

# Billy's Story: MOOCs, CYC and Storytelling

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## Abstract

*Yuan and Powell (2013) describe Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a 'relatively recent online learning phenomenon' which has been developed for a mixture of philanthropic and business motives. The potential of MOOCs has prompted a number of universities to set up open learning platforms and provide courses online. In the UK, the Open University created Futurelearn, a partnership involving a number of leading UK universities, providing a number of open, online courses at no cost to learners (Futurelearn, 2012). The University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, subsequently joined this partnership. This article outlines the process of developing Strathclyde's fourth MOOC, Caring for Vulnerable Children, its relationship with our MSc in Child and Youth Care Studies by distance learning and explores some of the challenges and opportunities in teaching child and youth care in a completely online environment.*

From January 2014 onwards The University of Strathclyde developed and delivered three different MOOCs – Introduction to Forensic Science, Understanding Modern Business and Organisations and Introduction to Journalism. All were well received and popular, in particular Introduction to Forensic Science, which recruited more than 26,000 participants in its first run alone and garnered significant amounts of positive feedback from course learners. This MOOC has now run five times with a total of more than 52,000 registered participants.

When considering the development of a fourth MOOC, there was a strong desire to involve a different part of the University, in particular the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. This opportunity was presented to the staff team involved in developing and launching the MSc in Child and Youth Care Studies by distance learning and also involved working in partnership with the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in

Scotland (CELCIS). It was hoped that a high quality product could be developed which would make a contribution to both the philanthropic and business motives of many MOCC providers mentioned above. The philanthropic piece would be the creation of a free, open-to-access learning resource for all residential and child and youth care practitioners, and indeed other related professionals, which would contribute to the development of the field. However, a business angle also existed with the opportunity to use a free online, distance learning program to publicise the income generating online, distance learning MSc program.

Establishing this link in a meaningful manner presented one obvious challenge. Whilst the MSc is aimed at experienced practitioners with prior educational qualifications, MOOCs are open and accessible to all. Masters level study involves and requires engagement with material in an in-depth manner, engaging critically with theory and research. MOOCs by comparison offer the chance to present an introduction to subject matter but not necessarily the time or space to explore key concepts in significant depth. Consequently, there was a need for constant review and attempt to achieve a suitable balance in the material between talking to experienced practitioners alongside those who could conceivably be completely new or external to the field.

Initial tasks involved setting out the curriculum to be covered during what would be a 6-week course where the material would equate to 3-4 hours of participant work per week. The course was placed within a clear political context, stating that in times of austerity and shrinking public resources, the task of identifying and caring for vulnerable children has never been more challenging. Following this, six weekly themes were decided upon, these providing a more detailed shape and structure and shape for the course. The six themes were: Vulnerability and Risk; Attachment and Child Development; Communication; Key Characteristics of Practice; Responses to Vulnerable Children and Ways Forward in Caring for Vulnerable Children.


The next task involved creating the mixture of resources for each week. These included weekly video introductions, text based pages, video based inputs focussing on key curriculum themes, discussion pages, a weekly quiz designed to allow participants to measure their progress, and a series of polls which participants complete to promote and stimulate discussion.

The process of creating the video based inputs on key curriculum themes was a particularly interesting process. MOOCs, due to their free and voluntary nature, finish with far fewer fully participating learners than first register. Different sources cite figures between 7% (Parr, 2013) and 13% (Onah, Sinclair & Boyatt, 2014) as the average

completion rate for MOOCs – and perhaps the main challenge for all MOOC developers is how to keep learners as fully engaged as possible. Barriers to completion are significant (Kennedy, 2014) and there are not the regular drivers associated with fee paying and credit bearing courses.

In the case of Caring for Vulnerable Children, part of the strategy to tackle this issue involved keeping all items or pages to a manageable size and/or duration for learners. Text based pages had an upward limit of 500 words whilst all video based inputs had to fit to an ‘8-minute rule’. This presented an interesting challenge to those recording inputs on complex subjects such as containment and holding environments, attachment theory and care for children in a risk-averse environment. The challenge involved presenting a coherent introduction and/or overview in a relatively short window, especially when many were used to the luxury of far longer lecture slots on traditionally taught courses, whilst simultaneously speaking to the previously mentioned mixture of experienced practitioners alongside those completely new to the subject and the discipline.

Another significant task – a storytelling component – involved an element which had evolved as a key feature of the Strathclyde MOOCs developed prior to Caring for Vulnerable Children. The first MOOC developed by Strathclyde, An Introduction to Forensic Science, had incorporated a fictional video based story which formed part of the weekly learning materials. In the Forensic Science MOOC it took the form of a murder mystery where the events and issues featuring in the story each week mirrored the course content and curriculum. Upon review of the course feedback it was clear that participants enjoyed the storytelling element of this MOOC and in some cases they fed back



3.7 YOU'VE COMPLETED 0 STEPS IN WEEK 2

[View transcript](#) [Download video: standard or HD](#)

## Containment and holding environments

208 comments

In the second presentation this week with Dr Laura Steckley, we are introduced to the concepts of containment and holding environments.

