Speaking about SPOC: Can a Small Private Online Course (SPOC) Be a Viable Solution for Teaching English?

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Abstract: The article looks at the process of designing a language SPOC (Small Private Online Course) for second- and third-year students from the West University of Timisoara (WUT), Romania, who chose *Learning English with Technology* (LET) as Transversal Discipline. The course recommends ways of using free online tools for practicing English grammar and lexical items. After running the pilot course, we requested the students' feedback to find out how they evaluated their progress and what we still needed to work on in order to adapt the course to the Transversal Disciplines curricula and thus ensure sustainability of SPOCs at WUT.

Keywords: teaching, English, online courses, SPOC

1. Introduction

Online courses have changed the way in which people study and develop their competencies (at their own pace, from the comfort of their home, etc.). Universities have taken up this trend and started creating such courses, integrating them in the curricula, and even giving credits to students who complete them.

During the past decade, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) were created and used by higher education institutions as support for an educational transformation, for lifelong learning, for specialization or improvement of professional skills, to share

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expertise on various topics with anyone, or to enroll international students with no access higher education. A MOOC typically integrates video lectures, computer-graded tests, peer or self-reviewed assignments and online discussion forums.

Sokolova (2017) points out that MOOCs "brought a revolution to education, freeing knowledge from the restrictions of traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms and making it available for free". It follows that people with Internet access from all over the world now have a chance to take professional courses and even get certificates without actually attending universities. But, Sokolova also raises the question if on-campus students should take MOOCs, too.

The authors of this paper believe a Small Private Online Course (SPOC) is, perhaps, a better solution for Romanian universities. The term SPOC was coined in 2013 by Armando Fox, professor at University of California Berkeley. He suggested that "if MOOCs are used as a supplement to classroom teaching rather than being viewed a replacement for it, they can increase instructor leverage, student throughput, student mastery, and student engagement". Practically, a SPOC is a combination between traditional classroom and a MOOC (Fox, 2013). Sokolova (2017) concurs that SPOCs are not aimed at replacing or "replicating classroom education, but rather at complementing it through blended learning and flipped classrooms". Coughlan (2013) also agrees that enrolling students in a SPOC allows a successful mix between face-to-face lectures with small groups of students and online materials (video lectures, practical activities, interaction by leaving comments or posting on forums).

Therefore, one could argue that SPOC and MOOC "are not alternative, but parallel" (Guo, 2017). While a massive open online course is the best solution for outside the campus, addressing a large-scale education and resource sharing, a SPOC is a smaller-scale version of a MOOC, more suitable to be used locally with on-campus students. A SPOC focuses on certain groups of learners, qualified to take the course and ready to interact with others throughout the learning process. Hence, SPOCs successfully "combine online resources and technology with personal engagement between faculty and students" and the result is a small-scale private online learning community (Bull, 2013).

2. Literature review

Najafi et al. (2015) suggest that teaching online credit courses (whether MOOC or SPOC), requires "advance planning and continuous presence to provide feedback". It takes time to design a course, to leave comments, to assess. Then, it takes time to re-design according to students' feedback. According to Holland & Tirthali (2014) "course redesign may result in a flipped classroom format using MOOC material or integrating frequent feedback, discussion, and peer-assessment within the curriculum".

Guo (2017) notes that SPOC is the revised form of MOOC in Higher Education, and that student participation and completion rates are higher when using

SPOCs. Other advantages of SPOC include the fact that learning resources are personalized according to the students' characteristics, micro videos can emphasize targeted contents, there is real time-management, and the real names of participants are requested. That allows for better management of classroom activity, personalized feedback, as well as enhanced interaction and communication among students. The restricted number of students means teachers can assess their work more thoroughly.

Hua (2018) demonstrates the effectiveness of a SPOC-based learning model in teaching linguistics. The author shows how this type of course can compensate for the shortcomings of MOOCs. Course completion can reach high rates, online resources are combined with classroom instruction and group work, students are active rather than just receptive entities, and learning is maximized as a result. But course construction is critically important for these positive results to be achieved. Hua divides it in 3 parts: pre-class (in order to achieve the learning goals teachers can give specific instructions to students and they can make use of the online content of the course), in class (questions are asked and answered to ensure the quality of learning), and post-class (students do more exercises and read more advanced materials to consolidate what they have learned). In summary, this learning model preserves students' attentiveness, satisfies their individual learning needs, and successfully combines online, offline, group and self-learning.

