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Managing education in the digital age
Choosing, setting up and running successful online courses

Andy Hockley and Fiona Thomas
Types of Courses

Once you have taken the decision to start offering online courses, one of the first things you will need to decide is what materials you will use. Consider the following questions:

- What do you know about online course materials?
- How will you decide whether to license already existing materials or try to create your own course?
- What factors should influence your decision on what course material or platform to use?

There are different alternatives available and trying to decide what to do can be a minefield. In order to help you work out what will work best for you (and conscious of the fact that we might be over-simplifying), we have broken down the possibilities into three broad options:

1. Ready-to-go / Off-the-peg courses
2. Create your own course from databanks of online exercises and activities
3. Create your own course from scratch

The first thing to mention is that these options can overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Some online materials providers for example, offer set courses and also the possibility of adding additional exercises and tasks to these courses. Robin Mason defined this type of online course as a *wrap-around model* in which tutors can create and add material to support already existing course content (1998). Some materials providers even include exercise templates which help you to create your own interactive exercises in addition to a selection of ready-to-go courses or exercises.

Inevitably though, one of the options will be central to your online course even if you decide to complement the option you choose with other alternatives. In order to help you to decide which option should become the core of your course, this chapter will first discuss the pros and cons of each option and second look at other factors which you need to bear in mind in your choice or creation of online course material.

Part 1 the pros and cons

Option 1: Ready-to-go / Off-the-peg courses

Back in 1998 Robin Mason (Open University 1998) came up with three classifications of types of online courses and interestingly, they are still relevant today. One is the *wrap-around model* mentioned in the introduction to this chapter and another is the *content + support model*. Her *content + support model* referred to relatively unchanging content materials which can be tutored by other teachers than the contents authors. Off-the-peg online courses would fall into this category.

There is a large number of course providers on the market offering different types of online courses which, through different business models, can be bought or more frequently licensed to use with your students. They can be language courses for students, training or development courses for teachers or other courses in related fields. Much of this material will need to be delivered or supported by a tutor and you will be given the option to use your own teachers to cover this service.

So why are off-the-peg courses a popular option?
a) A good online course will have been written by a team of expert and professional writers who will have spent a long time thinking about how best to design the course material for students studying online. Most will have had the support of professional programmers, graphic designers, sound and video experts and editors who will all have contributed to the finished product. There will be a sound rationale behind the material design and course participants will be carefully taken through engaging and carefully staged exercises and activities designed to maximise learning in an online context.

It is difficult for teachers or organisations that do not have experience in online material design or access to a team of materials producers to put together a course of the same quality.

b) The courses are finished products and can therefore be used straight away so set-up time is minimal. If you are in a hurry to start offering online courses or you have already received a request for an online course, this type of course can provide you with an immediate solution. Any other option will require much more preparation and time to get everything ready.

c) There will be minimal risks in terms of cost. Although course material can be licensed in different ways, most course providers will not expect you to pay vast quantities of money up front. They will normally request that you pay for the access codes requested and the price will depend on the course material accessed. Alternatively you will be charged a flat monthly rate per student. Either way, the initial outlay of money is low compared with the costs of developing your own course and consequently, any financial risk is minimal.

d) If your core business is face-to-face classes, you will probably tentatively begin by experimenting with offering online solutions. By initially choosing to use courses which already exist, you gain valuable experience in how online courses can work, you don’t take excessive risks in terms of set-up costs and you gradually move into the online course market. At a later stage, when you have more experience and knowledge of how online courses work and the market, you can consider taking greater and more informed risks.

e) This option caters well to smaller organisations which do not have either the human or the material resources to easily provide other types of solution.

Why might you decide NOT to choose this option?

a) Your client may have specific needs or you will have specific objectives in mind which are not catered for by the materials available. Commercial products will aim on the whole to satisfy the general market requirements but there will inevitably be contexts and requirements which are not reached by these providers.

b) You might want to differentiate yourself from your competitors by being seen to offer your own unique quality online course which is branded as your own. While some materials providers will white label the course material, most will insist on co-branding and at the very least maintaining the copyright.

c) The majority of off-the-peg online courses are less flexible than other options although some course providers do build in a certain amount of flexibility in terms of
being able to turn off access to certain parts of the course and some allow you to add other content.

d) The commercial options may not be context or age appropriate. Courses which are written with a specific student profile in mind might not work for your students. Other courses might not be suitable for certain religions and cultural contexts.

**Option 2: Create your own course from already existing banks of materials**

Some materials providers offer the use of banks of exercises, activities or tasks so that you can create your own online course according to your or your clients’ needs. They provide tools which allow you to build the course and track your students’ progress on the learner management platform they use.

