The suitability of the MOOC format for teaching the principles of microhistory: a case study of "Irish Lives in War and Revolution".

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Abstract

The MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course, is a relatively new medium for online education with particular emphasis on interactivity. MOOCs have become an increasingly popular teaching format among universities in recent years. They are widely seen to represent a revolution in the field of third-level teaching, in light of the freedom afforded to learners and the capacity for immersion in new forms of information communication. A review of relevant literature reveals an abundance of academic discussion on the feasibility of MOOCs as a form of online learning. However, little attention has been directed at the precise suitability of the MOOC format for certain subjects, particularly subjects related to history.

This study addresses the suitability of the MOOC format for teaching the principles of microhistory. Microhistories involve the study of small, often marginalised, social groups as a means of understanding and explaining wider trends in history. The paper uses the "Irish Lives in War and Revolution: Exploring Ireland's History 1912-1923" MOOC, delivered by Trinity College Dublin, as a case study to ascertain this suitability. A personal interview was conducted with the educational staff of the MOOC, and qualitative data arising from this discussion was analysed in conjunction with material from the course, as well as an examination of learner participation statistics, discussion forums, and survey feedback. Through this analysis it was found that the MOOC format itself offers the potential to be used as a tool in teaching more inclusive and holistic perspectives on history, but an institution's approach to using the format is ultimately the deciding factor.

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Introduction

Background and context

The MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course, is a relatively new medium for online education with particular emphasis on interactivity. MOOCs have become an increasingly popular teaching format among universities in recent years. They are widely seen to represent a revolution in the field of third-level teaching, in light of the freedom afforded to learners and the capacity for immersion in new forms of information communication. The "Irish Lives in War and Revolution: Exploring Ireland's History 1912-1923" MOOC, which will be the focus of this study, was established by Trinity College Dublin in 2014 and has just completed its third consecutive year of running. The course has attracted significant interest, both nationally and internationally, partly due to the accessible format in which it is presented, but also in light of the teaching approach behind it.

The "Irish Lives" MOOC deals with Irish history during the decade 1912-1923, a fraught period which spanned World War One, the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. It is organised into six weeks, each of which concerns a separate facet of the events at hand, with instructional videos, analytical questions and lists of archival resources offered. There are two optional, peer-reviewed assessments along with a number of quizzes, and learners can share their ideas on the discussion forums which accompany each step of the course. This is a familiar and oft-discussed period of Irish history, but in "Irish Lives" it is encountered for the first time in MOOC format.

Savage (in Trinity College Dublin, 2014) has spoken of the "disruptive potential of online learning" and its capacity to "increase access to high-quality higher education". The MOOC is a prime example of the revolutionary changes occurring in higher education, and such innovative means of teaching naturally combine with non-standard perspectives on the subjects being taught. Thus arises the subject of microhistories: put simply, these involve the study of small, often marginalised, social groups as a means of understanding and explaining wider trends in history. The "Irish Lives" MOOC was designed with the aim of presenting "multiple voices and multiple truths" about the events under discussion (ibid.). In a press release, Brady (one of the historians involved with the project) elucidated the aim behind the MOOC thus: to "challenge the silent assumption that there can be one authoritative voice [in history] claiming to have all the answers." Brady also mentioned "the question of whose history gets recorded and sought out, and whose history, ultimately, gets told" (ibid.). Thus, I argue, the "Irish Lives" MOOC espouses many of the values of microhistory, such as inclusivity and anti-authoritarianism in the historical record, in its teaching approach.

The difficulty with more marginal historical voices (and microhistories), however, is the general scarcity and disorganised nature of relevant historical evidence. The increasing digitisation of historical study over the past several decades has been highly beneficial to the study of microhistories (and indeed, history itself), but difficulties of collation and interpretation still remain. As a result, teaching formats play a vital role in the effective study of microhistories. I wish to discover whether the MOOC format is especially suited for embracing microhistorical principles, considering the manner of its presentation of historical

sources and mode of instruction. In doing so, I will use the "Irish Lives" MOOC as a case study.

Research question

The question that this research paper seeks to address is whether MOOCs are a particularly suitable format for teaching the principles of microhistory. There are several pertinent facets to this question. To answer this, we must first ask how MOOCs and microhistories fit within the broader trend of digitisation in historical study. Can the MOOC, as a format, adequately address the selective digitisation of source material? Does the MOOC facilitate the presentation of historical sources in an objective fashion? Neglect by the "official" record and misinterpretation are two highly significant issues plaguing the microhistorical discipline.

In line with this, how can learners be helpfully and neutrally directed in their interactions with the presented material? This is an important question to address, as MOOCs by their nature cannot enjoy the benefits of face-to-face, teacher-student interactions. Similarly, how do learners tend to respond to the MOOC's less formal mode of assessment, and the heavy emphasis placed on learner interactions? Did "Irish Lives" learners, as an example, feel that this was a useful way of learning?

Finally, the question will demand an insight into the links between academic and popular history, so that we can situate the MOOC, and microhistory, within this. For instance, how does microhistory relate to popular history? What are the roles of revisionism and public memory

therein? These phenomena are manifested throughout the MOOC. As a result, can learner comments be used as oral testimonies to expand our understanding of the subject being taught?

Through examining each of these sub-issues, I hope to arrive at a conclusion regarding whether or not the MOOC is a particularly suitable format for teaching the principles of microhistory.

Methodology

In order to answer the question of whether MOOCs are particularly suited to teaching the principles of microhistory, I used "Irish Lives in War and Revolution: Exploring Ireland's History 1912-1923" as a case study. Gerring (2004: 341) defines a case study as "an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units." In this case, the "unit" was clearly defined as a single MOOC, studied in its first year of operation (2014); the "larger set of units" was the category of MOOCs as a teaching format. Suitably, this definition of the case study shares some features with the overarching aim of microhistory itself: to study small, often marginal, social groups as a means of understanding and explaining wider trends in history. The "Irish Lives" MOOC was chosen for this study largely for convenience, due to the accessibility of the professorial staff for interview in Trinity College, and the availability of statistics on learner participation. Added to this, the subject and teaching style of this MOOC were of particular relevance to this paper, due to their espousal of certain microhistorical values and approaches. I believe that examining the "Irish Lives" course using the case study format was an effective way of analysing the capabilities of the MOOC regarding the presentation of educational material and learner participation. In doing so, I hoped to shed light on whether the

MOOC, as a teaching medium, has a unique potential for teaching the principles of microhistory.

It must be noted that the "Irish Lives" MOOC both dealt with a contentious period in Irish history, and was delivered through an Irish university. Thus learner reactions and participation may have carried the unique flavour of individual investment. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of this particular MOOC offered an insight into the suitability of certain approaches and techniques for fostering an awareness of microhistorical values.

In carrying out this case study, I used four main methods. First, I interviewed two of the professors involved in organising the "Irish Lives" MOOC: Dr Anne Dolan and Dr Ciarán Wallace, both of the Department of History in Trinity College Dublin. Ethical approval for this research was sought from the Ethics Committee of the School of Computer Science and Statistics, Trinity College Dublin, and was granted on 10 February 2016. I conducted the interview with Drs Dolan and Wallace on 19 February at Trinity College. Data gleaned from this interview acted as qualitative evidence regarding the design of the course and the coordinators' intentions. Through this discussion I gained an insight into the educators' opinions on the selective digitisation of source material and how this can be addressed, their aims regarding the neutral presentation of sources, and the manner in which learners were instructed to engage with the source material. I also learned what the educators felt were the teaching advantages of the MOOC format, and what they viewed as drawbacks. This evidence underlined the importance of the academic and personal intentions behind the design of a MOOC, and how these can aid or inhibit its teaching of microhistorical principles.

Second, I examined the "Irish Lives" course material, particularly the manner in which sources were presented and the instructions given to learners regarding their interaction therewith, and presented a critical analysis of these methods. I focused on Weeks One (Chronology of Events), Five (Social Lives) and Six (Private Lives) of the MOOC, as these were the most relevant to the topic of microhistory. I examined and presented examples from the course material alongside statements by the course coordinators to further assess the significance of design intentions, and how these carry through to the delivery of the MOOC.

Then, I examined learners' engagement with the MOOC from the 2014 session, such as their contributions to comment threads and the feedback which was submitted after completion of the course; this added to my collection of qualitative data. I was not able to reproduce comments verbatim, as this would have run counter to the terms agreed to by the MOOC participants on registration; instead I offered summaries of sentiments and statements. This research was vital to my assessment of the success of the MOOC's design, and my identification of which methods had the most apparent success in the teaching of microhistorical principles, judging by the response of learners.