3. Transversal disciplines

Taking into consideration these qualities of SPOCs, we decided to adapt the transversal discipline *Learning English with Technology* (LET) to a small private online course for students enrolled in WUT.

Transversal complementary disciplines (TCD) (WUT, 2018) have been included in the curricula since the 2014-2015 academic year, WUT being the first Romanian university to do that. The main aim of TCD is to form transversal competencies, other than explicit professional ones. In short, transversal competencies ensure: team-work abilities; oral and written communication abilities (in the student's mother tongue or in a foreign language); critical thinking and argumentation abilities; using ICT (Information and Communication Technology); problem-solving and decision-making; acknowledging and respecting diversity and multiculturalism; learner autonomy; initiative and entrepreneurship; openness to lifelong learning; respecting and developing professional values and ethics; abilities to work, in an interdisciplinary manner, with methodologies and concepts from sciences, social sciences, humanities, art, etc.

Academic curricula of all the faculties from our university include at least three optional disciplines (apart from foreign languages), one per semester (during the 3rd, 4th, and 5th semesters), aiming to form transversal competencies. Students can choose disciplines from different fields of study than the one they are majoring in, from their faculty or from a different one. TCD have 1 lecture and 1 seminar or

laboratory each week and students receive 2 transferrable credits (ECTS) upon course completion (as part of the 180 mandatory credits).

Table 1. Distribution of TCD between 2014-2019 at WUT

# of total disciplines*	# of offered disciplines*				
	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015
	161	158	175	160	78

source: Rector's reports (2014-2018)

Learning English with Technology (LET) is a transversal discipline aimed at forming transversal competencies. Like the other transversal complementary disciplines, LET is included in the curricula of all the bachelor programs offered by the 11 faculties belonging to WUT.

4.   Learning English with Technology (LET)

LET was created as a pilot SPOC and included in the TCD program during the second semester of the 2017/2018 academic year. WUT encourages blended courses, MOOCs, flipped classrooms, so this pilot SPOC was used with students who had chosen LET as transversal discipline.

The authors of this paper took into consideration that SPOCs can be a convenient method of teaching English as a transversal discipline. Such a course enables the tutor(s) to use the available technology in order to cover general aspects connected to language learning, but at the same time to adapt the content to the target learners' needs (2nd and 3rd year Romanian students from different faculties and majors). Moreover, students could later use the tools, apps, software, and transfer the knowledge to their fields of interest (in professional or personal contexts).

However, adapting the SPOC for building transversal competencies was challenging. Heterogeneity of university students and learning needs raised key issues for us. For example, those who had enrolled in the course had basic Internet and computer skills and intermediate level of English, but came from various majors, so to the best of our knowledge they had little else in common. Eventually, we decided to provide the background for learners to become fundamental actors "for co-designing and co-producing the online course within real-world settings, thus realizing the co-creation through a virtuous collaboration between producers and users" (Prahalad & Krishnan, 2008).

As mentioned above, the advantages of using a SPOC for transversal disciplines include personalized learning resources, real time-management, real names, students engaged in co-creating content, not mere recipients, but active participants.

4.1. Building the SPOC

The platform we used to host the SPOC was Teachable (https://teachable.com/). Each of the 7 units of the course included short audio/video lectures, reading material, external links, as well as tutorials for using the technological tools which would enrich the learners' experience. Short video lectures are a key learning component. Brief, precise and engaging, they can include in-video quizzes to give learners opportunities to reflect on content (Cummins, Beresford & Rice, 2016). At the end of each unit, students had to complete tasks and activities, as well as grammar quizzes.

"Collect or create?" According to Burns & Goldin (2016), this is another important question we should ask ourselves when designing online courses. Collecting resources others have come up with (podcasts, video lectures) may not respond to learners' needs, so creating tailored content for our students is sometimes better. However, teachers are not video producers, so this may prove difficult.

Burns & Goldin (2016) divide the digital resources used for SPOCs into three categories:

1. *High production* (these require extensive investment in both time and equipment). As examples we mention the TED talks, video materials posted on video-sharing sites like YouTube (see those by the Khan Academy), infographics, advanced modules or widgets made in HTML or with other professional software.

2. *Medium production* (this kind of resources can be produced in academic facilities normally equipped by individual instructors). As an example, one can refer to professional podcasts.