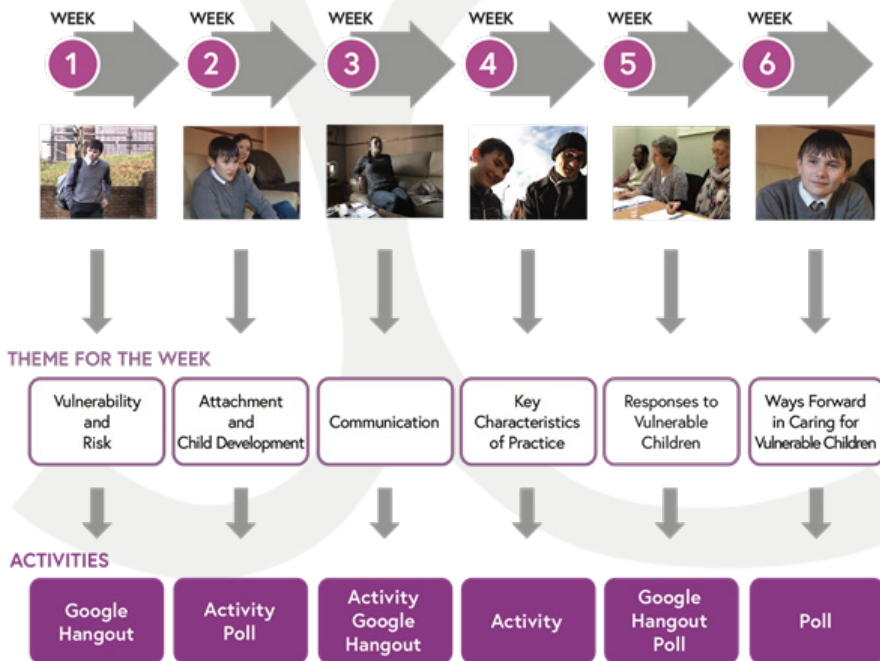
She starts by making clear that containment is not the same as constraint. Similarly, she highlights how holding environments can sometimes be inaccurately be confused with holding therapies.

that the story that weaved its way through the six weeks of the course was the hook that kept them coming back each week and encouraging them to complete the course, and at the same time contributing significantly to the challenge of boosting retention and completion rates.

Consequently, all Strathclyde MOOCs adopted this same storytelling technique. The task for this MOOC was to develop a storyline which complimented and contributed to the curriculum of Caring for Vulnerable Children. This subsequently took the form of “Billy’s Story” and became, arguably, the cornerstone and greatest asset of the entire course.

The task here moved beyond the traditional writing of academic course material and involved developing the broad storyline, from this creating a far more detailed storyboard to guide filming, scouting and securing locations and cast members and then the actual

## The Case Study – ‘Billy’s Story’



shoot. The work involved in this whole process was considerable but was rewarded with hugely positive feedback from course participants as well as external recognition when the Billy's Story element of the course was the winner of a British Universities Film and Video Council Learning on Screen Award in April 2016.

Whilst post-course feedback didn't specifically measure the degree to which Billy's Story impacted on retention rates, comments posted on a weekly basis pointed towards it playing a significantly positive role. Many learners regularly commented on how worried or concerned they were about Billy and his family and were keen for the story to develop the next week to find out how he was getting on. Many of these comments evidenced the true effectiveness of the storytelling, as learners connected the story and the events being played out to the course curriculum.



In the week where child development and attachment were the focus, Billy's Story featured some of his early childhood experiences and family relationships. In the final week, when the story ended but clearly pointed towards ongoing challenges, this reflected the course material that week which encouraged learners to reflect on the challenges involved in continuing to provide on-going support and care in a climate of austerity and resource shortages. Whilst fictional, the issues explored were very real and Billy acted as a means by which learners could both think about how the course material



related to practice, as well as making links, where appropriate, to their own role and work setting.

Another learning tool employed was Google Hangouts – of which there were three. These provided a different strand of interaction for learners with potentially real-time interactions with course staff as opposed to asynchronous comments and posts in forums. Learners were invited to post questions to course members which would then be answered and responded to in a live session, which was also recorded and made available retrospectively via YouTube to participants who couldn't join in as it was broadcast.

These live sessions lasted 40 minutes each and feedback here was again very positive with many comments pointing towards an appreciation of being able to hear questions and talking points being explored in more depth. These sessions, perhaps more than any other component of the course, served to highlight the huge complexity involved in the task of caring for vulnerable children and the lack of concrete solutions and answers to deeply complex scenarios.

