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Multi-Section Open Course Design: Design and Implications for Faculty, Sessional Instructors, and Learners

Valerie Irvine
University of Victoria

Michael Paskevicius
University of Victoria

Colin Madland
University of Victoria

Rich McCue
University of Victoria

Verena Roberts
University of Victoria

Correspondence:

Valerie Irvine
Faculty of Education
University of Victoria
Email: virvine [at] uvic.ca

Abstract

As open course designs are being implemented in regular post-secondary credit courses (beyond massive open online courses), new issues and processes need to be considered that are fundamentally different from courses offered within the traditional learning management system. In this paper, we review our approach to multi-section open course design and share our experiences working through emergent issues, such as content placement, intellectual property, attribution, etc. We provide insights and recommendations for institutional leadership and administration, faculty area advisors, technical support staff, and sessional instructors.

Keywords: open education, open pedagogy, OER-enabled pedagogy, higher education, open educational practices, learning management system, information technology systems, learning technology

Introduction

Open access has been a driving force in the transformation of higher education; however, the greatest gains have come with increased access to open research, such as open journals, with some government funding bodies now requiring open access publication of research findings (Government of Canada, 2016). However, in teaching and learning contexts, the most notable development came with the emergence of massive open online courses (MOOC) and more recently, open textbooks. Currently, most post-secondary learning environments remain locked behind learning management systems. Most common educational technologies facilitate the growth of communities which are constantly being dissolved and hollowed out as semesters end and new ones begin. Students are often limited in their ability to access past course material when courses end (Groom & Lamb, 2014). Further, when courses are completed, the associated collaborative environment and knowledge resources created in many cases by the students during the term are removed and not made unavailable to future students, who miss the opportunity for continuity and knowledge development (Mott, 2010). Where open course designs are implemented in regular post-secondary credit courses (beyond the MOOC), new issues and processes need to be considered that are fundamentally different from courses offered within the traditional learning management system.

While the benefits of open access to society and to learners are well documented in the government, institutional, and research literature (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, n.d.), as we gain ground in the adoption of open course designs, we must develop and document the new processes and considerations for implementation in order to continue sustaining positive change. Where the MOOC is designed to be a single stand-alone course offering with hundreds or thousands of learners participating, many undergraduate and graduate courses on campus are often neglected in the efforts to make them open (Irvine et al., 2013). These regular courses have a unique characteristic, or challenge for open designs, in that many of them are offered with multiple sections. While some research has been published on open course design (Axe et al., 2020; Chen, 2019; Graham & Roberts, 2018; Robinson, 2018), courses with multiple concurrent sections present an entirely new set of considerations.

Simply through the nature of being publicly available, open courses with multiple sections can create both new challenges and new benefits. In our case, open courses have led to increased collaboration and cross-pollination between instructors and exposure to different approaches to teaching. In addition, these open courses provide a living corpus of learning materials that evolve over time as well as a permanent and open access resource for past, present, and future learners. It can be advantageous for new instructors to see how their colleagues are teaching a course and an ongoing professional development benefit to see how their peers are modifying content and bringing in new topics as the field evolves.

In this paper, we will review our approach to multi-section open course design and share our experiences working through emergent issues such as area oversight and coordination; content creation, content placement, and content sharing; intellectual property and attribution; and finally, technical requirements, expertise, and workload responsibilities. We will provide insights and recommendations for institutional leadership and administration, faculty area advisors, learning systems management and support staff, and sessional instructors.

Context

The lead author, Valerie Irvine, has taught online and open since 1998 starting at the University of Alberta with Craig Montgomerie, David Mappin, and Mike Szabo. This was before the learning management system existed on campuses. She tried teaching once within WebCT around 2000 and then again once using Moodle, while in her position at University of Victoria (UVic), but has chosen to teach entirely open and outside of a learning management system using open and networked designs since then. As the area of Educational Technology grew at UVic, multiple sections began to be offered, thus creating the need to navigate how to design an open course with multiple instructors and sections. In 2018, Irvine created the course website using a hosting service outside the institutional WordPress, as it was too locked down in terms of plug-ins. This new website allowed instructors to have the freedom to create their own instructional materials on websites. Neither the institutional nor the external WordPress had cloning capabilities and, although the institutional WordPress supported learner blogs, the start-up and learning curve was too high and too time-consuming without a clone option.

