

Internal Responses to Informal Learning Data: Testing a Rapid Commissioning Approach

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Introduction

There are several unique aspects to researching the behaviour and motivations of informal learners. Examining informal learning data can allow researchers to respond more quickly, and at a greater scale, than to data gathered through formal institutional research processes. Studies undertaken in 2013 (Law, Perryman & Law, 2013; Perryman, Law & Law, 2013; Law, Perryman & Law, 2014), in collaboration with The Open University's OER Research Hub (www.oerresearchhub.org) provided a set of recommendations for The Open University (OU) around informal learning. These primarily drove the OU's commissioning approach to scope new content for informal learning channels during 2014 and to improve the usability of OpenLearn – the key platform on which free resources are delivered by the OU (www.open.edu/openlearn). This paper reports on the impact of research undertaken in 2013 and 2014 into informal learning on the OpenLearn platform and shows how simple research models in the open can bring about change in a short period of time.

Background

OpenLearn and iTunes U

OpenLearn (www.open.edu/openlearn) is the OU's web-based platform for free educational resources and was launched in 2006. It hosts hundreds of online courses and videos and is accessed by over 5 million users a year; most of the resources are available under a Creative Commons licence. It also serves as the medium through which the OU promotes its partnership with the BBC and the related broadcasting and free open access courses and content that are created as co-productions with them. Since its launch, OpenLearn has received 33.4 million unique visitors (internal OU data) and has developed from being a platform that hosts units from decommissioned undergraduate and postgraduate courses, to one which hosts commissioned interactive games, videos, podcasts and free online courses. Much of the course extract content is developed using structured authoring tools and then made available to users

in multiple formats such as Microsoft Word and epub (that can be opened by ebook readers).

The development of OpenLearn was initially funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in 2006 along with its sister website OpenLearn Works, a platform where NGOs and philanthropically-funded projects can publish, remix and reuse courses targeted to specific populations. With the end of the Hewlett Foundation grant, OpenLearn and OpenLearn Works became mainstream activities for the OU and now form part of one of the University's strategic priorities – 'the Journey from Informal to Formal learning' – as part of The OU's commitment to widening participation. The OU aims that 5% of each of its courses should be made available on OpenLearn in whole, meaningful units, some of which are embellished with interactive quizzes and additional audio visual content.

For the period August 2013 to July 2014, The OU reports a 10.8% click-through rate from OpenLearn to the 'Study at the OU' webpage to learn more about becoming an OU student.

Since 2008, The OU has also made available hundreds of eBooks, courses, audio and video via its channel on iTunes U. Many of the audio and video files are elements of larger projects and courses produced for its fee-paying students, or specifically commissioned to be Open Educational Resources (OER) and shared across several open platforms i.e. OpenLearn and YouTube as well as iTunes U. As an institution specialising in producing higher education (HE) content for distance learners, the aim of this approach is a natural extension of the University's mission to further make available its OER, but also to reach a growing population of mobile device users.

At time of writing, there have been 67.1 million downloads and 8.6 million visitors to The OU on iTunes U. For the period August 2013 to July 2014, The OU reports a 0.8% click-through rate from iTunes U to an OU web domain (OU internal statistics).

Studies and recommendations from 2013

In 2013 a study was undertaken to analyse and compare the demographics of The OU's informal learners, students and educators who are using OpenLearn and/or iTunes U. In addition an analysis was made of what content these three categories of users were using, how they were using it and how using these OER motivated them or otherwise to progress to formal education. The objectives of the study were to:

- Understand as far as possible, how the content provided as OER through the OpenLearn and iTunes U platforms serves the demographic using them, and
- Understand more about how the widespread offering of OER is impacting learners' motivations to take up formal study.

These objectives aligned with two of the OER Research Hub project hypotheses, and hence could form part of the data set collected by that project (see oerresearchhub.org):

- Open education models lead to more equitable access to education, serving a broader base of learners than traditional education, and
- Open education acts as a bridge to formal education, and is complementary, not competitive, with it.

In addition to this research activity, pilot projects around digital badging at The OU were undertaken in 2013 on OpenLearn using the Mozilla Open Badge Infrastructure (OBI) (see openbadges.org). Digital badges were awarded via three entry-level *Openings* courses (access level): *Learning to Learn* and *Succeed with Maths Parts 1 and 2* for the successful completion of the course and passing of quizzes. The evaluation of these pilots was in alignment with the study of the wider OpenLearn and iTunes U platforms in that it gathered identical demographic data and asked questions about informal learner motivation.