3. *Low production* (the resources can be produced "on a day to day basis"). As examples we could list blog posts, the messages sent/received through email software or tweets, video-logs (v-logs slightly edited) - which allow giving feedback and responding directly to students. Another example points toward presentations (in Powerpoint, Google Slides, Keynote etc.) - the instructor can narrate and then post the presentation (involving minimal additional work).

Altogether, building a SPOC probably requires a mixture of "collect and create", as well as the collaboration of teachers and professionals. We did not have support staff, instructional designers, video creators, web designers, so for LET we used mainly low production resources, alongside high and medium taken from TED, Youtube, other channels.

In summary, when designing LET we had to:

- decide on the contents (grammar, vocabulary topics);
- find links to documents available on the Web, search and select open educational resources (OERs) to be part of the course;
- record ourselves to produce short, original audio lectures and animations;
- think about the free tools, apps, sites that would be most suitable and engaging for each learning unit;

- and create grammar quizzes and vocabulary tasks, as well as seminar activities.

4.2. Learning outcomes

Our main goal was to integrate digital technologies and online apps in order to:
- develop communication competencies in English;
- consolidate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and abilities;
- practice fundamental issues connected to English grammar: the verb (modes, tenses, aspects), the noun (plural, countable and uncountable), the adjective and the adverb, linking words and transitional expressions (conjunctions, prepositions), word order;
- enrich vocabulary;
- encourage creativity and critical thinking;
- and improve digital competencies of working with images, sounds, videos and animations.

These objectives were achieved since we used digital and multimedia tools, as well as software, to enable practicing a language. At the same time, we provided students from various majors with the opportunity to discover and use new technologies while solving practical language-learning tasks. Throughout the semester, students developed their communication competencies in English in a different, but engaging manner.

In accordance with these goals and expected outcomes, we searched, selected and included sites, apps, tools suitable for practicing the 4 skills: reading, writing, but also listening and speaking (see Table 2).

Table 2. Examples of tools used for each skill

Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing
Voki, Flipgrid, Voicethread	BBC learning English, Audioboom, AI, Lyrics training, Youtube channels for learning English (pronunciation)	Pottermore, Awesome stories	The Hero's journey, Cube creator, Storyboardthat, email, blog posts, Haiku

4.3. SPOC assessment components

To check the grammar we designed computer-graded quizzes (multiple choice). For the seminar activities we gave face-to-face feedback during class, while for the more complex vocabulary tasks which had to be finished at home, we posted online comments. The final grade was obtained by solving all the quizzes and by completing at least one vocabulary activity from each unit (usually, at least two activities were included). In order to complete the activities, learners had to engage with course material and even with their peers (for group work).

Although peer-assessment and self-reflection are possible in a SPOC, we did not provide grading rubrics meant to facilitate these forms of evaluation. Thus, the tutor assessed the work of all the 64 students enrolled in the course.

5. Methodology

Recent trends in technology-based education consider learners' preferences and perspective as valuable sources of information to improve an online course (Lefevre & Cox, 2016). After designing and running the pilot SPOC, we developed a small questionnaire to collect reactions from students. We analyzed their input to find out how we could improve LET and promote a more satisfactory learning experience for future learners.

A combined method, quantitative and qualitative, was used for this study. For the quantitative analysis, we chose as instrument an online questionnaire that was applied after the last lecture, but before the final examination. For the qualitative component we carried out a sentiment analysis using the MonkeyLearn application (https://monkeylearn.com/).

Only 10 questions were included in the evaluation of the course, concerning didactic issues (content and resources, teaching and tutoring, course organization, clarity of learning goals, assessment methods), technological aspects (communication and interaction tools, friendliness of apps, availability), and the overall evaluation of users' experience (originality compared to traditional courses and pedagogical methods, learners' satisfaction, other positive/negative aspects we may not have foreseen, as well as suggestions for improvement).

5.1. Data synthesis and discussions

Learning English with Technology was completed by 64 students (47 females, 17 males) during the second semester of the academic year 2017-2018.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the volume of work devoted to theoretical activities (vocabulary, grammar, suggestions for using apps) was around one hour (39). 21 students responded that they needed 2-3 hours to engage with the theoretical content and 4 participants said they needed more than 4 hours. On the other hand, for the practical activities (tasks and quizzes), most students (51) needed 1-2 hours.
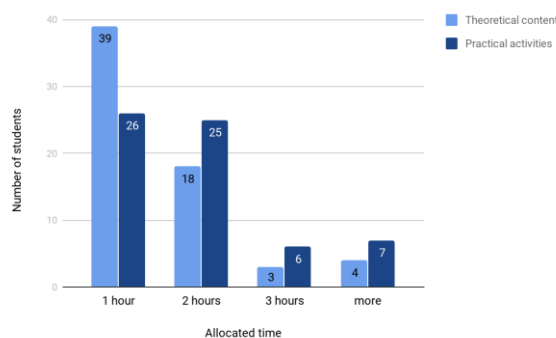
Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses to Question 1: *„How much time a week do you estimate you have spent on a particular unit for: a) browsing theoretical content, and b) performing practical activities?"* (on a scale from an hour, 2 hours, to 3 hours and more)