Finally, I used learner participation statistics as quantitative data: for example, how many learners began the course versus how many completed it, and how many took part in the course assessments. This contributed a more objective assessment of the success of the MOOC's approach, based on hard numeric evidence. The result was a rounded picture of learner participation in the MOOC based on a variety of data types, through which I set out to judge the effectiveness of the course approach. In doing so I hoped to ascertain the suitability of the MOOC format for teaching the principles of microhistory.

Chapter outline

Chapter one examines the literature surrounding Massive Open Online Courses and online learning in general, as well as a brief overview of the concept of microhistories. It also addresses broader discussions of the democratisation of historical study through digitisation processes. Chapter two discusses the presentation of sources in the "Irish Lives" MOOC: how the course dealt with the selective digitisation of historical sources, whether this material was presented in an unmediated fashion and what instruction was offered to learners to guide their analysis of these sources. Chapter three concerns learners' engagement with the course: their expectations prior to participating, their attitudes towards the course assessments, and the importance of social interactions with other learners. Finally, chapter four focuses on how MOOCs can act as a bridge between academic and popular history, thus fulfilling the more democratic aims of microhistory. In particular, it examines the link between microhistory and public memory, the role of revisionism therein, how the MOOC can act as an aggregator of oral testimonies, and how it can represent a significant break from the rigors of the academy. Through a comprehensive investigation of each of these areas I hope to arrive at a conclusion regarding whether or not MOOCs are an especially suitable format for espousing microhistorical principles.

Terminology

It will be useful to clarify some of the terminology to be used in this study. First, in referring to participants on the "Irish Lives" MOOC, I will use the terms "learner" and "student"

interchangeably. However, the term "student" is not meant in the traditional sense, as the format of MOOCs tends to be less formal than courses taught in person. For example, as we shall see, the assessments issued on the "Irish Lives" MOOC were not in fact compulsory; indeed, learners were generally free to choose and define their own level of participation in the course. Thus they should not be viewed as "students" in the strict sense of the word.

Secondly, in chapter four, I will discuss the links between microhistory and revisionism; here, the term "revisionism" is used in the very rudimentary context of revising one's views or preconceived opinions on historical events. I do not intend to place this study within any political or academic debates over the multiple meanings of the term; it is used largely for convenience.

Finally, the terms "MOOC" and "microhistory" will be elaborated on and explained in the literature review provided in chapter one.

Chapter One

Literature Review

What is a MOOC?

MOOCs, or Massive Open Online Courses, are a relatively new medium for online education, based on the age-old traditions of distance learning. They make use of the internet to disseminate course material and facilitate learner discussion. There is a strong emphasis on interaction, which typically takes place through discussion forums, and the course material is based on freely accessible online resources. Moreover, MOOCs are usually provided free of charge and do not specify a mandatory degree of participation (McAuley et al., 2010). As a result, involvement is dependent on the interest of the individual learner, such that MOOCs are known for having a remarkably high drop-out rate. Clow (2013: 187), however, identifies this as "an almost-inevitable consequence of any open, online activity: there is less initial commitment." In light of the above, it is clear that MOOCs represent a seismic change in traditional educational practices, signifying a departure from many of the more formal strictures of academia.

MOOCs are widely viewed as a vital path to innovation in education; Sharples et al. (2012) write that such courses "have the potential to provoke major shifts in educational practice." Furthermore, at an Educause Learning Initiative (ELI) focus session on MOOCs in May 2013, it was generally agreed that "MOOCs have opened the door for more open and flexible sharing of content and pedagogical approaches" (Diaz et al., 2013: 14). One aspect of this potential lies

in the unique ability of MOOCs to surmount the restrictions of "static representations" and written text through the superior "visualization and presentational capabilities of online multimedia environments" (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt, 2006: 584). However, not all educators are convinced by the academic viability of MOOCs; Struck (in Diaz et al., 2013: 5) questions the suitability of MOOCs and online learning for "intellectual work", particularly in the humanities, and cites the inclusion of multiple-choice quizzes instead of essay questions as being problematic. He suggests that the peer-reviewed writing generally relied on for MOOC assessment is insufficient for "high-stakes evaluation" (ibid.). Such comments may be taken to epitomise the apparent dichotomy between MOOCs and more stringent, traditional academic contexts. However, Struck also acknowledges that the MOOC format has forced him to "recalibrate, reanalyze, and re-ask whether [he is teaching] the right way"; he claims that online learning allows educators to "question everything" about pedagogy and "scrutinize" teaching methods; the MOOC format, he said, "challenges us in useful ways" (ibid.). Thus the MOOC's departure from traditional teaching methods may not necessarily be a negative trait, as it can serve to revitalise educational approaches.

Several considerations distinguish the MOOC and its inherent challenges from courses taught in person. For one thing, by virtue of its delivery method, participants on a MOOC may be more likely to feel isolated in their learning experience; thus, it is vital to foster a "supportive learning community" (Collier and Anderson, in Diaz et al., 2013: 6). This is achieved through learner participation in community discussion forums. In fact, it is widely recognised that MOOCs rely on a high degree of interactivity; learners and educators generally do not wish to be mere "receivers or transmitters of information", a description which could be applied to many campus-taught courses (Diaz et al., 2013: 15). The ELI focus session also drew attention to the importance of being aware of the diversity of participants' educational, cultural and

linguistic backgrounds; as MOOCs may generally be accessed from all over the world, distance is not an impediment to learning (ibid.). Thus course coordinators must bear this diversity in mind when designing MOOCs. Moreover, the question of student motivation is a pertinent one distinguishing online learning from that which takes place on-campus, as it can shed some light on the issue of drop-out rates. One positive difference that can be identified is that "in a MOOC, people are often learning for learning's sake" (ibid.), rather than attending university as simply the next logical step in their education. On the other hand, the lack of a need to physically attend classes may make it difficult for MOOC learners to stay motivated. Thus MOOCs can be seen as a significant departure from campus learning in a number of ways.

In the years since the format was first conceived, it has been observed that MOOCs have split into two broad tendencies; cMOOCs (or connectivist MOOCs) and xMOOCs (so named to distinguish them from the former). While xMOOCs typically emphasise the expertise of a single educator and revolve around its direct transferral onto students (Degree of Freedom, 2013), cMOOCs are "underpinned by connectivism, a sophisticated and innovative reconceptualization of what it means to know and to learn" (Clow, 2013: 185). The connectivist MOOC will be the focus of this research paper. Clow (ibid.: 186) writes that there is less emphasis on "end points" in cMOOCs, such that a learner who does not complete the course may still be "seen as a success", in light of the cMOOC's symbolic departure from linearity in learning; as we shall see, the "Irish Lives" MOOC aligns with these values.

The literature here reviewed has focused on more general discussions of the capacity of the MOOC for any kind of structured learning, and the changes heralded by new forms of online education. However, little research has yet been conducted into the suitability of MOOCs for

particular subjects; thus, it is my intention to ascertain whether MOOCs can be said to be particularly amenable to microhistorical study, and why. In doing so, it will be necessary to examine trends towards online education in historical study more generally.

Democratisation of history through digitisation

Stevens and Martell (2003: 30) write that "people learn when they put their ideas into contact with those of others"; this can be taken as a central tenet of the connectivist MOOC, and indeed, of democratic historical learning in general. One way in which this democratisation has been achieved is through the digitisation of historical study, and the move towards modern technologies in presenting and learning about history. The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media declares, in its mission statement (2015): "We use digital media and computer technology to democratize history: to incorporate multiple voices, reach diverse audiences, and encourage popular participation in presenting and preserving the past." These ideals stem from the Centre's namesake, Rosenzweig, a visionary in the evolution of egalitarian approaches to history, who campaigned for making historical sources more widely available through the web. In many ways, Rosenzweig spearheaded the move towards embracing new technologies, in a discipline whose mode of teaching had undergone little innovation for decades (Kelly, 2011).

This process of modernising historical study was the backdrop to an online conversation, hosted by the *Journal of America History* in 2008, on "the promise of digital history", in which a number of prominent academics took part (Cohen et al., 2008). During this discussion, historians pondered the non-linear nature of online history, and the resultant opportunity to consider the past in new ways. One participant mentioned the prospect of "total immersion"

offered by digital history, replacing "the force of…linear argument" that has heretofore dominated the subject, and continues to do so in academic settings (Thomas, in Cohen et al., 2008: 454). Another subsequently posited that this "nonlinear character of the digital medium may fit well with the microhistorian's desire to embrace…the multiple dimensions of a small topic" (Taylor, in Cohen et al., 2008: 465). This brings us to the subject of microhistory, and how this discipline fits within the move towards digital history.