Findings from both studies were reported in (Law, Perryman & Law, 2013; Perryman, Law & Law, 2013; Law, Perryman & Law, 2014) and recommendations were delivered internally to inform the business of informal learning commissioning at The OU. The studies concluded that:

- The two different informal learning platforms were being used by very different demographic groups with different motivations,
- Using OER during formal paid-for study can improve learners' performance and self-reliance,

- Learners' motivation is enhanced through the provision of digital badges,
- University-provided OER acts as a taster before embarking on formal learning,
- The same free content on different platforms can meet the needs of both professional and personal development but that work was needed to improve the learner experience, and
- The badged open courses attracted learners who were more inclined to become students and were key to meeting The OU's widening participation agenda (there were significant variations in relation to prior education, numbers of retired learners and numbers of learners reporting a disability compared to OpenLearn and iTunes U users overall).

Based on these conclusions, the recommendations that were made within The OU were as follows:

1. Create an entire Badged Open Course (BOC) curriculum targeting access students (work to be completed in October 2014, see Law, Perryman & Law, 2014),
2. Improve the usability of OpenLearn especially around the user experience of studying an online, unsupported course, and
3. Extend syndication to reach new audiences.

Contextualising 2013 data and building on it

Over the last year, a range of methods have been developed that allow organisations and individuals to create and issue digital open badges (Bull, 2014). The rise in such developments is largely in response to the demand to issue badges and the range of achievements that can be recognised digitally. Bixler and Layng (2013) note that digital badges in higher education 'hold great promise' but that 'policies on badges for higher education institutions do not exist'. This is still largely true although the Badge Alliance (a group of volunteers discussing the potential use of badging for different groups largely based in the US, see badgealliance.org), is, amongst other things, taking case studies and innovations from contributors to build a picture for badge use within HE.

This growing interest in soft assessment and badging was also identified by Grant and Shawgo (2013) and highlights that learners want recognition for informal study. This challenges the notion of informal learning described by Cross (2007) as one where "...no one assigns grades..." and "...no one takes attendance." In this age of paid-for certification for MOOC participation this notion has changed, as whilst learning is still

taking place as a supplement to formal learning there is a growing demand and expectation that informal learners want recognition for their achievements and engagement. This is reflected in the data from the 2013 and 2014 studies on OpenLearn (see Results).

The MOOC phenomenon has also impacted learners’ expectations of OpenLearn. Of the 5.3 million users visiting each year, the majority are searching for course-related content over short interactive learning pieces, joint OU/BBC programme information and blogs, which the site also hosts. Table 1 shows the search criteria for learners visiting the OpenLearn homepage for the period August 2013 – July 2014 (data excluded where search term is not known) (internal data).

Table 1: Known search terms for learners visiting the OpenLearn home page

Known search terms	Percentage
open university / the open university / open university uk	47%
free online courses / open university free courses / online courses / free courses / free online courses uk / free open university courses	32%
openlearn / open learn / study skills	21%

By repeating the study undertaken in 2013, we were able to compare data to: i) evaluate whether demographic data from the 2014 study concurred with 2013 data, and ii) if any notable changes had occurred in attitudes towards informal learning provision, learners’ expectations and goals.

Results

The following table shows a summary of the demographic data for studies undertaken in 2013 and 2014 on OpenLearn showing that 2014 data concurs with 2013 data. (There are some variations in age range following a revision for the 2014 surveys.) (Notable variations are shown in bold italics.)

Table 2: Comparisons of demographic data for OpenLearn

	2013 data (n=904)	2014 data (n=741)
<i>What is your age?</i>		
0-24 yrs / 0-25 yrs	14%	17%
25-44 yrs / 26-45 yrs	38%	27%
45-64 yrs / 46-65 yrs	38%	39%
Over 65 yrs / Over 66 yrs	10%	16%
<i>What is your gender?</i>		
Male	41%	41%
Female	58%	57%
Other* **	>1%	2%
<i>Where do you live?</i>		
UK	67%	61%
US	6%	6%
RoW	27%	33%
<i>Is English your first spoken language?</i>		
Yes	81%	79%
<i>What is your highest educational qualification?</i>		
School	16%	16%
Vocational	9%	6%
College	23%	24%
Undergrad	26%	24%
Postgrad	20%	20%
None	6%	5%
<i>What is your employment status? (Tick all that apply)</i>		
Employed (full or part time)	58%	52%
Voluntary	5%	7%
Student	14%	15%
Unwaged	16%	9%
Disabled and unable to work	4%	6%
Retired	15%	18%
<i>Do you have a disability?</i>		
Yes	19%	23%

* Other = 'transgender' and 'prefer not to say'.