**Why is this option popular?**

a) This option allows you to customise the course to your clients’ needs. By carefully selecting and putting together materials which are already available, so long as you can find appropriate materials, you can build a course which will cater for the specific requirements of your client in a way that ready-to-go courses are unlikely to be able to do.

b) The course is not a static creation. While the course is running, you can adapt and build in more content according to how the course progresses and the needs of your students. As a result, you can produce a dynamic, evolving and flexible course.

c) This option requires a low level of technical expertise as it provides ready-made exercises, tools and a user-friendly learning environment for students, teachers and administrators. The expertise required is pedagogical and requires knowledge in the selection of material and the ability to put it together to make a coherent and relevant course.

d) Courses created from banks of materials will be unique and will allow you to differentiate your course from other courses on the market.

e) This option requires a moderate set-up time. Although this option requires more time in terms of the selection of material than option 1, it requires less time than if you were to create the course materials yourself from scratch as in option 3.

f) Many teachers and trainers will feel more comfortable with this option than the first option as it replicates the typical role of a teacher or trainer in a conventional course. Teachers and trainers are used to selecting material to use in their classes, this option allows them to apply similar principles and practices but in an online context.

**Why might you choose NOT to use this option?**

a) Although the material available may be of a high quality, most activities, tasks and exercises will not be sequenced and will be designed to work independently of each other. By selecting different exercises and activities and putting them together to create a course, there can obviously not be the development and staging of activities which can be found in a ready-to-go course or a course you create from scratch. As a result the course can feel rather bitty and disconnected. Indeed, this option tends to
be used most to supplement already existing courses in either an online or blended context precisely for this reason.

b) Creating and managing this type of course and students is fairly **time-consuming** in comparison to option 1.

c) Putting together a course of these characteristics requires a certain amount of **expertise** in creating courses and an understanding of how people learn online.

**Option 3: creating your own course material**

This option is very popular for online teacher training and development courses which do not require the same level of programmed interaction as online language courses.

Robin Mason’s third category (1998) is the **integrated model** in which the course contents are fluid and dynamic and are negotiated between student and tutor. This option of creating your own course material allows you to do this most readily.

There are two ways that you can create your own digital material to be delivered online. One way is by using an open-source platform such as Moodle. These are free platforms which you can use to create your online course, create forums and monitor what your students are doing. The alternative is to use commercial platforms which have been designed to help you create a course and come with exercise templates which make it easy for you to create interactive exercises from a selection of exercise types.

**What are the advantages of choosing this option?**

a) You have the **freedom** to create a course from scratch with no conditioning factors other than your level of expertise in content production and programming skills. This means that you create a **unique product** with the content you choose, of the length than you require and you define the role of the tutor and interaction with other students. The course(s) can evolve with your experience and grow as required. This allows you to **differentiate** yourself from other products and online course providers on the market and cater for your client’s requirements however specialised they are, providing you have the knowledge and skills to do so.

b) You have complete **ownership** of the course you create and can do with it as you see fit. You can modify it, you can commercialise it or you can use it for whatever purpose you like.

c) If you use a platform which provides digital self-authoring tools, you can produce different types of interactive exercises without being a technical expert.

d) If you use an open-source platform, there is **no fee** associated with the platform or contents.

**Why might you decide NOT to choose this option?**

a) This option is at the far end of the spectrum of **expertise** in online courses. Most people who produce online courses on open-source platforms such as Moodle end up creating essentially text and link-based materials with associated tasks. In other words, students are invited to read articles or texts, open links to external websites, videos and podcasts and then carry out a task usually on a discussion forum. This, while fine
for some courses, is rather limiting for others. Having said this, the number of user-friendly authoring tools for creating interesting online content is growing and as a result it is becoming easier to create more sophisticated online material without being a computer programmer.

b) This can be the **most expensive option in terms of materials production**. Materials writers, teachers or trainers will need to be paid to produce the materials, and depending on the type of course, you will also have to consider payment of computer programmers and other relevant experts. The offset of this is that if the course can be used repeatedly and if successful, the production costs will be paid off in the medium or long term.

c) This is the option which will take the **longest to set up** in terms of time. The course will need to designed, written, and edited, programmed, checked and preferably trialled before it is used.

d) It is more difficult to make this course look like a **professional looking product**. Obviously this will depend on the resources and expertise you have available and the platform you use but any commercial materials provider will have taken into account the importance of how the course will look and be presented to the end-user.

e) You need to be very careful not to infringe any **copyright laws** when creating your course content. Much material available on the web is copyright protected and copying or borrowing sections from it to create your online course can cause you serious legal problems.

**Part 2 – Other factors**

In this section we will focus on other factors related to online course material which you need to think about whether you create the course yourself from scratch, from banks of materials or use one which is ready to go.

In order to do this it is useful to understand that there are different types of learning experiences to be found in online courses. A US Department of Education report on the *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning* (2010) carried out research on the effectiveness of online courses on different subject matters and identified three types of learning experience:

1. Expository instruction in which the online course transmits knowledge. This can be understood as a type of lecture mode in which technology delivers content and the learner is to a certain extent a passive recipient of this content.
2. Active learning in which the learner has control over what and how he or she learns.
3. Interactive learning in which learning comes about by learners interacting with other learners, with tutors and also with the material itself, both synchronously and asynchronously.