What is microhistory?

Microhistory involves the study of small, often marginal, social groups as a means of understanding and explaining wider trends in history. Microhistorians set out to challenge authoritative or "mainstream" versions of history that focus on grand events and eminent personalities, by giving a voice to the "inarticulate" in society (Lepore, 2001). Because of their focus on peripheral groups, the main difficulty faced by microhistorians is a shortage of reference material, as their subjects have often left little evidence of their experiences (University of Victoria, 2003).

Lepore (2001: 132) emphasises the non-biographical leanings of microhistory, stating that even where they focus on a single figure, microhistorians "are keen to evoke a period, a mentalité, a problem." In fact, one of the central beliefs of microhistory is that the value of examining a person's life "lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual's life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole" (ibid.: 133). For instance, the "Irish Lives" educators set out to examine "ordinary lives" in Ireland during a tumultuous decade, and the course's findings may be taken as an illustration of how personal

lives are affected by war and revolution on a universal scale. Kusch (2011: 490) highlights the central "lesson" of microhistory: that historical events "must not be artificially divided into internal/intellectual and external/social 'factors' or 'levels'." Thus, it is generally believed that microhistorians are less susceptible to personal bias, as their subjects are merely "devices" for understanding broader historical trends (Lepore, 2001).

Digitisation has played a significant role in the development of microhistory as an academic perspective. One tendency of microhistorians is to try to make history more interesting for the public through transparent research and "unconventional presentation methods", such as their early use of the internet (University of Victoria, 2003). Moreover, microhistorians stand to benefit from making their work accessible on the web if their subject matter is considered too "niche" for popular historical journals. The digitisation of history also shares its democratic principles with the microhistorical discipline; the former aims at an egalitarian approach to presenting historical sources, the latter at an even-handed methodology for compiling and analysing such sources. Thus, the question of whether historical MOOCs – as a recent step on the path of digital history – can effectively communicate the principles of microhistorical study, is a pertinent one.

Conclusion

A review of relevant literature reveals an abundance of academic discussion on the feasibility of Massive Open Online Courses as a form of online learning; experts alternately criticise and praise the MOOC's departure from the linearity of traditional academia. The burgeoning use of interactive digital media in education, as represented by the MOOC, is mirrored in the trend

towards digitisation in historical study specifically. It appears that educators and historians alike are recognising the potential of the web for both the dissemination of material, and the more democratic facilitation of interactions therewith. Both trends have been dealt with exhaustively by interested academics. However, little attention has been directed at the precise suitability of the MOOC format for certain subjects, particularly subjects related to history. It is my intention to address this gap by examining whether MOOCs are especially suitable for espousing the values of microhistories – fields of study which are shrouded in the democratic ideals shared by both MOOC designers and modern professors of history.

Chapter Two

Presentation of Source Material

In 2003, Rosenzweig (2003: 737) posed the question, "What would it be like to write history when faced by an essentially complete historical record?" In 2016, many historians are discovering the answer to this. Increasingly democratic approaches towards history have resulted in a previously inconceivable amount of source material being placed online. However, microhistorians remain plagued by the selectiveness of these digitisation processes, as many topics tend to be neglected. Gallagher and Wallace (2016: 5) write that in light of the "vast array of digital sources" available, the MOOC is an especially suitable format for presenting "diverse opinions and conflicting evidence" in history; though this documentary abundance is not spread evenly across subjects and peoples. Thus we need to examine the capability of the MOOC to address this drawback, and to foster in learners an awareness of exclusion in the historic record. The aims behind "Irish Lives" were expounded in an interview conducted with the course coordinators, Drs Dolan and Wallace, in February 2016. Through qualitative data arising from this discussion, alongside an analysis of course material, I set out to ascertain the manner in which historical evidence is presented on the MOOC, and whether this aligns with a microhistorical approach. I examined how the course dealt with the selective digitisation of sources; whether the sources themselves were presented in an unmediated manner; and what probing questions were asked of learners in confronting this material, in light of the suitability of the format for propagating microhistorical principles.

First I will examine how the "Irish Lives" MOOC dealt with the selective digitisation of source material. The potential for contradicting authoritative interpretations of history, where a large

quantity of historical sources exists, reinforces the democratic ideals behind digitisation, and underlines its link with the study of microhistories. However, microhistory – by its very nature – generally suffers from a shortage of source material, in comparison with other subjects. When interviewed, Dr Wallace (one of the co-ordinators of the "Irish Lives" MOOC) pointed out that one danger associated with digitisation is the tendency to neglect marginalised groups, and elucidated that one of the aims of "Irish Lives" was to "prioritise unprioritised material" (Dolan and Wallace, 2016, pers. comm., 19 February). In this case, the focus of the MOOC was on "ordinary lives" during the turbulent events of the early 20th century in Ireland. Wallace outlined the difficulties encountered with "trying to find an image that says 'ordinariness', or 'happiness'", and explained that the issue stems not only from the prioritisation of certain topics when digitising, but also from the fact that "in the 1920s, photography prioritised certain things", which tended to be exceptional occasions rather than ordinary events. Thus the "Irish Lives" educators were acutely aware of the selectivity of digitisation processes, and this presented a core challenge in their design of the course.

Moreover, Dr Dolan (another of the course educators) explained that digitisation itself can "flatten out a sense of the context" of documents, in that there is an implication of equal importance of digital sources placed side by side (Dolan and Wallace, 2016, pers. comm., 19 February). This can be detrimental to informed interpretation; thus, Dolan pointed out the importance of teaching students how to "fathom which [document] is more important, which had more weight." However, she posited that the "Irish Lives" MOOC "possibly didn't do as much of that as you would do in a classroom." In light of this, it is clear that digitisation, while undoubtedly beneficial, can create a host of other issues regarding the interpretation of sources; not only are historical documents stripped of their context when placed online, but the neglect of certain topics and groups by the digitisation process can lead to a disproportionate scarcity

of material, particularly for microhistorians. However, if designed with these shortcomings of the historical record in mind, and if students are equipped with the necessary skills to critically assess digitised sources and their contemporary significance, the MOOC medium can successfully draw attention to the fallacy of authoritative versions of history.

In order to ascertain the suitability of the MOOC for dealing with microhistorical sources, it is necessary to study the manner in which this material was presented in "Irish Lives"; namely, whether it was mediated by an academic voice. This is especially pertinent to microhistories as such topics tend to be neglected by mainstream histories, and a general shortage of source material renders them vulnerable to misinterpretation. Thomas makes reference to the majority of people's "preference for unmediated history" (Cohen et al., 2008: 472); similarly, the historians working on the "Irish Lives" MOOC spoke of a prevailing desire among learners who had been given "a very particular line" on historical events during their primary and secondary schooling, to discover alternative modes of interpretation. Dolan and Wallace discussed the dangers of the "talking head" mode of teaching, in which an expert speaks on a topic with authority and merely transfers their knowledge onto a captive audience. They expressed an alternative intention "to leave more questions hanging open rather than deliver information", focusing on teaching learners how to think like a historian. Here, again, we see the differences between the xMOOC and cMOOC (connectivist MOOC) teaching styles. Dolan also spoke against elitist attitudes towards some primary source material, and emphasised the need to convey to learners the widespread availability of such documents. She described their efforts to "make [students] feel included but equally try and undermine the notion of a single narrative." In doing so, the professors were battling against what they call "an older style of school teaching" in Ireland.

In practice, this meant that the historians on the "Irish Lives" MOOC took a largely back-seat approach to co-ordinating the course, simply stepping in once or twice per week with "a general round-up" to remind the learners that they were following their discussions. Wallace stated: "there was no teacherly facilitation of the conversation other than presenting the material, presenting the questions, and then we'd join the conversation in a very small way." He also outlined the stark difference between this mode of teaching and that which occurs in person: students tend to look on the lecturer as an adjudicator in class discussions, whereas on the MOOC, issues were resolved among the learners themselves. In terms of the actual directions given to students, Dolan stated that these were more detailed in the first two weeks of the course, but that as it proceeded, instruction was replaced largely by links to external resources. It is necessary to mention the use of instructional videos here, in light of the MOOC format more generally; Dolan described the discomfort felt by the "Irish Lives" professors regarding the pressure to appear "authoritative" in the videos, even extending to their choice of dress; she stated that as a result, it was important to them that there were three educators on the course, as this provided balance in its presentation. This suggests that the goal of the "Irish Lives" educators was to present the source material in an objective fashion, with the minimal amount of instruction and mediation; these are vital tenets in the study of microhistories. However, the pressure exerted on the coordinators to adhere to a set format in their educational videos seems to contradict and undercut the objectivity of these aims.