These results may indicate efficient time management and time allocated to the course and seminar on behalf of both teacher and students. What is more, the theoretical content seems to have been presented in an attractive manner, accessible and easy to understand.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses to Question 2: *„How do you evaluate: a) the course (and seminar) content; b) the materials used (links to videos, articles, other web resources); c) assessment activities?"* (on a scale from 1 to 5: very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, satisfied and very satisfied)
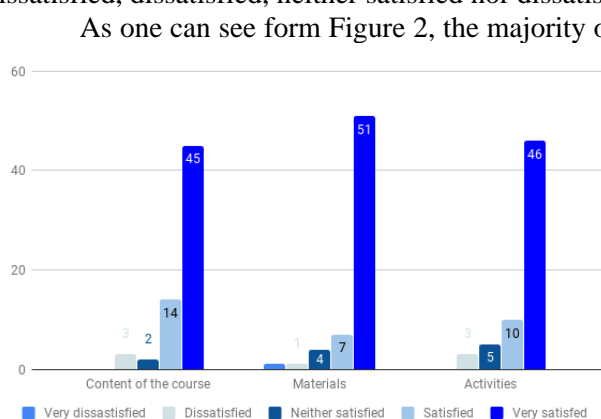
As one can see form Figure 2, the majority of respondents assessed the content as being applicative and highly interactive (45/51/46 were very satisfied). This means learners considered the course materials to be well-organized and suited to their learning needs.

For Question 3 "*To what extent do you think the learning objectives were clearly expressed at the beginning of each unit?*" (on a scale from 1 to 5: very poor, below average, average, above average, very clear), 53 of the students (82,8%) gave score 5. Hence, the teacher formulated the learning objectives clearly, as well as the students' responsibilities and the assessment criteria.

The fourth Question wanted to find out to what extent the main learning objectives (building vocabulary and practicing English grammar at intermediate level) were fulfilled. On a scale from 1 to 5 (to a very small extent, to a small extent, to some extent, to a large extent, to a very large extent), 47 students (73,4%) answered that these goals were achieved to a large extent. This is in accordance with the transversal competencies of the discipline – see Table 3.

Table 3. Specific skills from the LET syllabus

Transversal competencies	- stimulating trust and motivation to work in multidisciplinary teams; - participating in social learning activities; - promoting reform and innovation in higher education; - innovation and creativity during novel learning experiences; - taking creative advantage of one's potential in scientific activities; - improving employment opportunities by acquiring basic English knowledge and the ability to use new technologies

Figure 3 shows that more than half the students rated the activities and quizzes included in each unit as useful.
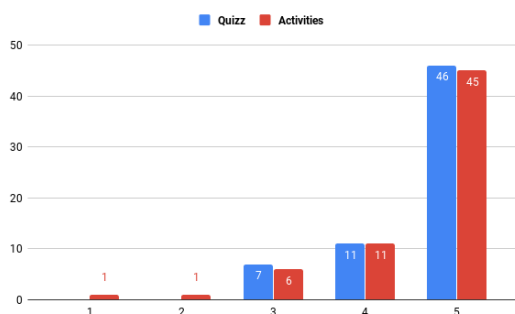
Figure 3: The distribution of responses to Question 5: *"How do you rate the assessment methods?"* on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not useful and 5 extremely useful.

Question 6 is very important because we asked students whether they believed they had made any progress regarding their English knowledge after completing *Learning English with Technology*. 36 students (56,3%) checked 5, which means they had made significant progress, and 14 participants (21,9%) checked 4. So, the majority of learners considered they had made important progress while taking this course.