Irvine chaired the Learning Technologies Committee within BCNet, which was an IT leadership and shared services organization for post-secondary institutions in British Columbia. The committee then formed an Open Education Working Group, which was chaired by Grant Potter. The committee developed a collaborative WordPress installation, hosted on BC Educloud (the BCNet-hosted web infrastructure) for any post-secondary institution to use, given only larger institutions were previously able to resource their own WordPress installation. This working group eventually formed the Open Educational Technology Collective (OpenETC), which supported not only WordPress sites, but the critical tool of cloning blogs, which was used for our learner blogs. OpenETC is described as a community of educators, technologists, and designers sharing their expertise to foster and support open infrastructure for the BC post-secondary sector. While our course blog was hosted externally on an internet service provider, our learner blog clone, our learner blogs, and Mattermost (our communication backchannel that is similar to Slack but open source) were all hosted on the OpenETC.

Area Oversight and Coordination

Anyone who has taught multiple sections of a course will know that artifacts exist on the internet arising from sections taught in the same term as well as artifacts from past offerings of the course. It is simple when deploying one single MOOC, often found within a MOOC platform, there is no confusion for the learners. In regular course offerings, however, if each section offering has its own course website, then instructors run the risk of learners finding the wrong website, either for the wrong section or a past artifact. If the ownership of these materials falls beyond the institutional reach and is owned and then abandoned by former individual instructors, then the web-based landscape for an open course would be littered with abandoned knowledge nodes. To prevent this, area oversight must be provided by the institution to provide coordination of the deployment of open course materials between the instructors of parallel sections. Our department purchases this installation and has admin access with our area faculty providing oversight, operations, and coordination among instructors.

Content Creation, Placement, and Sharing

The next step in the development of a multi-section open course is how to design the interface and placement of content as well as define who creates and maintains the content. Ultimately, a sessional instructor should not be expected to develop a course from scratch; therefore, the

area faculty or course coordinator must be responsible for creating the content or facilitating who creates what content components. The open course website contains content that is relevant and supports all sections of the course across multiple instructors. This content evolves over the years with edits, updates, and additions and is openly accessible to current, future, past, and informal learners.

Course-Level vs. Section-Level Content

Considering one course website for a single course with multiple sections, the next challenge becomes how to separate the course-level content that is shared across all sections and the section-level content that is for each instructor's individual section. Figure 1 depicts an example of one of our multi-section open courses.