We shall now look at some examples from the "Irish Lives" course material itself, regarding the presentation of sources. In the introduction to the course, learners were informed that "we [the educators] will not be there to provide the answers. It is far more likely that we will be

prompting you to ask new questions of your own" ("Irish Lives in War and Revolution", hereafter "Irish Lives", Week 1: Chronology of Events 1912-23). Week One utilised an unusual approach to presenting the information, in the form of fictional characters or "voices" described as "composites of many people, representing real sentiments, opinions…rather than actual individuals"; these were intended to act as a device to "immerse" students in a range of viewpoints and experiences (ibid.). While unconventional, this method can nonetheless be viewed as a useful tool to arouse learners' imagination in the absence of an academic voice. In terms of the listing of primary sources at the end of each week, these lists were extensive and very little commentary was offered; rather, sources were linked to directly. Learners were reminded at each of these points that the suggestions for further reading were not exhaustive, that the given documents were merely "a sample of a much broader range of sources", and that they might "complement or contradict some of the themes or ideas raised" during the course ("Irish Lives", Week 5: Social Lives). In this way, students were not misled as to the representative nature of the sources offered, but instead were exposed to and reminded of the immense variety of experiences. At these points, learners were also told of the importance of considering different chronologies of events; for example, it was asked: "would a timeline plotted by a rural woman in the 1910s and 1920s be populated by very different events than a politician's timeline of the same period?" ("Irish Lives", Week 1: Chronology of Events 1912-23). While the detached presentation of sources is key, such prompts are also vital, as they instil in learners a microhistorical perspective and an awareness of different experiences in history. This brings us to the subject of the probing questions asked of students in their perusal of source material.

Gallagher and Wallace (2016: 9) write that the constructivist model was chosen for the "Irish Lives" MOOC because "the aim was to engage learners with the lived experience of ordinary

people, and to arrive at their own conclusions." Stevens and Martell (2003: 25) describe the "basic position" of constructivism thus: "that pedagogical activities ought to be organized so that learners' ideas – the meanings they make of events and objects – are placed at the center of the action." In trying to fulfil these aims, Wallace stated that the "Irish Lives" educators focused on asking "broad and accessible" questions. Dolan, furthermore, explained that while the MOOC does include a number of informal assessments, the coordinators were ambivalent as to whether these were completed, and their inclusion in the course arose from the technical necessities dictated by Futurelearn (here, again, we see the potential dangers of bureaucratic interference in the design of historical MOOCs). Wallace stated that "the vast bulk [of learners] went right through the course without touching [the assessments] and they were very happy", underlining the considerable freedom afforded to learners in their participation on the course.

On one of the steps, learners were asked to identify the turning point of the period for Irish history, and to provide a rationale for their choice ("Irish Lives", Week 1: Chronology of Events 1912-23). Other prompts were similarly open-ended, such as asking learners to choose a "word or phrase" that best "summed up" the period under discussion (ibid.). Moreover, questions accompanying primary sources tended to stay along the lines of asking learners which sources they found "most interesting or revealing" and whether they had "re-evaluated" their opinion on the topic at hand ("Irish Lives", Week 5: Social Lives). When learners were given more direction, it was most often intended to steer them along analytical lines, such as questioning traditional chronologies. Such modes of analysis align well with microhistorical principles. The written assessments themselves were not mandatory, and learners were reminded that the exercises were "informal" opportunities to "share [their] reflections" (ibid.). This emphasis on exchange hearkens back to the constructivist values mentioned above. Each learner who submitted a written assignment was assigned another learner's work to critically

analyse; they were instructed to do so with a number of set questions in mind, directed at the author's use of supporting evidence. These directives – combined with the instructions for engaging with primary sources given in Week Two – support the aim of the "Irish Lives" MOOC to instruct learners in the methods and mindset of the historian, rather than emphasising any particular viewpoint or lens of interpretation. Such skills are essential to a microhistorical approach.

While widespread digitisation processes have meant that many historians now find themselves faced with an abundance of source material, the plight of the microhistorian remains complex. Though much source material is now more readily accessible, issues have arisen in the neglect of certain kinds of documents not deemed worthy of digitisation; on the other hand, as Dolan pointed out, digitisation in general tends to "flatten out" the context of historical sources, creating other issues of interpretation and comprehension. The professors on the "Irish Lives" MOOC spoke of the difficulties they faced in locating source material on "ordinary lives" in Ireland during the early 20th century. It emerged that the course may have been somewhat remiss in instructing learners on how to critically assess the relative importance of documents. However, the educators were careful at all points to avoid presenting an authoritative voice on the events under discussion, but rather aimed to teach learners the necessary skills to "think like a historian". Thus, the presentation of primary sources on the course was done in an unmediated fashion, with less instruction given in later weeks; furthermore, the probing questions issued to learners to direct their engagement with these sources tended either to request broad observations on the topic, or to guide the learner towards a more critical perspective. While the MOOC benefits from digitisation processes the same as any learning medium, for the study of microhistories, a scarcity of sources will always be problematic; thus it is even more vital that the presentation of the available sources be done in a balanced fashion.

If this is done, and learners are allowed as far as possible to form their own conclusions, then the medium can be said to lend itself well to microhistorical study. In the next chapter, we will examine the success of this approach through an analysis of learner engagement on the "Irish Lives" MOOC.

Chapter Three

Learner Engagement

"We wish to support…a basic democratic principle. Visitors often understand museums as places of authoritative knowledge. This perception can easily lead visitors to withhold their own ideas and seek out only the 'correct' principle being exhibited…or the 'correct' interpretation of a painting of photograph, because they are afraid to be wrong" (Stevens and Martell, 2003: 27).

Perhaps the most telling indication of the success of a MOOC, in teaching microhistories or otherwise, is the response and engagement of its learners. Fortunately, the very nature of MOOCs – as an online course format – makes it comparatively easier to quantify and analyse this participation than in a classroom setting. 10,650 learners visited the first step of the "Irish Lives" course, and this number decreased gradually as the weeks went on, with 2,018 participants viewing the final step (Banks, 2014). Futurelearn carried out pre- and post-course surveys of students on the MOOC: 3,835 people participated in the former, and 1,722 in the latter. Furthermore, a detailed report was compiled with statistics on comments, interaction by step and by week, completion of assessments, etc. Learner comments were also aggregated by step, date, and number of "likes" in a spreadsheet which could then be conveniently searched through and filtered. The presentation of this evidence will be limited to some extent as direct quotations may not be given; however, summaries of the content of user comments will be offered instead. I will examine the evidence that arose regarding learner expectations; their response to the course's mode of assessment; the significance of community interaction; and the benefits of the MOOC format in this very possibility of measuring learner participation, and how this engagement reflects the MOOC's teaching of microhistorical principles.

