

# Crowdsourcing for social sciences researchers: data gathering, teaching, learning and research dissemination from a single project

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/10/03/crowdsourcing-for-social-sciences-researchers-data-gathering-teaching-learning/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/10/03/crowdsourcing-for-social-sciences-researchers-data-gathering-teaching-learning/)

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*What if your next research dissemination exercise could also help you gather unique data for your next research project, while at the same time providing your students with unique learning opportunities? **Darren Moon** reflects on the success of the award-winning ConstitutionUK project and suggests how its crowdsourcing techniques might represent a unique opportunity and alternative to both traditional research dissemination methods and MOOC offerings, as well as providing new data gathering opportunities for research.*



When Campus Technology announced ConstitutionUK as a winner in its 2016 Innovator Awards (now in their 12th year), I was delighted. As the only UK institution recognised in this year's awards, it is a huge compliment to the two teams who collaborated on the project: LSE Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and LSE Learning Technology and Innovation (LTI). With this recent announcement, now seems an appropriate time to reflect on what's been achieved.

That our award came in the Teaching and Learning Innovation category may come as a surprise to some (ConstitutionUK was not explicitly an educational offering, after all). That it was recognised as such is a significant validation of our rationale for LTI involvement in the project. The IPA's aim for ConstitutionUK was unambiguous: to crowdsource a written constitution for the UK, with coverage over ten key topic areas, backed by the legitimacy of a large community and high level of participation. For LTI, this was an ideal opportunity to apply our expertise in technology, social media and online and blended learning in a non-traditional context. Working closely with Professor Connor Gearty and IPA colleagues, we designed a unique, pedagogy-informed engagement strategy, that made a major contribution to achieving the stated project goals (my colleague, Peter Bryant, has written about the underlying pedagogical framework [on our LTI blog](#)).



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### Crowdsourcing as an alternative to MOOCs

It is worth briefly summarising some of the key features and achievements of the project. Over 14 weeks we supported the formation of a community 1500 members strong, who generated over one million words of contributions and debate, and whose efforts delivered a refined, final constitutional draft of some 8500 words. Drawing comparisons with [open data from HarvardX-MITx MOOC](#) (Massive Open Online Course) offerings, the approach taken on ConstitutionUK yielded some interesting results in terms of user contributions:

- some contribution: HarvardXMITx, 1%; ConstitutionUK, 48%
- more than five contributions: HarvardX-MITx, <1%; ConstitutionUK, 9%
- user retention (completing or active in final week): HarvardX-MITx, 2.5%; ConstitutionUK, 41%.

Is this a reasonable comparison? Surely, a crowdsourcing project and a MOOC (by which I mean [xMOOCs](#), rather than [cMOOCs](#) or the many derivatives thereof) are two very different things? Indeed, they are. What I would like to suggest is that through our work on ConstitutionUK we have perhaps unearthed some tentative answers to questions that continue to be asked of MOOCs and the major platform providers, regarding their effectiveness, sustainability, and purpose. I also think we have the beginnings of an approach which, if developed further, is well-suited to our status as a social sciences institution and which would deliver a unique synthesis of research, teaching and learning, and civic engagement.

Dr Claire Gordon and colleagues at the School's Teaching and Learning Centre have recently highlighted the [emerging trend of assessment diversification across the School](#) and concluded a series of very well-received, informal breakfast meetings to engage colleagues in discussion around research-informed teaching practice at the School. Having very much enjoyed these discussions, I see how our experience on ConstitutionUK can provide a contribution to both debates. We were able to demonstrate how it is possible to deliver large-scale, flexible, online offerings that: a) provide a range of educational opportunities and accommodate a diversity of participant interests; b) make clear to the wider public the value(s) of LSE research and teaching; and c) which, crucially, also provide unique research and learning opportunities for colleagues and students alike. This represents a clear alternative to standard MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) pedagogies and approaches.

Many MOOCs have closely replicated existing models of face-to-face instruction: the lecture (talking heads videos), reading lists, assessments (frequently multiple choice quizzes); all produced with a minimal amount of tailoring for the online environment or audience. By adopting all the nomenclature of the traditional face-to-face higher education experience, they are almost immediately off-putting to anyone with less than positive memories of their own educational experience (as shown by the disproportionate popularity of MOOCs among graduates). By importing the strictly scheduled, linear approach to learning that is a necessity of face-to-face instruction, it is almost inevitable that a proportion of registrants feel as though they're behind before they've even started. Accordingly, motivation suffers and students may disengage (true of anyone unable to keep pace with the schedule but even more so for late entrants). By adopting a non-linear approach and dispensing with the standard course structures, we created an environment that arguably became easier to engage with and contribute to as time went on and activity grew. We successfully fostered a community that continued to grow into its final week and ended with an impressive number of active participants overall. Despite not being pitched as an educational offering, there was a fair expectation of this among community members (56% of survey respondents having either 'some' or 'high' expectation) and we were able to identify a number of positive associations between aspects of the project and various indicators of learning (to be expanded upon fully in a forthcoming report).



