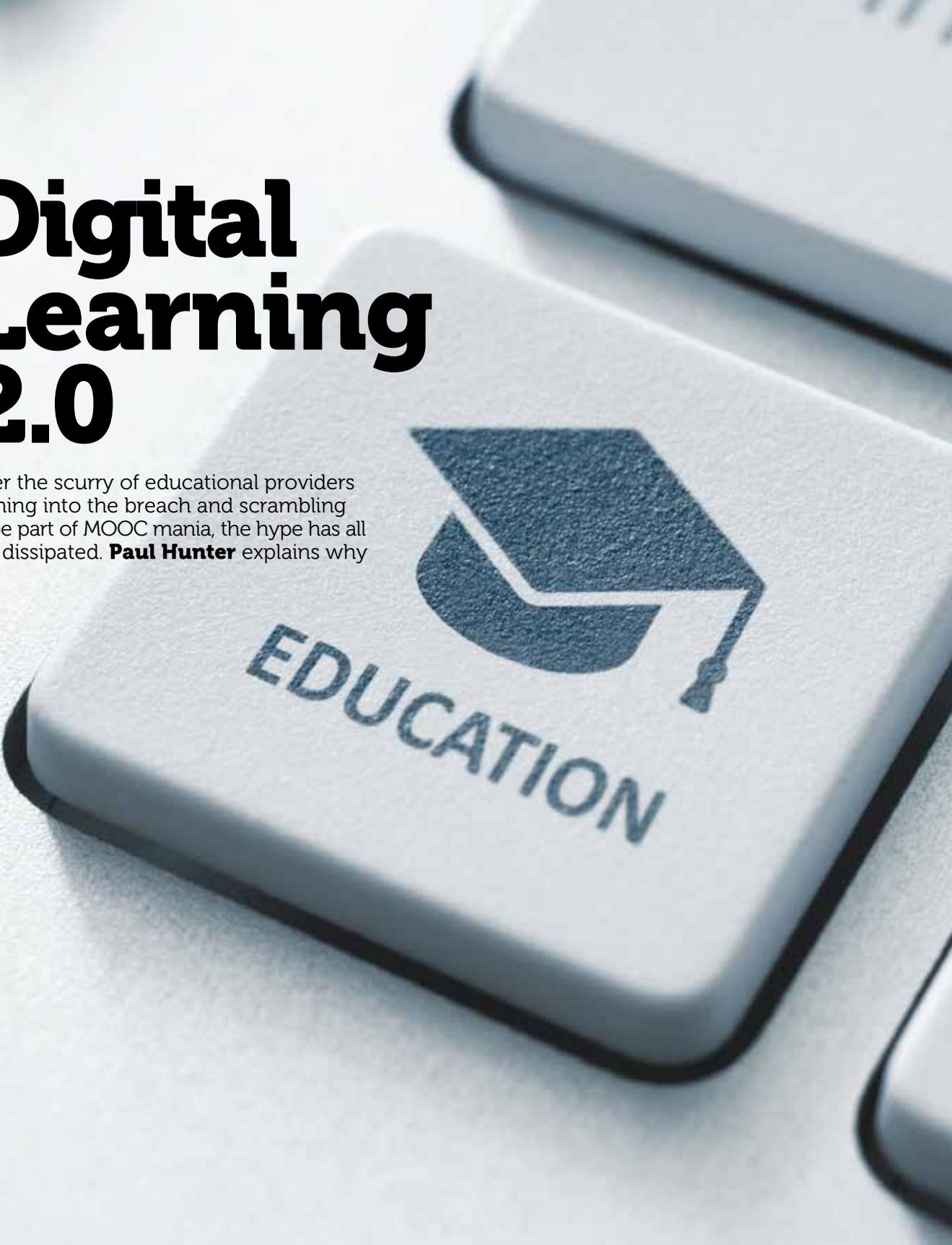


# Digital Learning 2.0

After the scurry of educational providers rushing into the breach and scrambling to be part of MOOC mania, the hype has all but dissipated. **Paul Hunter** explains why



EDUCATION

**M**OOCS (massive open online courses) undoubtedly have their place for disciplined and curious individuals with an iron will, available time and a natural predisposition to persevere. However, for time-stretched executives struggling to keep the train on the track while juggling high-pressure professional objectives and increasingly scarce personal time, MOOCs have not provided the hoped-for panacea.