For Question 7, "*Considering that we are talking about online content, how do you evaluate the teacher's effort throughout the semester to increase the accessibility of the course?*" (on a scale from 1 to 5: not at all satisfactory, to highly satisfactory), 54 students (84,4%) evaluated the teacher's efforts to increase accessibility of the course as highly satisfactory. Thus, active participation was encouraged and further explanations were provided when needed. Overall, the teacher's performance was highly appreciated, with only 2 students giving lower scores.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses for Question 8 "How do you evaluate the difficulty of using technological tools such as: *a) the Teachable platform, b) the suggested apps?*" (on a scale from 1 to 5: very easy, easy, neither easy nor difficult, difficult, very difficult)
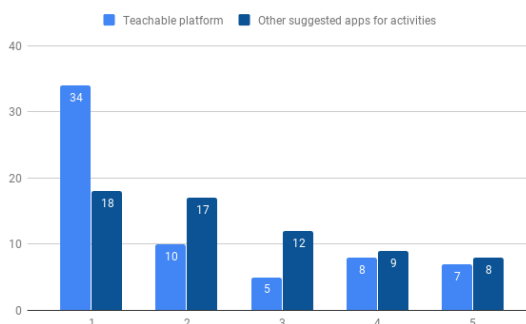
As we can see from Figure 4, both the platform and the apps were deemed as rather simple to use. Thus, our students became easily familiar with the technology we suggested in each unit to enhance communication, collaboration, content creation, sharing, brainstorming, polling (see Figure 5). As far as copyright is concerned, it has to be mentioned here that students were instructed how to assign a Creative Commons license to their work.

The penultimate question in our survey was open-ended and requested comments or suggestions. In Table 4, one can see the results of the sentiment analysis we used for the answers to Question 9. The polarity of the corpus collected from the students' survey is positive (29 positive, 26 neutral and 6 negative), which means that

almost all students evaluate their participation in the course as a positive experience. The majority of comments from the Neutral category are "No suggestions".

Figure 5. Tools and applications used by students during LET

Table 4. Polarity results with MonkeyLearn for 61 valid responses (out of 64 participants)

Question 9: What comments or suggestions can you make to help us improve the content, activities, choice of apps, etc.	Classification	Confidence
No comment.	Negative	66,3%
I would see an improvement if there were more interactive activities.	Positive	73,2%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
No comment	Negative	66,3%
Everything was very well structured and organized, learning was pleasant. Everything is fine as it is with this course.	Positive	99,5%
I really enjoyed working on this platform and I would take the course next semester as well, as an optional course, even if I don't have to get a grade. I think it helped me improve and everything is clearer now. The perfect mix between fun and learning.	Positive	99,9%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
No suggestions, I just hope students will be more curious.	Positive	42,7%
More apps like the one from Unit 4 with the story =)	Neutral	69,8%
I don't think those apps are necessary.	Neutral	53,8%
Congratulations!	Positive	93,8%

No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
Everything is perfect as it is.	Positive	96,9%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
I think more quizzes would be useful. Other than that, the course was very well structured, interesting and useful.	Positive	99,3%
The course was highly interactive. Using technology in the teaching-learning process is very useful, especially since young people spend a lot of time online, and by taking this course they could make good use of their online time.	Positive	98,9%
Keep going, the course's just fine	Neutral	52,5%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
Maybe more speaking activities	Neutral	86%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
The apps are quite interactive, but to some extent I don't think they are the most appropriate for students.	Positive	86,7%
I liked it, I wouldn't change a thing.	Positive	97,8%
Everything is well structured, I don't have any suggestions.	Positive	86%
Using technology and online apps in the teaching-learning process is a very good idea, because in this way young people can do something useful with the time they spend online.	Positive	83,6%
The apps were useful and I will certainly use them in the future. It really was a practical course. No further suggestions ;)	Positive	99,1%
More grammar	Negative	95,8%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
Dr. Pimsleur's Method	Negative	54%
No suggestions, the course is very good as it is. You understand the tasks even without asking the teacher.	Positive	98,2%
The quizzes should be more complex.	Negative	70,5%

Everything is fine.	Positive	74,4%
I suggest adding new activities.	Positive	75,4%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
More details when it comes to using apps, as some students may not be as keen on using and integrating the use of technology in their learning at first.	Positive	63,8%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
The course is fine as it is.	Positive	91,4%
No comments	Neutral	66,3%
Everything is perfect!	Positive	99,1%
No suggestion, the course is very well organized and I love the fact that there are several apps for each task or activity.	Positive	99,6%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
I wouldn't add anything.	Neutral	57,6%
Honestly, the course was super ok. :D	Positive	57,1%
More apps to test the grammar	Negative	80,6%
More video activities	Neutral	85,2%
No suggestions. The platform is well structured with everything it contains.	Positive	95,8%
The course was exactly what I wanted. I would suggest more speaking activities, not necessarily on the platform, but in the classroom, between students.	Positive	81,5%
More quizzes	Neutral	86,6%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
It would be nice to have more quizzes.	Positive	65,5%
The course was very interesting, I enjoyed the activities, they were comprehensive and useful.	Positive	99,9%
More group activities	Neutral	79,9%

