

WHAT ARE MOOCS (MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES)? WHY SHOULD WE BE INTERESTED IN THEM?

As we use the written word (books and specialist literature for example), to bring our knowledge up-to-date, we should be able to access information from the internet. Unlike the well-known Wikipedia, MOOCs are written by practising academics from international Universities. This means they are as current and accurate as possible. Consider the time taken to write, edit and publish a book; it is bound to be at least a year behind current thinking by the time it is read. Online courses are likely to be the most up-to-date information we can read on any topic.

HOW CAN WE USE THEM IN A COLLABORATIVE (U3A) WAY?

This could be a problem as they are all designed for individual study. Here are some suggestions from those members who have already used MOOCs.

- One member of the group can sign on to a course and use their individual research to introduce the topics to the group.

Not ideal as it becomes too much of a didactic teaching method where 'teacher knows all' and others merely receive the information. If more than one person signs up the role can be shared in a way more appropriate to U3A.

- All members of the group sign on to the course, watch it and work on it at home and come together in their meetings to discuss their findings.

This is a much more collaborative method of working and allows for members with more background in the topic to aid others.

- The group meet at a venue where they can all watch the course together.

The added advantage of this is that the course can be watched at a pace suitable to all members of the group and can be paused for discussion as necessary.

- Some U3As have MOOC groups which share recommendations about interesting MOOCs but do not necessarily collaborate in watching them.

- There are also many other sources of information online, for example TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Talks, Khan Academy and specialist based websites —the Subject Adviser will help with ideas for their specialism.

For more information and ideas from U3As who are using MOOCs go to the national website or www.u3asites.org/advice-on-moocs

ADVICE FOR THOSE NEW TO MOOCs

- Start with FutureLearn — it's the easiest to follow.
- Start with a subject you know and check it out, then choose a course on a subject that is foreign to you and compare.
- Keep study sessions short and don't give up if you miss a week as the course remains available for a while after completion.
- Do it at your own pace — there is no rush.
- Choose a short course to start with.

- Join the discussion forums but don't read everything, use the filters to find the most relevant comments and follow the tutors' comments.
- Go for it—there is nothing to lose.

ARE THERE DISADVANTAGES?

Some courses seem to require participants to register for a certificate of completion (at a cost).

None of us need certification ('U3A does not require or award qualifications') so be prepared to reject this offer — for many MOOCs you can still do the course.

The course may not be as you expected — too simplistic or too advanced or just not the content you were expecting.

Forget it and try something else.

NEWS

After collaboration with the Standing Committee for Education, Royal Holloway University are working on a course which can be self-paced and will have the possibility of aspects designed for group work. This will be on women's suffrage — look out for it.

It will also be possible for U3A members working on this course to have their own interactive discussions online which could make it possible for members working at a distance or isolated by circumstance or geography to enter into discussion in a virtual group.

FutureLearn are now charging for some elements of their courses but not for the main body of the course. This is still free but you may be asked to pay for access to tests, and courses may now be time-limited to the natural duration of the course plus 14 days.

All new developments will be posted on the WA website.