Futurelearn's pre-course survey offers useful information on the motivations of learners for embarking on the "Irish Lives" MOOC, which can shed light on the nature of their participation therein. In answer to the question of what participants hoped to achieve from the course, 36.10% (1,344 respondents) answered that they wanted to "try out learning online", while 25.41% (946) said that they wanted to try out Futurelearn or MOOCs in general; this points to the popularity of, and curiosity surrounding, online courses (Futurelearn, 2014a). Furthermore, of those who completed the survey, 71.27% (2,592) stated that they had not "taken a course delivered mostly or fully online before, including MOOCs", while 28.73% (1,045) said that they had done so (ibid.). Thus the audience for the "Irish Lives" MOOCs was primarily composed of learners who were new to the realm of online learning, which raises the interesting question of how they responded to the more informal mode of teaching.
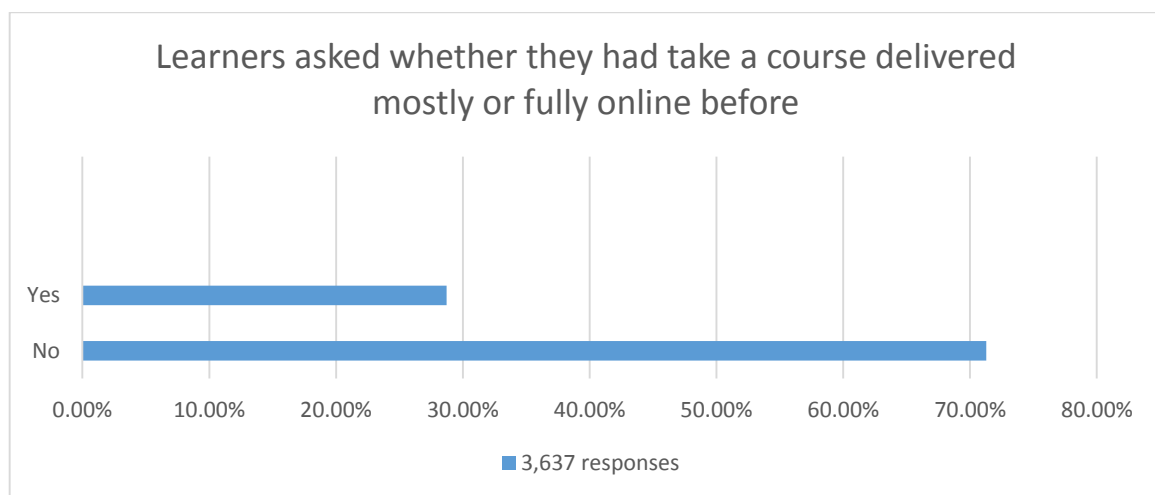

Figure 1: Learners were asked whether they had already taken a course delivered mostly or fully online (Futurelearn, 2014a).

Meanwhile, when asked what they hoped to "get out of [the] course", 12.44% (463) of respondents stated that they wanted to interact with other people on the MOOC, perhaps signifying that not many learners believed that this would be an important aspect of the learning experience (ibid.). Indeed, elsewhere in the survey, expectations seemed to emphasise interaction with the course coordinators. Among the miscellaneous responses offered, many learners stated that they hoped to gain a new perspective on the events under discussion, mentioning the nationalist bias which clouds the period in modern memory and the tendency to neglect certain viewpoints in the re-telling of history (ibid.). This illustrates that some portion of "Irish Lives" learners were aware of the aims of microhistory, even if they did not know it to be a mode of historical study. In answer to the question of what prompted their interest in history, a large number of respondents cited family history and roots as their incentive, highlighting the personal nature of the course topic and the cultural investment of many of the learners therein (ibid.). Indeed, when interviewed, Dr Dolan (of the "Irish Lives" professorial staff) cited "the move towards genealogy in the last couple of decades" as a strong motive for studying certain period of Irish history (Dolan and Wallace, 2016, pers. comm., 19 February). Finally, the last question in survey, which asked learners to name their favourite figure in Irish history, could be seen as an experimental precursor to the MOOC's aim of transcending the "key" names and events of mainstream history. Many learners listed Michael Collins, James Connolly and other well-known names as their favourite figure, which reflects the emphases present in conventional historical accounts (Futurelearn, 2014a). Thus the survey which was circulated amongst learners before the "Irish Lives" MOOC commenced is a useful resource for examining the expectations, mindset and motivations of participants; this will be relevant in analysing the success of the MOOC from a microhistorical perspective.

Looking at the "Irish Lives" course report, it is possible to gain an insight into the attitude of learners towards the peer review approach taken in the course "assignments" (as we have seen, this work was not necessary for the completion of the MOOC). The first assignment, in Week Three, asked learners to write 300 words on "what 'political activism' means in a time of violence"; the task had quite a low uptake, with 1,032 pieces submitted (Banks, 2014). The second assignment, in Week Five, was slightly longer, and asked learners to write 500 words on the impact of war on ordinary lives ("Irish Lives", Week 5: Social Lives). Due perhaps to the natural fall-off of learners as the weeks progressed, or the longer word-count of the assignment, even fewer took part, with 707 assignments completed (Banks, 2014).
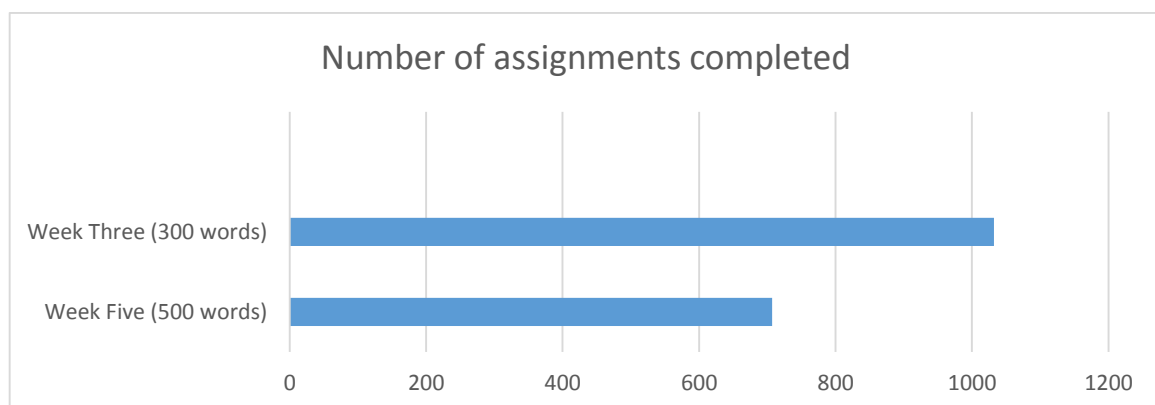

Figure 2: How many learners completed each of the two "Irish Lives" assignments (Banks, 2014).

In the user comments it is possible to ascertain the feelings of some learners towards this mode of assessment; many took issue with the peer-review aspect, some reporting themselves dissatisfied with the comments offered by their reviewer ("Irish Lives" discussion forums). Some did not feel that the assignment allowed enough scope to explore the question in enough detail, and others viewed participation in the weekly discussions with other learners as being more useful for their learning process. Dolan and Wallace posited that perhaps learners who

were very active in the comments section did not feel that the formal assessment was necessary; furthermore, many may have feared that their work might be reviewed by someone who was less knowledgeable on the subject. Whatever the explanation, the low level of participation in the formal assignments on the "Irish Lives" MOOCs underlines the non-traditional nature of this mode of learning, a feature which mirrors the nature of microhistory as a whole.

The fact that many students viewed the social interactivity of "Irish Lives" as being more amenable to learning than the more formal written assignments highlights the vital role played by community discussion in the MOOC. Indeed, Stevens and Martell (2003: 30) note that "people learn when they put their ideas into contact with those of others." These democratic ideals are central to connectivism, and to microhistory. The academic staff of "Irish Lives" described their initial scepticism of the online community aspect of MOOCs, and thus their surprise at being informed by Futurelearn that "the crowd was much chattier", and the average comment length longer, than on other MOOCs. In total, 67,556 comments were posted in the "Irish Lives" discussion forums, from 4,855 unique authors (Banks, 2014). Dolan noted the prevailing desire amongst learners to talk about their own families and personal experiences. She also mentioned the trust that seemed to build up through learner discussions, such that some even organised meetups facilitated by Futurelearn. Furthermore, some non-Irish students on the course contributed insights into similar events which had occurred in their native countries; this ties in with the sense of universality inherent in microhistory, as it views the experience of small groups in history as representative of eras and societies as a whole. Such contributions may be seen as an advantage of online courses over in-class learning, in that there is wider scope for non-local input. While not all learners took an active role in the discussions, Wallace suggested that it was also possible to benefit from quietly observing the comment threads (Dolan and Wallace, 2016, pers. comm., 19 February). This importance placed on the

MOOC's discussion forums accords with the connectivist tradition of emphasising conversation, rather than learners simply acting as "receptacles for ideas created by others" (Stevens and Martell, 2003: 30).

Having reviewed the user comments on "Irish Lives", it is clear that many very much enjoyed the interactions with other learners, while others found it less helpful, a few taking issue with the quality of comments, the degree of repetition involved, and the sheer bulk of discussion to read through. Some learners also commented that they enjoyed returning to previous weeks of the course in order to see how the conversation had progressed. An analysis of the highest-rated learner comments (ranked by their number of "likes") reveals some of the recurring themes in learner discussions on the MOOC. The top comment (posted in step 1.16 and with 39 likes) expressed scepticism towards the task of picking one particular turning point of the era; this may indicate the success of the course's aim of undermining hegemonic timelines. The next highest-rated comment (with 37 likes in step 2.7) encouraged efforts to understand the perspectives of those involved; again, this can be viewed as evidence of the effectiveness of the course approach, in that learners were promulgating microhistorical values amongst one another. Another contribution (in step 2.2) reminded other learners that much information is not documented as it only survives in personal and family memory; this comment underscores the importance of giving a voice to the voiceless in history and highlighting ordinary lives.