Figure 1
A Multi-Section Open Course

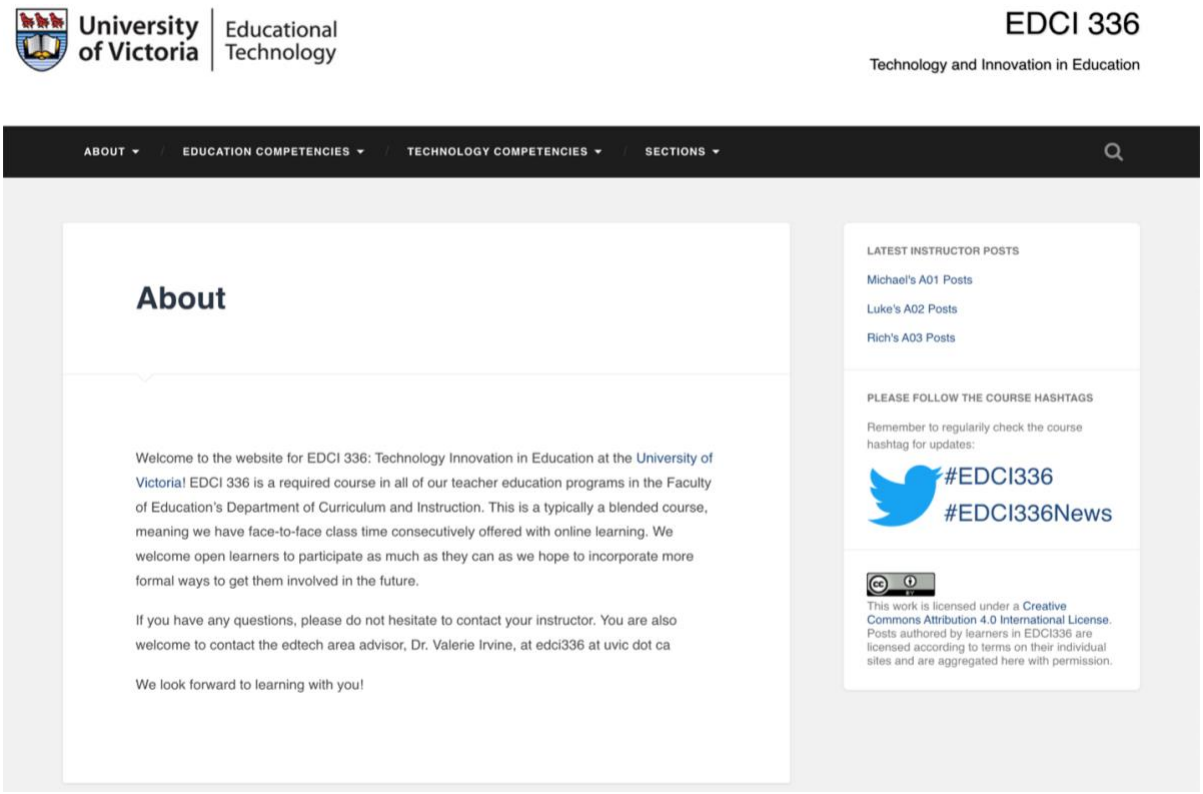
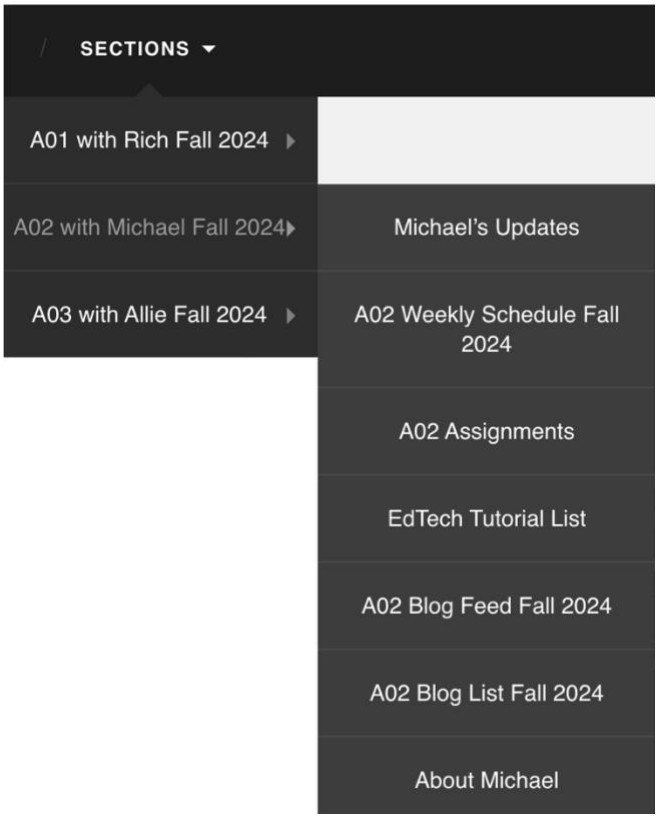


Figure 2 depicts a sample submenu for a specific section. Multi-section open courses require navigation that is clear for the learners. In the spirit of open principles, section-specific content remains open and visible for all, which provides the opportunity to "peek over the fence" into another section to see how they may be teaching the content. That said, we restrict access to a "social spaces" page that exists for each section that contains private content, such as the course Zoom link, instructor contact information, Hypothes.is invite link for social annotation, and any other private content. Course instructors often create weekly posts that draw from or point to the course-level blog posts, linking to them from a weekly update, although some

instructors choose to edit a course-level blog post to add a category to it that aggregates the post within one of the section's menus.

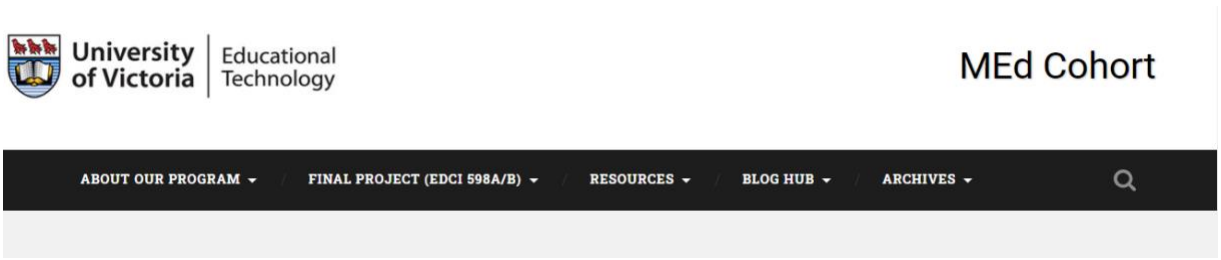
Figure 2
Menu Structure for Different Sections of an Open Course