Expecting executive learners to stay on an (online) course based on a cobbled-together jumble of videos, articles and chat rooms is farfetched. In such circumstances, expecting tangible results such as measurable business impact or observed behavioural change is delusional.

For virtual learning to work, a number of elements need to be deployed in parallel and constantly monitored and adjusted throughout the learner's journey. So what are the key success factors to ensure that executive learners are not only engaged but also transfer their learning into meaningful actions in their professional or personal context?

### **1. Start at the end**

In the creation of any learning experience, virtual or otherwise, being crystal clear on the participants' learning objectives is the place to start. The taxonomy named after Benjamin Bloom in the early 1950s has long since suggested ways of sharpening objectives to avoid undesirable bluff such as "By the end of this programme participants will be better strategic thinkers".

If this is true in the classroom, it is of paramount importance in the online arena. Switching on the studio lights or deploying the latest widget before learning objectives have been crisply defined, ensures a mediocre mix of multimedia segments that will simply not lead to executive learning. In a medium where learners crucially need to know upfront why they should invest their scarce time in spending more hours online rather than less, the deal needs to be clear from the outset.

### **2. Treat executives like executives**

Once the learning objectives have been honed, not only for the programme as a whole but for each individual segment, instructional design can

start in earnest. Moving from learning objectives, the next piece of the puzzle is determining how these objectives will be measured. Many online learning providers tend to come unstuck at this point.

Deploying a range of quizzes or multiple-choice questionnaires may seem expedient, but such a scholastic approach is simply not appreciated by executives and in many cases fails to provide meaningful data other than basic knowledge retention. The increasing trend towards the use of ever-more performing algorithms may de-bunk this current impasse but we are clearly not yet there.

On the other hand, asking executives to test out hypotheses, draw conclusions and submit evidence-based results on how they have used a particular concept in their professional arena not only provides a more engaging learning experience but allows learning facilitators to engage in a constructive dialogue.

### **3. Change the channel**

Once you are clear on your objectives and how you are going to measure them, you are ready to start content creation. Time and again education providers start with "what we do well in the classroom" and then move forward with a "virtual version". This is a sure-fire way to ensure disengaged learners, poor traction and massive drop-out.

It is a source of constant bafflement that educational providers believe they can switch from one learning medium to another without rethinking the basic learning premises. The pedagogical techniques that deliver an engaging face to face learning experience may simply not be appropriate in the online arena. Recycling classroom PowerPoint slides embellished with a few snippets of video footage does not constitute digital learning.

Additionally, too little attention is paid to the "in front of the screen" experience. If you think that screwing a camera onto a tripod in the back of a classroom, hitting the record button and then editing the footage into chunks will have executives flocking to your online offering, think again.

Creating a successful virtual learning journey for executives requires not only a new learning design that respects the chosen virtual channel, but a design that is seamlessly interwoven with the production and delivery process.

#### 4. Respect the “holy trinity” of virtual learning

Successful creators of virtual learning for executives need to be mindful of three distinct but interwoven aspects of online learning: design, production and delivery. Each of these activities is important in its own right but if any of them take place in a vacuum, the learning experience is doomed to fail.

Here we see three typical errors educational providers make:

- Video production is outsourced with scant regard to the original learning design and little thought for how programme facilitators or coaches will leverage their material. This makes for great-looking videos that are pleasing to the eye but may not deliver on the learning objectives.
- Design and production work together to ensure that content is created in alignment with learning objectives. So far, so good but the issue here is whether sufficient thought has been given to how this material will be used to enable learning. If a coach is providing feedback to participants who have been learning from material that they have had little involvement in, the risk of feedback being “lost in translation” is relatively high.
- Production and delivery work hand in hand, typically under the guidance of the classroom expert who may not see the need to adapt his or her learning material to an online arena. More often than not, this leads to an awkward online learning experience that satisfies neither participants nor the classroom expert. In the new virtual channel the classroom magic has gone and participants tend to drop out at a high rate of knots, frustrated that they were unable to access the classroom experience and feeling cheated by what is perceived as a second-class alternative.

#### 5. Keep the content fresh and easy to digest

Executives who have bought into investing time and energy in a virtual programme expect and deserve cutting-edge content. As educational providers, if we do not have fresh content ingredients in place – how you slice and dice them or what secret sauce you use will not hide the taste of stale content that has passed its sell-by date.

High quality movie-like productions bombard us every day: on TV screens that have popped up at airport security; in the carefully crafted online campaigns that get to us despite the best efforts of our spam filters; and in traditional TV advertising.