Most online courses will contain a mixture of the above types of learning experience. The decision on the balance of how material in our online course is to be delivered, discovered and learned; the role of the tutor and student in relation to the material and each other; and the rationale behind how the course is structured will not only be influenced by understanding how a quality online course should be designed and the subject matter itself but by many contextual and cultural factors relevant to our students’ context. While some online courses
will work very well in some areas of the world or for a certain type of learner, in others they won’t.

**Types of learners and cultural considerations**

Some online courses will be designed with fairly autonomous students in mind. The course will typically encourage them to reflect on their needs and allow them to make decisions about what they learn. While this can work very well for certain types of courses and for learners who are comfortable with taking control of what they study, there are many cultural contexts in which it is difficult to get this model to work. Students who have not been educated in this way or had experience of taking responsibility for their learning will find this particularly difficult in an online context. These students will usually react better to courses which contain a clear structure and more expository-type activities.

In a similar way students from cultural contexts which value social interaction will probably react well to courses which emphasise collaborative tasks. On the other hand, cultures which stress self-reliance and which are less dependent on group support will often prefer courses which require less collaboration with peers.

So, when possible, understanding relevant cultural learning styles of your target audience will also help you to make the right decision about what materials to use. Having said this many online courses are run with heterogeneous groups from different cultural backgrounds. If this is the case, and if the course requires a high level of learner autonomy or collaborative activities, it can be a good idea to include some sort of induction unit or sessions to prepare and support students for these types of activities. In Gilly Salmon’s five-stage model which describes the stages that many students need to go through in an online course, this corresponds to the second stage of her model, called online socialisation. In this stage students are familiarised with the learning environment and material and bridges are provided between culture, social and learning environments (Routledge, 2012).

**Differences with materials designed to use in a face-to-face context**

Good online courses tend to replicate what would happen in a face-to-face course but in a way which works online. This means that an online course will and should be different from a book used in a face-to-face class. A course book designed for a face-to-face context is written with the understanding that a teacher will set up and walk the students through the tasks, the teacher will monitor the activity as it is taking place and intervene if required, the teacher will bring everyone together after the activity and provide appropriate feedback and encourage reflection.

Many online courses, however, will effectively present and stage many of the activities and tasks in the course without the necessity of a teacher (this is one of the features of many online language courses especially) and is a very efficient way of delivering certain types of content. Online courses which include less interaction with the course material will rely more on the tutor to bring the course together (more typical in teacher training and development courses). In the first type of course the importance of well-designed material is essential to the success of the course, in the second the tutor will play a central role to the success of the course.

**Hardware and software**
It is important to check that the materials you are using or creating will work on the hardware your students use. While most courses will typically work on PCs, not many currently work on tablets or smartphones. Given the growing popularity of tablets, should the material you will be using be accessible on them? You also need to check what software is required for the material to display correctly. Is it free? Is it easy to install? Who will provide technical support?

Remember that the online world is a fast changing world to work in. If you are creating the course content, you need to think about the importance of updating the content in line with changes in technology. If you are licensing content, it is advisable to check that the materials provider has a policy of updating content to work with new versions of software as and when they are released.

**Platforms / Learner management systems**

The materials will usually be accessed via a learner management system so that you can track your students’ progress on the course. It is very important that the platform is intuitive for students, tutors and administrators. The other important aspect is that it registers and displays information which is relevant for you needs and that you can export the information from the platform into documents which you can use for reporting or other purposes.

**Assessment**

Inevitably there will be some type of assessment of the students’ progress in the online course you use. This could be some type of continuous assessment via assignments, tutorials, student contributions and online tests or exams, or less frequently, just end of course assessment. Either way it is useful to evaluate how this assessment is built into the course materials and how it is recorded, displayed and accessed on the platform.

**Support**

If you are going to license courses, content or platform from a commercial materials provider, remember to find out what type of support they will give you. Do they provide training courses? Do they provide administrative support?

**Round up**

As you can see, there are many factors to think about when deciding what material to use for your online course. There are no right or wrong answers and much of your decision will be dependent on your clients’ context and requirements and your own organisation’s set up. However, we hope that this chapter has helped you to reflect on whether it makes more sense for you to licence already existing content or try to create something from either databanks of exercises or from scratch. We also hope it has helped you to reflect on other equally important issues such as cultural contexts and learning styles, the role of the material in the course in relation to the tutor (this will be explored in more detail in chapter 3), hardware and software, platforms, assessment and support.

We have finished the chapter with a checklist to help you remember to take into consideration the most important factors when deciding what materials to use in your online course:
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Add any other relevant factors here:

Bibliography


Gilly Salmon, Routledge, 2012. E-moderating. The Key to Online Teaching and Learning