Multi-Course Program Website

Beyond a multi-section course design, we have also used a similar structure for a program website. Instead of multiple sections, we moved multiple courses through a single site for a master's program, making it a one-stop stop for their learning journey. Figure 3 depicts an example of a multi-course program website, where current courses appear in a primary menu and move to a submenu to archive once the course completes.

Figure 3
Menu Structure of a Multi-Course Program Website

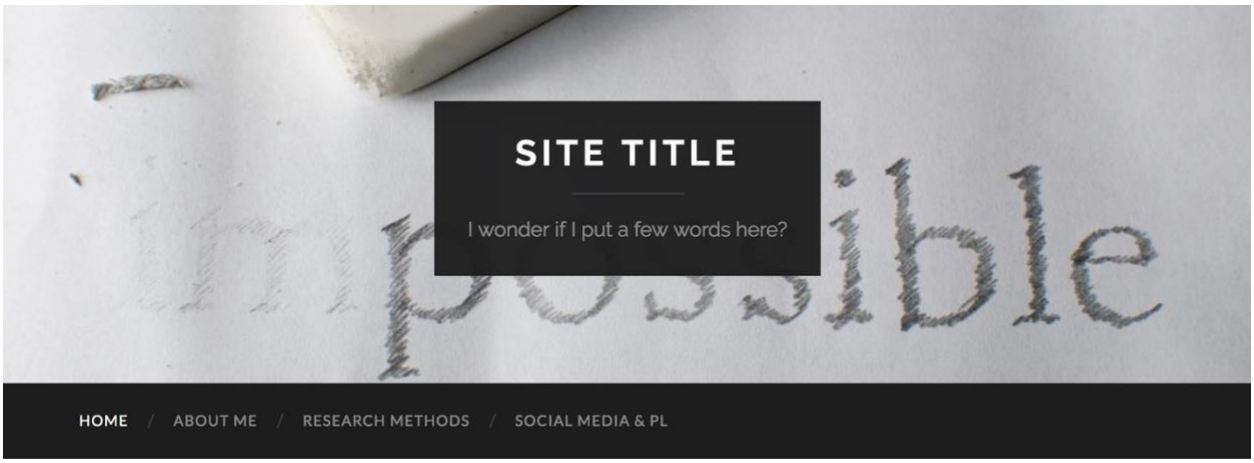


Learner Blog Template and Blog Feeds

Our courses adopt a networked learning design that prioritizes ownership, autonomy, customization, and control by users. Students create their own learning portfolio using WordPress developing networked learning literacy as a result. We use the OpenETC for site creation with individual student sites across different URLs. We employ Really Simple Syndication (RSS) aggregations of learner blog posts from their own individual blogs as per their privacy preferences. This builds an activity feed of learning contributions centrally presented in the relevant section of the multi-section open course site. In this way, we employ a distributed learning pathway, where communication and representations of learning are presented in different locations and take on varying forms that are owned by the learner (Major, 2015).

Learners use a blog template on the OpenETC that is pre-stocked with categories, menus, and instructional content (e.g., links to the course blog and other resources) to reduce technical overhead on the learner. Figure 4 depicts a learner blog template prior to customization by a learner. There are pre-stocked menus, pages, and posts, to demonstrate how the content is organized. For example, the blog is pre-stocked with a post with a category created and assigned to it, which enables that post to be pulled into a menu. With this in place, it is easier for learners to look on their administrative dashboard to see the mechanisms that make this happen, so it is easier to recreate as opposed to build from scratch.

Figure 4
Learner Blog Template Prior to Customization



Each learner has digital autonomy to choose if they blog at all or use another method. If they blog, they can choose if they do so publicly, or if they blog privately. Learners will have a feed of learner blog posts within their section-level content area. We use Feedzy for this as recommended by our IT Systems; however, FeedWordPress is common in other contexts. Our learners can also access the public pages, posts, and feeds from their counterpart sections. This enables any learner to not see the feed of learner blog posts not only from their own section, but those from other sections. This supports transparency in the types of work being completed and the ability to find common ground and relationality. Another benefit is when a

student misses a class session, they have the option of reviewing peers' blogs to discover what they may have missed.