Amid the plethora of video material competing for our attention the entry-level ticket is high production values. Executives will simply not invest time watching a video that has been poorly executed or at best they will let it run in a corner of their screen while they get on with “real work” such as responding to emails. If you want to capture executives’ attention and keep them captivated for the seven to 10 minutes of your video footage, don’t scrimp on production values.

The content also needs to be easily digestible. Placing oneself in the participant’s online shoes can never be over-estimated. Is it really reasonable to expect a participant to watch a lengthy classroom video featuring the backs of heads, roving angles and dodgy camera shake?

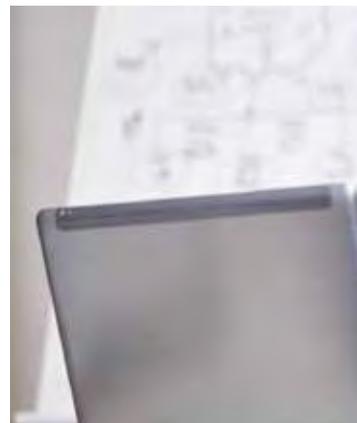
Is it sensible to serve up ingredients that have clearly been prepared for another purpose and expect the participant not to balk?

Ensuring that the content is fresh, varied, properly prepared and served up in the right portions will go a long way toward providing a digestible and memorable learning feast.

#### 6. Continuously demonstrate ROI

The most compelling reason we can give executives to devote time to a virtual programme is because they see for themselves the impact the programme is having on their professional context. Any activity that executives are asked to complete online that does not have a direct impact on their business arena is a waste of time.

In essence, the reason these executives commit weekly time online to follow a programme is that they implement learnings on a daily basis without leaving the office. The immediate nature of the learning transfer is undoubtedly the best way to tap into a participant’s intrinsic motivation.




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However, a constant in an executive's willingness to listen to feedback is how much they respect and trust the source.

In many online programmes for reasons of cost, operational efficiency or poor design, the feedback participants receive is at best worthless and at worst erroneous and counter productive. Feedback ranges from unstructured comments from random participants with wildly differing levels of relevant experience and expertise, to enforced peer feedback as part of a point-scoring system where a certain number of posts enables you to pass to the next level or gain a virtual badge. Whatever end of the spectrum the feedback comes from, it can hardly be characterised as meaningful.

If providers of online education want to get serious about online learning, they need to get serious about feedback.



## **7. Leverage qualified feedback as a catalyst for change**

So let's imagine that you have done your homework. Your learning objectives are clear, your online programme is properly designed, your production has been faithfully executed respecting design principles, your content pieces are judiciously chosen, and you have deployed a variety of learning tools and techniques to support the pedagogical aims. Have you done enough? Unfortunately, when it comes to meeting the needs of executives, the answer is probably no.

No matter how many of the above boxes you have ticked, if you want to guarantee learning transfer and be able to point to measurable return on investment executives need cogent feedback from someone they accept as a respected source of expertise.

Remember that executives are receiving feedback on a daily basis from customers, peers, bosses and subordinates. The smart executive takes this feedback seriously, is attentive to patterns and constellations in the input they receive, and tries to adapt his or her roadmap accordingly.

Whom they choose to listen to will depend on a number of independent variables: the executive's emotional intelligence, cognitive biases, listening skills, openness to change and resilience to deal with criticism, to name but a few.

### **To sum up...**

MOOCs and executives are far from a marriage made in heaven. With the exception of steely individuals prepared to cut through a sizeable chunk of irrelevant broadcast material to unearth their own learning nuggets and who are willing to be treated as participants rather than executives, MOOCs will simply not provide the meaningful learning transfer that many executives are looking for – and indeed have already experienced in face-to-face learning experiences.

Educational providers need to understand the changing needs of executives and double their efforts to be customer-centric, implementing dedicated virtual design, production and delivery techniques that lead to a learning experience that garners measurable impact. Anything less will not do.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Paul Hunter is Director of IMD's Corporate Learning Network and spearheads IMD's Digital Learning. He was formerly General Manager of the Wall Street Institute (Switzerland, France, Germany), Managing Partner of a boutique consultancy firm specialising in executive assessment and leadership development, and freelance BBC radio reporter.

He is a graduate of both Cambridge and Oxford Universities in the UK (BA Cantab, MA Cantab, PGCE, Oxon) and received an EMBA with honours from IMD. Paul is also the Vice Chair of ELIG (European Learning Industry Group) and a member of the EFMD Corporate University accreditation team.