OPEN LETTER

Learning from each other in the COVID-19 pandemic [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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Abstract

The increase in cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) worldwide has been paralleled by increasing information, and misinformation. Accurate public health messaging is essential to counter this, but education may also have a role. Early in the outbreak, The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine partnered with FutureLearn to develop a massive open online course (MOOC) on COVID-19. Our approach was grounded in social constructivism, supporting participation, sharing uncertainties, and encouraging discussion. The first run of the course included over 200,000 participants from 184 countries, with over 88,000 comments at the end of the three-week run. Many participants supported each other’s learning in their responses and further questions. Our experience suggests that open education, and supporting the development of communities of learners, can complement traditional messaging, providing a sustainable approach to countering the spread of misinformation.

Keywords

COVID-19, education, infodemic, MOOC

This article is included in the Coronavirus (COVID-19) collection.
Worldwide connectivity has facilitated spread of the virus causing COVID-19, and this has been almost paralleled by the spread of information and misinformation. Sharing accurate information, for example through reliable, trusted, social media accounts and websites, as well as responding to misinformation with MythBusters is important. However, behaviouristic approaches, the imparting of information, support only superficial learning. Constructivist approaches, placing the learner at the centre, with explicit expectations for engagement, can support deep learning, and the ability to appraise information critically.

Early on in the outbreak of COVID-19, The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) agreed to develop a massive open online course (MOOC) on COVID-19, in partnership with FutureLearn, as described here, and following courses on previous outbreaks such as Ebola and Zika. Our approach to this was grounded in educational theory and utilised social constructivist principles. Beginning with consideration of who the intended learners might be, and what they would know, we brought together a group to share and discuss, at pace, the overall intended learning outcomes for the course. We structured the course simply, in terms of what was known at that time about COVID-19, what a public health response may look like in various settings, and what research was needed to understand more. Within this, each step of the course had defined intended learning outcomes, which contributors were asked to address. We included international contributions to share global perspectives on the pandemic. To support engagement and maximise opportunities provided by the platform, we used varied formats including short video lectures, audio interviews, articles and quizzes. To maximise accessibility for learners we included subtitles and transcripts, in several languages. After each part of the course we encouraged participation and engagement through specific questions.

At the outset we didn’t know what the uptake of the course would be, or who would enrol. There was also the concern that evidence would have moved on before the course had even started, as materials were developed 3–4 weeks before the course start (to allow time for translation), and the number of publications and preprints on COVID-19 was increasing rapidly. In a time of heightened public anxiety, by taking a participatory approach to the course, which included sharing uncertainties in terms of what was known, and encouraging discussion and questioning, we, and our institution, took a substantial risk. It could, for example, have resulted in the mass sharing of extreme views by participants. In subsequent iterations it still could. However, as teachers and researchers we work to both learn more, and to share this learning. We are supported institutionally with the academic freedom to do so; there was no corporate “sign-off” from LSHTM.

For the first run of the course, starting in late March, we had very high uptake, with over 170,000 participants in the first three weeks, and over 200,000 in total in the first run, from 184 countries. We also noted very high levels of engagement, with over 88,000 comments, and many people supporting each other’s learning in their responses and further questions. Within LSHTM we set up a system to respond to as many queries as possible, even with a small team. Non-technical hosts read through discussion fora and collated queries and synthesised areas of interest for each course step, which academics then responded to, helping to keep the course current.

Much of the feedback on the course has been positive, highlighting the opportunity to gain new knowledge and skills. Running the course, we felt that developing participants’ own learning, and providing a space where ideas – and fears – could be expressed and addressed was central to this. But what surprised us was the level of expressed gratitude from learners, perhaps reflecting a gap in such opportunities. Learning from each other in the context of COVID-19 also helped to overcome the challenge of developing and running the course in the emerging pandemic. As we have prepared for a second iteration of the MOOC, we can use our learning from the first iteration to strengthen the learning environment we create.

Our experience suggests building individuals’ own capacity to question, to query the data, reports and guidance on COVID-19 is essential, and complementary to the circulation of accurate information. Further investigation of the role of education to support health literacy in the context of outbreaks, is important, to better understand and inform practice. The pandemic has highlighted the role of free online courses to support accessibility to education. Our weakness - the worldwide connectedness that increases the spread of disease and information – could also be our strength. By using open platforms to build communities of learners, to share the values of academia through education, we can support sustainability in countering the spread of misinformation.

**Data availability**

No data are associated with this article.

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**References**