** Other = 'other' and 'prefer not to say'.

Informal learners were asked again if they would be willing to pay for educational content online. The table below shows results for OpenLearn learners where there is a small rise from 2013 to 2014.

Table 3: Respondents indicating that they would be willing to pay for certification assigned to informal learning

OpenLearn 2013 (n=166)	OpenLearn 2014 (n=394)
81%	86%

Table 4: Responses to the question
Which of the following free educational sites or resources do you use in addition to OpenLearn?
 (Learners could select more than one option.)

Platform	2013 responses	2014 responses
iTunes U	22%	16%
YouTube	25%	32%
TED	23%	25%
Khan	11%	15%
MIT OpenCourseWare	12%	13%
BBC Learning	45%	41%
Coursera	15%	17%
Open Yale	4%	5%
None of these	25%	13%

Internal response to research data

Within a period of three months of analysing the data from the 2013 studies, the researchers’ recommendations were acted upon internally: the relevant governance approval to proceed was requested; the BOC project team was formed and the IT requirements were initiated. In this way, a close relationship and feedback between institutional research and the business of informal learning provision was developed. By repeating these studies in 2014, we were able to show concurrence between 2013 and 2014 data and be content that the recommendations following the 2013 were for the right reasons. New channels for syndication of content have been established to reach new learners: free eBooks are now distributed through Google Play (play.google.com) (and shortly through Kindle); audio files are now shared on AudioBoo (www.audioboo.com); and audio and video on Biblio (biblio.org) where thousands of new learners have found free educational content. Whilst we recognise that the majority of learners using educational content in English are educated and employed, we also recognise that a minority are not but that a small percentage of several million learners in this category is still a lot of learners.

This response to data, afforded by informal learning structures and created through simple research methods provides The Open University with a rapid response to changes in the focus of the informal learning curriculum that would be difficult to replicate in the formal curriculum. Additionally, understanding the usability challenges of learners using OpenLearn as a course environment has required the OU to make modifications to the Moodle platform, based on our understanding of

learners' interactions with it and with each other – information which can be fed back to the formal student learning experience. Our research evaluating methods of assessment in the open through the badged open courses project and exploring how underserved and less educated groups can be motivated in an unsupported environment, will again provide an opportunity to impact on informal learners' experience in addition to that of the OU's formal students.

Recommendations from the 2014 studies will be the subject of future papers. However, whilst the approach to issue a suite of access-level badged open courses on OpenLearn was largely based on data and a desire to meet the needs of a widening participation group, the discussion has extended to how we might serve other groups and to challenge how we recognise informal learning achievements beyond the issuing of certificates. Whilst FutureLearn, Coursera and other MOOC platforms charge for their certification, The OU will maintain the issuing of badges as recognition of informal learning for free. One of the questions for us researching informal learning in 2014/15 will be understanding whether learners' perceptions of paid-for certification as a recognition of achievement in informal learning has a greater value than that which is provided for free.

Conclusions and next steps

We now have a good picture of our learners studying informally on OpenLearn and via third party platforms such as iTunes U. We recognise from both 2013 and 2014 data that our learners on OpenLearn are somewhere between Secondary and Tertiary OER users according to Martin Weller's iceberg model of OER engagement – i.e. that they do have an awareness of OERs in general (Secondary), but have little or no interest in licensing of content and are “consuming rather than creating” (Tertiary) (Weller, 2014). In fact, data from the 2014 study shows that awareness of free learning content is increasing (see Table 4). In the light of greater numbers of universities' participation in MOOC provision, availability of free informal learning content is increasing as is the understanding of what it means to deliver to open platforms and to third party platforms.

To research informal learning, assessment in the open (via badged open courses) and to gain a better understanding of who our learners are and what motivates them is ever more important. To exploit the rapid feedback from data to commissioning enables us to both positively influence the learning experience and to share findings openly.

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