Elsewhere, one learner (in step 2.12) praised the aim of the "Irish Lives" course in offering a new perspective on history, rather than antiquated lists of dates and events. Such observations appear regularly throughout the comment threads. Some criticism did arise from the comments, however, including one complaint that the course failed to adequately cover women's

organisations, and another that criticised the lack of representation of Northern nationalist groups in Week One. Thus a review of the user comments on the MOOC – both positive and negative in tone – reveals a strong awareness of microhistorical values among learners. Whether these arose as a direct result of the course is unclear – perhaps some learners were inclined to view and study history in this manner previously – but this nevertheless acts in support of the course's microhistorical approach to the topic at hand.

The comments contributed by the academic staff throughout the MOOC can be useful in analysing the role they played in the learning experience, which is interesting in light of the democratic, anti-authoritarian principles propagated by Stevens and Martell. Wallace regularly contributed towards the discussion, generally thanking learners for their input, expressing an interest in the ongoing conversation, and clarifying the rationale behind the approach to certain weeks ("Irish Lives" discussion forums). He rarely if ever asked further questions of the learners, but simply demonstrated that the academic team were paying attention to their thoughts and insights. The reasoning behind this behaviour was elaborated on in the previous chapter. Suggestions were kept to a minimum; for example, in Week One, Wallace proposed that learners monitor whether their choice of a word or phrase to sum up the period changed as the course progressed. Learner responses tended to thank Dr Wallace for his clarifications, to appreciate his input, and occasionally to ask further questions of him. Thus the stated intention of the "Irish Lives" coordinators to take a back-seat approach to teaching on the course was borne out by their minimal and unobtrusive participation in the discussion forums.

Finally, the very nature of MOOCs – as an online medium with easily aggregated learner statistics – makes the process of analysing the user experience far easier than with courses

which occur in person, and this in itself is useful to the study of how microhistories are viewed, presented and absorbed. Through examining the participation and completion statistics of the "Irish Lives" MOOC, as well as analysing comments – as we have already seen – it is possible to analyse the effectiveness of the course approach, and thereby revise and improve the ways in which microhistories are taught. The "Irish Lives" post-course survey is also a convenient resource for examining the user experience. For example, of the 1,722 learners who responded to the survey, 88.99% (1519 people) stated that they had taken part in the course all of the way through, while 10.49% (179) took part only in part of the course, and 0.53% (9) did not take part at all (Futurelearn, 2014b). However, it should be remembered that those who responded to the post-course survey were more likely to be the people who had taken part until the end.
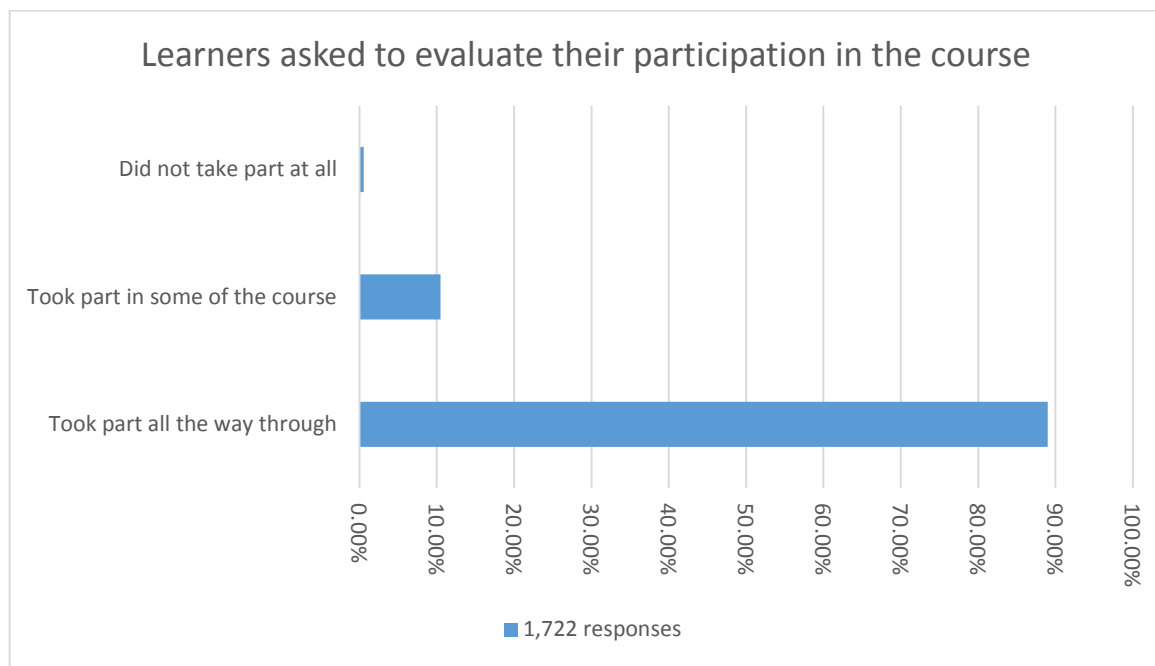

Figure 3: Learners were asked to evaluate their participation in the course (Futurelearn, 2014b).

More useful was the question on how users felt about learning on Futurelearn; 33.37% (551 learners) stated that they "strongly liked" reading comments posted by other learners, and 43.97% (726) said that they "liked" this aspect of the course, which is a good indication of the popularity of the discussion forums for learning (ibid.). Furthermore, 73.38% (1,210) stated that they found the educator(s) "engaging"; this might underline the continued importance which learners place on the "authoritative voice" of the course coordinator, which seems still to outrank learning through discussion (ibid.). When asked about their favourite part of the course, learners responded with a wide variety of aspects, thus it is more difficult to analyse this data; however, there were seventy-five direct mentions of "perspective" alongside words like "new", "fresh" and "different" and thirty-two students mentioned "interaction" with staff and other students, again drawing attention to the importance placed on these aspects by learners (ibid.). Banks' course report also provides information on the number of user comments by step, which is a useful way of measuring learner engagement in different parts of the course. Predictably, the highest numbers of comments were posted in earlier weeks, and there was a gradual falloff of contributions as the course progressed (Banks, 2014). More comments were generally posted on steps that asked learners to engage with primary sources or to contribute their own personal opinions and analysis; again, this points to the success of the connectivist format (ibid.).

The fact that learners tended to contribute more to discussions of primary sources suggests that the academic team's aim of offering resources, and teaching how to "think like a historian", proved effective. However, Wallace did point out that participants in a MOOC are by definition more comfortable browsing the web and searching through archives than perhaps students who learn in person. The academic staff also identified one difference between online and on-campus learning, in that students of the latter tend to "only look at the sources that are presented

in the class", while MOOCs have thousands of people researching the same topic, thus the result is necessarily going to be "more diverse and interesting". However, some "Irish Lives" learners did express concern that they could not make their way through all of the suggested material in a given week, which implies that more guidance could have been offered on filtering through and selecting different materials. Nevertheless, it appears that overall, learners on the MOOC tended to be quite comfortable with online research and amenable to instruction in historical methodologies, and to be present in such numbers that rendered them an apt audience for the reception of more thorough and inclusive accounts of history.

The overall response to learning on the "Irish Lives" MOOC appears to have been positive, and very much influenced by a microhistorical approach. Of those who responded to the pre-course survey, many learners entered the course hoping to gain a balanced, fresh perspective on a period of Irish history; most were new to online learning and expected a higher degree of interaction with the academic staff than they perhaps experienced. There was an overwhelming inclination towards community discussion over formal assessments, though assessments of the effectiveness of this were mixed. Some felt that the assignments did not allow enough scope for detailed assessment, and that the peer-review aspect was flawed; others disliked the disorganised nature of the discussion forums. A search through the learner comments revealed a strong awareness of microhistorical principles amongst students; though whether or not these arose as a direct result of the course is unclear. Regardless, the very nature of the MOOC format – in the possibility of easily aggregating and analysing user engagement statistics – renders it a useful tool in improving the study of microhistories, as their reception is more easily gauged. This analysis serves as a useful counterpoint to the statements of the course coordinators, and generally seems to corroborate the teaching intentions behind the "Irish Lives" MOOC. Despite

some mixed reviews of the course's mode of assessment, learners displayed a sharp awareness of microhistorical principles, and an appreciation of the course's inclusion of such.