How effective was Caring for Vulnerable Children overall in achieving its aims, both philanthropic and business? The evidence would point towards success on both fronts. In terms of philanthropy and making something available to the child and youth care community, participation numbers indicate that the opportunities provided by Caring for Vulnerable Children have been seized upon. The first four runs of the course saw more than 40,000 learners enrol to join. Completion rates hover at around 30%, significantly above the industry average. Participant enrolment data reveals learners from more than 100 countries were represented, indicating a truly global reach. Learner profiles and comments indicate that many participants were residential workers, teachers, social

workers, Scottish Children's Panel members, foster carers and child and youth care workers all undertaking and completing the course for reasons of continuous professional development. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the course has been successful in providing a resource to the sector, particularly in Scotland.

However, these have not been the only successes. Perhaps the biggest achievement has been the consistently excellent sociability rating that the course records. Sociability refers to learners who are actively participating in the course on a week to week basis, posting comments and engaging in discussion and debate. The average figure for Futurelearn MOOCs is 38%. After the first four runs of Caring for Vulnerable Children, the sociability rating was standing at 59%, the highest ever recorded for a Futurelearn MOOC. This translated into 149,990 posted comments in the first four runs of the course. Whilst not the highest Futurelearn course in terms of registered participants, it has outstripped others in successfully encouraging learners to actively engage and participate in the learning process. The reasons behind this could be connected to a range of factors. Futurelearn themselves have regularly cited the techniques used in Caring for Vulnerable Children as an



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## Discuss Billy's Story: 'Ongoing challenges'

Why not wait until you have seen the final video before adding your comments to this discussion?

When you have found out what happens in Billy's story you can come back to this step and comment on the decision taken by the Children's Hearing. You might also want to think about whether society and/or the state should do more to support families such as Billy's and what may prove helpful to Billy and his family as they move forward.

### DISCUSSION

Everyone | Following | **Most liked** | Your comments

**Alden Johnston**  
 Leave a comment... (plain text only, links will be auto-linked)  
 Post Max 1200 chars

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**[Redacted]** Follow 15 FEB  
 I hope Billy's mum gets the support she needs to tackle her depression counselling, what causes her depression, additional financial support & better education. Once mum is sorted Billy can relax, he may even attend some of the sessions to meet others  
 Like 9

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**[Redacted]** Follow 19 FEB  
 This is the question, the panel recommend the temporary placement for Billy do they also make recommendations for mum? It would have been nice to see her GP or Community Mental Health Nurse at the hearing so that they could have had some input, I would like to think there would be some inter agency working on trying to organise Billy's temporary placement with some increased therapy/day hospital care/psychiatric review for Karen. It would seem a shame to not utilise this time positively for them both.  
 Like 4

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**[Redacted]** Follow 19 FEB  
 That's a good point Natalie, having the GP there would show that mum is getting the help she needs to deal with her mental health which in turn would help Billy.  
 Like 1

Reply

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**[Redacted]** Follow 19 FEB  
 I am glad to see that the panel decided not to remove Billy from his home but is there no way of making his mother stepping into a kind of contract binding her to take more and specific measures to work on her own situation, her own mental health issues. Sometimes it needs pressure and a kind of wake up call to move people out of their passive miserable yet comforting zone of depression. I am not condescending here, I am speaking from experience.  
 Like 1

excellent example of how to set-up and stimulate discussion, so course design would appear to be part of it.

The participation of so many professionals from the field for the formal purpose of continuous professional development is also a likely factor and perhaps hints at a clear role and purpose for MOOCs as they move forward. CELCIS clearly see this a potential future strategy and are currently involved in developing a MOOC based around *Moving Forward: Implementing the 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children'* (Cantwell, 2012).

A clear business objective associated with Caring for Vulnerable Children was the link to the MSc in Child and Youth Care Studies. It was felt that there was the potential for the MOOC to enhance recruitment on the MSc, especially given that both are entirely online and delivered via distance learning, and both have the same lead educator. This objective can again be seen to have been successfully achieved with a number of students progressing from Caring for Vulnerable Children to the MSc in 2015 and 2016.

The experience of creating and delivering Caring for Vulnerable Children has also been highly instructive with regards to the future development of the MSc. Delivering child and youth care in an online distance learning environment holds certain challenges, most specifically the task of dealing with a subject which, at its core, is relational. Caring for Vulnerable Children has and continues to help inform the manner in which the MSc is shaped and delivered, most specifically the task of achieving high levels of socialisation and learner interactions. As Higher Education continues to engage increasingly with online technology and different delivery models, this is a challenge that those involved in education and training in the child and youth care sector will have to respond to. Some of the lessons learned from the development of Caring for Vulnerable Children and Billy's Story can help to inform this process.

Caring for Vulnerable Children is free to access and will be running for a fifth time starting on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2016. It can be registered for in advance at <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/vulnerable-children>

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