, this would also allow the university to see the work of prospective students in a course setting and would provide an opportunity to better assess applicants more authentically than a traditional entrance exam or essay.

Design

The decision was made to use a Moodle based LMS for the delivery of the course using the Finnish Digicampus.fi platform. This was chosen as this is very similar to the Moodle installation used in the MBA and would therefore provide students with an authentic

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experience of the platform. It was also decided to cap the number of participants to a maximum of 100, to allow for a closer experience of the MEL program, which has around 25 students per cohort. For this reason, it was felt that it was inappropriate to refer to the course as a MOOC as it really was not intended to be 'massive'. Given the focus on collaborative learning the 'M' of MOOC was replaced with a 'C' resulting in the COOC abbreviation.

It is important to acknowledge the influence that the Connectivist MOOC (cMOOC) movement has had on the design of the new course. The origins of this can be traced back to 2008 and the Connectivism and Connected Knowledge 2008 (CCK08) course run by Downes and Siemens and through other cMOOCs that adopted a connectivist rather than knowledge transmission pedagogical model (Downes, 2008; Milligan et al., 2013).

The course itself would run over 6 weeks, with 2 additional weeks available for those students who would want to pay a small fee and submit a portfolio for assessment and the awarding of 5 European Credit Transfer (ECTS) credits. If the student then goes on to apply and be accepted to the MEL degree program, these credits will count towards their degree. This also meant that the course would have to be at level 7 of the European Quality Framework (EQF7) to represent work at the appropriate masters' level.

The course designers decided to adopt a thematic approach where each of the six weeks would address a theme connected to a course on the MEL program. Each of the weekly themes would in turn have three key questions for the students to address and reflect upon in their collaborative study groups. This approach was felt to be more appropriate to the situation and context than the use of competency statements or learning outcomes, given the nature of the course and its objectives. The work would be undertaken largely asynchronously given the wide range of time zones of the participants.

Student Applications and Implementation

The course was announced in the public domain on 16th September 2022, 17 days before the course start date on 3rd October 2022. The COOC was promoted using a range of social media using the existing network of around 150 students and alumni from the program and the various communications channels of the university.

There was strong interest in the course, by the end of the first day 74 people had applied. Within 2 days the enrollment limit of 100 had already been exceeded. This raised a number of unexpected problems and decisions, such as whether to close applications after just 3 days or increase the number of students. A decision was needed as to how to select participants from the oversubscribed applicants. This was done on a first come, first serve basis.

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The decision to close the applications was made on 26 September 2022, by which time a total of 248 applications had been received from a total of 34 countries.

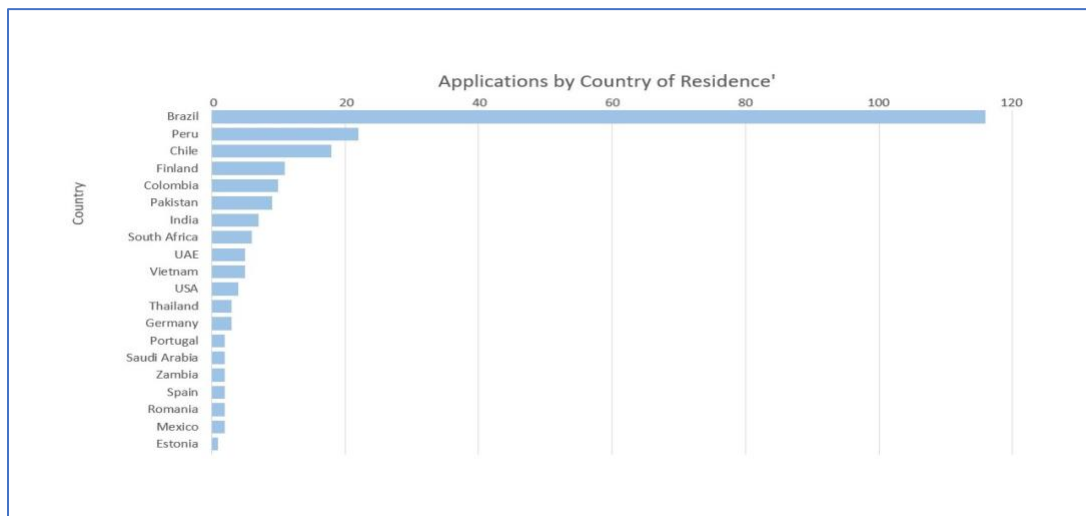


Figure 1. Number of applicants by country of residence (top 20).

Applicants were asked to confirm that they had the prerequisite experience and qualifications for the course and that they understood that the work would require them to be active and collaborative due to the participatory pedagogical design of the COOC. In the end 150 applicants were offered places. What is interesting, is that only around 45% of these chose to then engage with the materials on the first opening week of the course. By the end of the six weeks just 28 students remained active on the course and they were awarded a certificate of participation.

Four students completed the full course and activities and submitted a portfolio for assessment and so earned five ECTS credits. These students will not have to complete an application essay or pre-task when applying for the degree program and if accepted, they will have the first five credits towards their degree in place from the very start of the program.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

Despite the much-hyped MOOC ‘revolution’ that was envisioned for higher education not materializing, the design and development of this course showed that the open, online approach can still serve a useful purpose for higher educational institutions that provides benefits to both learners and the institution. By providing a way for students to experience a course, its topics, pedagogy and technologies, prior to applying for a program it is likely to lower attrition rates for programs, as there are clearer expectations on both sides. For the university, being able to see the student’s work and interaction over

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a six-week period provides a much better indication of their abilities than a traditional entry exam or pre-task.

Despite the typically high attrition rates and low levels of engagement towards the end of the course, the initiative was felt to be a success and that it had achieved its objectives. The university has agreed that the COOC will run again in the fall of 2023. It is recognized that there are areas which can be further developed and improved, and some activities and materials will be changed for the next implementation. For the course facilitators the experience was educational and rewarding and the lessons learned will be used to improve the course.

This also allows for further investigation of patterns of student engagement and to survey those who participated to find out why some did not complete the course while others continued to completion. What were the factors that motivated some students to keep working and to complete the course? Further investigation as to why more than half of the participants, having undertaken a somewhat lengthy application process, then chose not to engage with any of the course materials, presents another research opportunity. It is planned that these will be investigated during 2023.

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