Chapter Four

Bridging Academic and Popular History

This final chapter will address how MOOCs can act as a bridge between academic and popular approaches to history. This is an important factor of the aptitude of MOOCs for teaching the principles of microhistory, as the format represents a significant break of traditional academic practices. Memory is a vital aspect of both popular history and microhistory, as it relates to the drawbacks inherent in the written, "official" history record. Moreover, both genres have a special relationship with historical revisionism; revisionism both enables and is enabled by practices of microhistory, and tends to have a considerable effect on how the public remembers historic events. Public memory and revisionist trends are manifested throughout the "Irish Lives" MOOC and in learner discussions. I will investigate the links between microhistory, public memory and revisionism; how these are manifested in "Irish Lives"; how learner comments can act as personal history accounts; the MOOC's representative break from academic strictures; and "Irish Lives" learners' observations on inclusivity in history. In doing so I hope to ascertain how the MOOC can effectively link academic and popular approaches to documenting and remembering the past, and thus propagate the inclusive, universal values of microhistory.

First, it will be necessary to examine the importance of public memory in the recounting of history, in order to ascertain how the MOOC can fit within this association. Lukacs (1968: 33) wrote that "the remembered past is a much larger category than the recorded past." This identifies the shared tenet of both microhistory and popular history: memory. For microhistory, memory is important because of the general tendency for its subject matter to be neglected by

the mainstream historical record; for popular history, memory provides the foundation for many popular beliefs and "defining cultural myths" (Woods, 1995: 1114). Tyler-McGraw (in Horton and Horton, 2013) points out the difficulty faced by public historians, in negotiating between "stake-holders" – those with "some claim to the story being told", and "fidelity" to the historical record. Similarly, Tosh (2008: 22-24) states that the best public history is that which retains its "critical edge", which counters the "cosy assumptions" of popular memory, and which raises more questions than it answers; these are also important microhistorical values. We will discuss below whether the "Irish Lives" MOOC fulfils these criteria. Woods (2008: 1114) points out the importance of inclusivity in appealing to the public; he writes: "a public audience is neither a collegial nor a captive audience. It must be intrigued and cajoled." In order to do so, he calls for a movement to "combine the strengths of the history profession in the museum and the academy", in other words to find and expose the juncture between academic and popular history (ibid.: 1115). In their study of the "Irish Lives" MOOC, Gallagher and Wallace (2016: 2) write that "a well-designed History MOOC can act as a bridge, linking academic history teaching and research with popular history." Thus we will investigate how the MOOC can teach the values of microhistory by bridging the gap between academic and popular approaches to the topic under discussion.

We should also investigate the link between historical revisionism and microhistory, and how the former is manifested in the "Irish Lives" MOOC. Here, we will discuss revisionism only in the very basic terms of revising or rethinking the traditional perception of historical events, overlooking the many politically and academically charged interpretations of the word. Antoniou (2007: 98) points out that a "revisionist turn" can involve simply "a change of style or language, without significant change of content", and claims (ibid.: 112): "What revisionists do is to depart from established protocols of discussion." In the "Irish Lives" MOOC, this was

manifested in the prompts issued to learners to form their own thoughts and conclusions, and to reconsider any preconceived notions they may have harboured. For example, in Week One, learners were asked whether a "different perspective" on history can be formed through examining ordinary lives, and were encouraged to re-think "neat and tidy" established chronologies on the period ("Irish Lives", Week 1: Chronology of Events 1912-23). Moreover, in Week Five, the emphasis seemed to be on "re-evaluating" opinions and analysing whether new information has "altered" existing beliefs ("Irish Lives", Week 5: Social Lives). Perhaps most notably, in Week Six, the overall focus was on "public memory" versus "private grief", and learners were reminded of the existence of "different chronologies" and "alternative pasts" in historical accounts ("Irish Lives", Week 6: Private Lives). In terms of the link between revisionism and microhistory, Antoniou (2007: 100) points out that these trends have been mutually beneficial. He writes of the importance of microhistory and oral history for producing "paradigmatic shifts" and thus contributing to the rewriting of history (ibid.: 102). Similarly, the propagation of "multiple interpretations" heralded by revisionism served to open up the required space on a social level for "oppressed or neglected versions" of events to be expressed, e.g. microhistories (ibid.: 112). Thus the strong links between microhistory and revisionism are apparent. In this way the demonstration of revisionist approaches in the "Irish Lives" course is supported by the theoretical and historical links between microhistory and revisionism.

Another aspect of the MOOC as a bridge between academic and popular history is its potential use as a "generative repository" of personal history accounts, and thus its possible contribution towards ongoing historical research (Gallagher and Wallace, 2016). In Banks' (2014) course report on "Irish Lives", a qualitative analysis of learner comments found that contributions were very negative in tone on step 4.6 (which dealt with loss) and step 6.5 (which concerned family legacy); this may be taken as an indication of learners' emotional investment in their

responses. Indeed, certain comments were highly personal in nature, such as one learner who offered an insight into the mindset of a soldier from his or her own experiences of wartime ("Irish Lives" discussion forums). Other learners offered personal testimonies of their own relatives' actions during the events under discussion: for example, whether they supported or opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and one poster whose father had been a member of the much-maligned Black and Tans. Gallagher and Wallace (2016: 6-7) point out that not only can the MOOC facilitate the accumulation of "crowdsourced narratives", but these comments have an advantage in that they are "born-digital records" which can readily be "mined for trends and themes". While they are careful to stress that comments on MOOCs should not be considered oral history in the traditional sense – accounts are not issued in response to a particular set of questions, for one thing – Gallagher and Wallace (ibid.: 17) point out that the technologies involved in the MOOC have eliminated a core challenge of oral history: "how to access your interviewees." Thus the nature of the MOOC as an online course format is amenable to historical source accumulation in that it eliminates the problem of distance, and facilitates contributions which are automatically digitised and therefore readily collated. This can be particularly helpful for microhistories which face a shortage of source material.

With regard to microhistories, Gallagher and Wallace (ibid.: 7) note the importance of oral history in capturing and interpreting "stories which have been marginalized, the histories of groups…who may indeed be the victims of official erasure from the record." They claim that MOOC research can give "voice to individual and familial narratives…which may not echo the official national memory" (ibid.: 18). Also of interest is the fact that many "Irish Lives" learners commented critically on their experience of the Irish school system, as they felt they were offered a sanitised or biased version of events (ibid.); thus the MOOC may offer an insight into how history is taught, and which perspectives are given voice, in mainstream schooling.

Even factual errors and "popular misconceptions" which manifest themselves in learner comments are of use, as these offer researchers the chance to examine "how versions of history are constructed in the public mind" (ibid.: 8). Therefore the fact that the MOOC, as an online course format, offers considerable opportunity for learners to contribute their own histories – histories which might otherwise be overlooked by the historic record – and that these contributions are born digital and therefore easily analysed, illustrates its usefulness not only to microhistories in particular but to the historical discipline overall.

Furthermore, the MOOC's bridging of the academic and popular historical spheres stems in part from its symbolic break from academic strictures; a break which aligns well with the non-traditional approach of microhistory. This can be seen in the attitude of the "Irish Lives" course coordinators towards the minimal formal assessment, the low uptake thereof amongst learners versus their high levels of participation in comments, and the comments of learners on the accessibility of the course structure. On analysis, the language used in the "Irish Lives" instructional videos seemed to be more elaborate and descriptive than that which you might read in typical academic texts, and illustrative voiceovers accompanied archive photographs and videos. Moreover, the use of fictional characters in Week One can be seen as a slight departure from academic history norms which stress the importance of solid fact and evidence. The educators' perspective on the course assessments has already been outlined; they did not feel that the assignments were necessary to the completion of the course, and were happy instead to see learners participating en masse in group discussions. In terms of the learner response to the course methodology, it seems overall to have been positive, though some did lament the lack of a more structured and formal approach. In Week One, for example, many learners expressed satisfaction at the "learn at your own pace" approach outlined in the course introduction ("Irish Lives" discussion forums). In step 1.21, furthermore, a highly-rated

comment (with 23 "likes") described the course as being accessibly non-academic, and expressed admiration for the educators' attempts to teach the complexity of history and the prevalence of untruths therein. Gallagher and Wallace (2016: 6, 8) express the opinion that modern learners do not want "a populist or 'dumbed down' version of history", and state that through assessing the level of reception or resistance among learners towards "new conceptions of history", it is possible to learn a lot about the link between the academic discipline and "popular awareness". Thus it is clear that MOOCs offer the opportunity to depart slightly from the traditional limits of academia, and that this approach can enjoy considerable success among learners; this can aid in the MOOC's spanning of academic and popular history, and thus its propagation of microhistorical principles.