Intellectual Property and Attribution

Intellectual property creates complexity when co-creating instructional materials. In our case, we used a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License for all our content. In a multi-section open course, the course coordinator should ultimately be responsible for creating the bulk of the course materials; however, there is one issue with this in that blog posts have author names often listed and, if not publicly, it is marked in the administrative dashboard. When sharing a course, it may be undesirable for a sessional instructor to be a part of a course that has the name of a different instructor displayed all over the general content area. It could be perceived as affecting their credibility among their own learners. In our case, the faculty opted to label much of the generic content posts on the shared area as authored by "edtech admin."

One could argue it would be more appropriate to have the content properly attributed to the authors who created them, but we chose to use this generic user profile in the interest of making a welcoming space for our sessional instructors. As relationships were built and courses evolved, we transitioned into talking as a team about what content was needed and different instructors authored specific posts as negotiated, using their own user profiles. As years passed, it became more difficult to clearly know who owned authorship given posts were edited repeatedly by subsequent instructors. This brought us back to valuing the "edtech admin" generic author label for shared course-level content. Any instructor could create a blog post for themselves that appears only in their section-level content. Ultimately, it can be unclear who to attribute for course-level content, as the list of authors can grow over the years as more instructors contribute. We recommend that courses like this have a specific page called "attribution" and simply to list all the instructors who authored the course since inception given it is hard to delineate boundaries. We also advise using a CC0 license for only the course instructors, while the CC-BY is used for anyone else. Otherwise, our instructors could find themselves having to attribute each other within the course. It becomes more important to work as a collective than as individuals.

Technical Requirements, Expertise, Support, and Workload

Since many institutions do not host their own WordPress installation or, if they do, the installation may be so restricted to limit the necessary plug-ins and tools to run a dynamic website, it may be necessary to run the instructional website on a blog that is hosted on an internet service provider and domain. In our case, our Department provided the approval and funding to support our multisite blog located at https://edtechuvic.ca/ with child sites for each course (e.g., https://edtechuvic.ca/edci336).

When deviating from an institutional learning management system and using WordPress and related tools for an entire course, it becomes important that instructors have expertise and it may be possible, if the area is educational technology, to have expectations of WordPress knowledge and skills in an assessment for hiring. Typical support services on campus will not have the specialized knowledge or even access to the course blog or learner blogs as both of ours use non-campus technologies—the course blog being hosted on an external service provider and the learner blogs being on the OpenETC. This requires overhead in terms of support planning and contingency planning for any failures. Ideally, institutions supporting open

educational practices should broaden the horizon of technologies their staff formally support. As opposed to the default of "closed learning designers" and "closed educational technology support specialists," who are simply trained on the closed enterprise learning management system. Institutions should consider creating designated "open learning designers" and "open educational technology support specialists" to support those on campuses who wish to adopt open course designs. Currently, these responsibilities and their associated workload falls on the open adopter, who is often a faculty member, but sometimes a sessional instructor. When the benefits of open are well documented, from increased enrolment to public access to knowledge, institutions must find ways to support those who adopt open for the greater good.

Conclusion

In our experience hosting and facilitating multi-section open courses since 2018 we have been delighted to see increased collaboration between instructors, the cross-pollination and exposure of instructors to different approaches to teaching, a living and collaboratively developed corpus of learning materials that evolves over time, and a permanent and open access resource for past, present, and future learners. In this paper we share our recommendations for multi-section open course design, specifically with regards to area oversight and coordination; content creation, content placement, and content sharing; intellectual property and attribution; and finally, technical requirements, expertise, and workload responsibilities.

Author's Contributions

VI designed and implemented the design for multi-section open courses in 2018. In 2019, MP helped with the evolution of the design. CM, RM, VR provided input on iterations from their experiences as sessional instructors. VI was the lead responsible for the writing with assistance from all authors.

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier (ORCID)

Valerie Irvine https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8067-1300

Michael Paskevicius https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7391-0783

Colin Madland https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1761-1903

Rich McCue https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3503-5935

Verena Roberts https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3336-7805

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Ethics Statement

No ethical review was required as no human data was collected.

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