More quizzes. They are surprisingly helpful.	Positive	98,9%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
No suggestion for improvement. Everything was clear and well organized. Congratulations!	Positive	99,5%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
No suggestions	Neutral	87,2%
As a suggestion, it would be nice if there was a single platform where we could find all the tools to take this course.	Neutral	60,2%
No comment, I like the platform as it is.	Positive	95,4%
More activities and quizzes.	Positive	65,5%

We also used Keyword Extractor method from the corpus to identify the important topics in the course content (see Table 5).

Table 5. Extracted keywords by confidence attitude

Positive	Neutral	Negative
interactive activities // very well structured // organized // learning was pleasant // fine // enjoy // clear // fun // perfect // curious // super // comprehensive // interesting // useful	more quizzes // more videos // more group activities// // more speaking apps	test the grammar // quizzes more complex // Dr. Pimsleur's Method

Based on the sentiment analysis carried out we have identified as *strong points*:
§ well-structured course and seminar activities, application of modern tools and teaching methods;
§ students are encouraged to work for listening and writing, to be involved in speaking and reading activities, as well as in content creation.

The *weaknesses* identified include the fact that students did not have as many speaking tasks and group activities as they would have liked. As suggestions for improving the teaching activity, students also indicated the need for more quizzes and video-based activities (both online and offline) as well as interactive applications and exercises.

Overall, more than half (37 students) conclude that "compared to traditional methods of teaching a language" (Question 10), *Learning English with Technology* was a useful, comprehensive course, and a fun experience at the same time.

As a potential methodological limit - our analysis should cover other aspects, for instance more specific issues such as the relationship between technology/app and targeted skill (e.g. Voki for speaking).

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion - yes, it can! SPOC can be a viable solution for teaching English to students from different academic backgrounds. By pushing the limits of pedagogy in large classrooms (offline and online), our LET SPOC enabled us "to more fully engage a targeted group of learners, who benefit in turn from an intensive, personal course" (Garlock, 2015) The authors of this paper agree, based on the experience described above, that "SPOCs may be the most relevant and promisingly disruptive experiments the MOOC boom has yet produced." (Garlock, 2015)

Our contribution is that we have managed to make LET as comprehensive as a credit course. By combining face-to-face lectures with online tasks and materials, we have succeeded in finding the appropriate solution for a transversal discipline. Consequently, we suggest **adapting all transversal disciplines to SPOCs.** As Epelboin (2017) suggests, conceptualizing alternative learning opportunities, devising instructional approaches that promote active learning and engage students, and designing SPOCs requires teamwork, but a small team of 3-4 people can manage. Although it can be stressful to film/record oneself for tutorials, videos, or podcasts, in this way the course becomes personalized and, thus, more motivating and attractive for students, if tutors are willing to add this to existing workload (Epelboin, 2017).

Another benefit is that, with fewer participants than MOOCs, course staff can provide more extensive feedback and track learning better in the case of SPOCs. Moreover, during in-class sessions tutors can clear up problematic issues, give instructions for completing tasks and hand-on exercises, encourage communication among peers, and adapt resources based on the face-to-face interaction with learners.

On the downside, sometimes apps stop working or change online location (for instance, Text2mindmap). So they have to be checked periodically and several similar tools should be suggested for each unit in case this happens. Something else we have noticed is that filming or recording and editing material takes a long time and a lot of effort. Without professional equipment (camera, microphone) and specialized help (graphic designer) the results can be low quality, in which case it is advisable to search for ready-made material or animations that are suitable to the course content.

Based on our experience with designing and running LET, we can also recommend:
- using a professional app to record the videos (instead of posting written "how to" tutorials);
- searching for a free platform to host the course (Teachable is not free)

- integrating a discussion forum which would contribute to increased interaction among peers, but also between students and tutors.

The traditional learning model cannot meet 21st century students' learning needs and cannot keep up with the fast evolution of technology and society. Therefore, small-scale Internet-based courses such as SPOC can make learning more attractive and students will achieve the desired progress.

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