Finally, the MOOC as a conduit between academic and popular history can be seen in learner comments (insofar as these represent the "public"), which discussed the level of inclusivity present in the version of history on offer. One learner commented on the "Irish Lives" MOOC's failure to mention women's organisations formed before the vote was granted (bar the suffrage movement), and another was critical of the lack of representation of Northern nationalist groups in the characters of Week One ("Irish Lives" discussion forums). There seems to have been a minor trend of criticism of the lack of focus on women. On the other hand, many commented on the usefulness of videos for communicating the experiences of ordinary citizens during times of war; indeed, a recurring observation amongst comments was "how the digital sources…brought history to life" (Gallagher and Wallace, 2016: 13-14). As mentioned above, some learners spoke of their dissatisfaction with Irish teaching methods, which have tended to overlook ordinary lives and to provide biased accounts of Irish history. There was an implicit comparison with their learning experience on the "Irish Lives" MOOC, in part because of the ability to converse with their peers on a large scale in the discussion forums; Gallagher and

Wallace (ibid.) observe that learners felt that discussing history with others on these forums challenged and extended their ideas of history. Thus there was a clear awareness present amongst learners on the "Irish Lives" MOOC of the importance of inclusivity in historical teaching; while some felt that the course did not go far enough in offering this, others commented that the medium itself was particularly amenable to inclusivity, in contrast with traditional teaching practices in Ireland. Therefore an analysis of learner experiences on board the "Irish Lives" MOOC illustrates that the format can act as a bridge between academic and popular history, but this bridge must be paved with the values of inclusivity and objectivity expected by MOOC learners, and propagated by microhistory.

Antoniou (2007: 93) describes one of the difficulties faced by academic historians thus: they "usually have to transfer and transform the 'facts,' which they acquire in their mediating role, typically with no lived experiences of the event described." The "Irish Lives" course coordinators faced this challenge on an acute level, as many of their learners either had personal experiences of the events described or their consequences, or were not far removed from them. Added to this, the events covered by the MOOC form a core and contentious part of modern Irish identity and its many fragmented parts; thus particular care was called for in this particular junction of the academic and the popular. I have discussed how the MOOC can effectively teach the values of microhistory in acting as a bridge between academic and popular versions of history, through an examination of the relationship between microhistory, public memory and revisionism; the MOOC as a "generative repository"; its symbolic break from academic tradition; and the discussions of learners regarding inclusivity in history. What has emerged from this discussion is a sense of the importance of public memory to microhistory, and of the usefulness of the MOOC format in merging this popular strand with its more academic counterpart, by virtue of its massively open, online nature.

Conclusion

"The opportunity of our time is to offer universal access to all of human knowledge" (Kahle, in Rosenzweig, 2003: 755).

In this study, I set out to ascertain whether or not the MOOC format is especially apt for teaching the principles of microhistory. In doing so, I reviewed the existing literature on the subject of MOOCs, which has tended to focus on their suitability for learning in general. I also examined the nature of microhistories and how they fit within the trend of digitisation in historical study. I found that there was a gap in the existing work on the suitability of MOOCs for the study of particular subjects such as history, and within this, microhistory. Thus I hoped to ascertain whether the format can be said to particularly suit these areas of study. In doing so, I used the "Irish Lives in War and Revolution: Exploring Ireland's History 1912-1923" MOOC, delivered by Trinity College Dublin, as a case study.

A personal interview conducted with the "Irish Lives" professorial staff revealed a desire on their part to avoid presenting an authoritative version of the period under discussion, but instead to teach MOOC participants the necessary skills and mindset to "think like a historian". This accords with the connectivist tradition of education, which places the learner experience at the forefront of education, and also links up with two of the core values of microhistory: the need for objectivity in the historical record, and recognition of the multiplicity of historical "voices". Furthermore, an examination of the presentation of source material on the "Irish Lives" MOOC revealed that the course coordinators were largely successful in their approach: sources were presented in an unbiased fashion, and probing questions issued to learners tended to encourage

detailed analysis and reconsideration, rather than encouraging any particular viewpoints. Again, this mirrors the approach of microhistory. A laidback attitude was also taken to assessment on the MOOC, with more importance placed on community interactions. However, it emerged that the course could have gone further in instructing learners on how to critically assess the relative significance of documents, in light of the highly selective digitisation of sources that plagues the historical – and particularly the microhistorical – discipline. Added to this, I discovered that the bureaucratic guidelines of the companies in charge of delivering MOOCs can interfere in the objective intentions of course coordinators. Thus I gained an insight into the importance of the design process to the MOOC's espousal of microhistorical values.

Following this, I analysed the engagement of learners on the "Irish Lives" MOOC, through examining the pre- and post-course surveys conducted by Futurelearn, as well as Banks' course report and the database of learner comments. From these analyses I gained an understanding of the expectations of learners prior to participating in the course, their attitude towards the course assessments and the importance placed on community interactions in their learning experience. I also posited that the MOOC, by virtue of its digital nature, is an especially suitable tool for measuring learner response to a microhistorical approach, as this can easily be quantified and analysed. This gave a detailed picture of the success of the approaches outlined in chapter two, thus enhancing my understanding of how the MOOC operated and whether it was effective in its propagation of microhistorical values.

Finally, I explored the ways in which MOOCs can act as a bridge between academic and popular versions of history, thus furthering the aims of microhistory. This involved examining

the link between microhistory and public memory; the role of revisionism therein; how the MOOC can act as a "generative repository" for personal testimonies; how it represents a departure from traditional academic strictures; and learners' assessment of the inclusivity of the MOOC's approach. I found that the MOOC can effectively link the academic and popular spheres in allowing for large-scale personal contributions, but that it must couple this with an egalitarian and inclusive outlook in order to be effective. This research aided me in contextualising the importance of learner contributions in the MOOC, and what this can mean for the study of microhistories.

What has emerged from this study is a sense of the potential power of the MOOC to teach and emphasise marginal perspectives in history, and the importance of inclusive objectives in realising this. The format itself allows access to the vast abundance of digitised source material, but learners must be reminded of the selectiveness inherent in this process, and they must be instructed in how to assess the relative importance of multiple documents placed side by side, and thus – in Dolan's words – stripped of their context. In general, historical source material is more readily available nowadays, in that there is far more digitised content than there was ten years ago; however this content is not evenly spread across topics and peoples, the recognition of which is central to the study of microhistory. Furthermore, by virtue of its online nature, the MOOC introduces a considerable international element to group learning, thus aiding in the situation of events and peoples in broader, global contexts – a key tenet of microhistory. However, any efforts to teach a microhistorical perspective may enjoy more success among learner populations where there is a degree of personal or emotional investment in the topic under discussion. In the case of "Irish Lives", we saw learners' investment in the topic at hand, in their contributions of personal and familial narratives to the discussion.

The interests and intentions of course coordinators and MOOC designers are, predictably, vital in the teaching of more inclusive approaches to history. With the "Irish Lives" MOOC we saw an objective, connectivist approach, which aimed to emphasise the teaching of key historiographical skills as well as a critical awareness of the fallacy of mainstream historical accounts. However, pure as these intentions may be, the strictures associated with MOOC formats may exert pressure on the professorial staff to appear more authoritative than they might be comfortable with, thus somewhat undermining this connectivist approach. This risks erring on the side of the xMOOC, which hinges on the direct, one-way transferral of information from the expert to the learners. Such administrative interference can be seen in the style of the MOOC's instructional videos and the inclusion of formal "assessments" in the learning experience.

In conclusion, I have found that the MOOC format itself offers the potential to be used as a tool in teaching more inclusive and holistic perspectives on history, but an institution's approach to using the format is ultimately the deciding factor. Without the core values of objectivity, critical analysis and approachability, a MOOC may fail to offer anything more than the "official", mainstream historical account. However, through the abandonment of the authoritative academic voice, the inclusion of probing analytical questions, the encouragement of social interaction, and the allowance of personal testimony and contribution, all the while aiming at a non-discriminatory approach, MOOCs can effectively undermine the authority of traditional histories. In their open, online nature, they can also aid learners in formulating a universal perspective on the lived experiences of smaller social groups. Thus, MOOCs can be valuable tools for teaching the principles of microhistory.

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