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### **Crowdsourcing rich, new data sets**

An online civic engagement exercise such as ours reimagines research dissemination as a more active process, as opposed to the static project websites or research portals most typically seen. In order to better support community members, we worked to create an environment that was opportunity-rich and, critically, demand-light; with a minimum of obligations but many possible pathways through which we could encourage a diversity of interests that would inform contributions and so benefit the community as a whole. This meant having a well-curated, regularly updated content feed that was easily accessible to project members. So it was that across various tweets, Facebook and Storify postings, blog posts and video updates, as well as interviews with IPA Director Prof Gearty, we were able to repeatedly highlight the work of various LSE researchers working in areas related to the project.

A project like ConstitutionUK also generates huge amounts of longitudinal data that is both quantitatively exhaustive



and qualitatively rich. There were many millions of data points generated from our fairly modestly sized community. These captured the individual choices and contributions that shaped hundreds of developing conversations and defined the various user interactions, group formations and emergence of influencers within our community, as well as an overall sense of collective identity for participants. For LTI, we were able to undertake an extensive evaluation and impact assessment exercise to establish the efficacy of the underlying pedagogical and instructional model, which will inform changes and optimisations for future iterations. Though not a specific aim of ConstitutionUK, it is nevertheless easy to see how a project could be designed that generates an entirely new data set to inform new research.

### **Crowdsourcing offers new learning opportunities**

Where I continue to struggle with MOOCs is in understanding how institutions explain their participation in them to the student community. What benefit do these often costly activities return to the institution? How do they inform or enrich the student experience? There have been various attempts to create [hybrid classrooms](#) but all too often these seem to take as their starting point the justification for continuing participation in MOOCs. In giving LSE students an active role in the ConstitutionUK project, we offer a different conception of hybridity, one that goes beyond simply extracting economies by serving registered students content that has been designed for MOOC offerings and which instead recognises the domain knowledge which third-year undergraduates and postgraduates have command of and the value this can bring to an open civic engagement project. 20 of our LSE students were deployed as online facilitators, working in pairs to support discussions across various topic areas. Among their responsibilities was to jointly curate their own topic-level news feed via Storify (adding their contribution to the project's overall content proposition for community members), to support individual discussions and member interests by directing them to further learning opportunities, and also to provide weekly reports to the project team on overall user activity and community progress within their area. The experience was highly valued by our students and, though not tied to either a specific course or formative or summative assessment, the potential of this is clearly evident. There is also an opportunity to provide students with experience of data handling and analysis, working with new data generated by the project and so actively engaging them in the research process.

### **Conclusion**

It remains hard to pin down exactly what problem higher education institutions are hoping to solve with their MOOC offerings. Two recent articles consider the nature and development of the discourse surrounding MOOCs in both the [higher education press](#) and the [mainstream media](#). While discussions in the higher education press have been overwhelmingly concerned with MOOCs as they relate to teaching practice, the results of a thematic analysis of the wider, mainstream media, reveal that 'pedagogy' ranked only sixth within the discourse. [Elsewhere, there is the suggestion that MOOCs stand as a media phenomenon above all else](#), that they are somewhat 'imaginary'; the gap between media coverage and student numbers meaning they function as "a prefiguring of possible and desired realities rather than an unified and coherent domain around which clear boundaries exist". In rejecting a possible partnership with [edX](#), [Amherst College \(Massachusetts\)](#) asked: "[are we experimenting with them, or are they experimenting with us?](#)". Despite the many examples of fantastically innovative MOOC variants ([FemTechNet's DOCC](#), [DS106](#), [Phonar](#) etc.), this question still hangs over the sector. In comparison, a more active, crowdsourced approach appears to present an alternative that not only has higher rates of participant engagement, contributions, retention, and learning but can potentially generate new qualitative data for future research. The LTI team will continue to develop this research-teaching-learning framework and are currently working with colleagues across LSE departments on developing project ideas and related bids.

*An [archived version of the ConstitutionUK project](#) is still currently available to view online.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the author**

**Darren Moon** is a Senior Learning Technologist in LSE's Learning Technology and Innovation team. LTI works closely with teaching colleagues from across the School to critically evaluate educational technologies and associated pedagogies, and to ensure that where technology is used it extends teaching opportunities, enriches the student learning experience and enhances student learning outcomes. As well as maintaining the School's core teaching technologies (LSE Moodle, LSE Lecture Capture) LTI runs training and development workshops for teaching colleagues, as well as an ambitious programme of grant-supported, technology-enhanced learning projects. LTI's work explores areas such as assessment diversification through technology, the value of social media for teachers, and structured approaches to technology-enhanced teaching and learning.

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