Time for new ways – go one step further!

How a MOOC can make archaeology possible for everyone

Sigrid PETER, Austria

It has been known for a long time that so-called "lay researchers" or even "citizens" have repeatedly made a claim for participation in archaeology and monument preservation. This is also understandable, as cultural heritage is not an exclusive matter for archaeological specialists and heritage management offices, but also triggers a high emotional reaction in the respective population.

Fig. 1. Excavation, Castle Ried am Riederberg (© Verein zur Erhaltung und Erforschung der Burg Ried am Riederberg).

The problem here is that citizens often have no experience or training in this field, because they have not completed a relevant course of study. At the same time, access to university studies is often not possible for various reasons. As a result, it is difficult or impossible to learn, let alone document, the skills and abilities required in the archaeological field. In Austria itself, it is not possible to learn such skills outside of university. Well-prepared internet resources often come from the UK and are therefore only available in English. However, the English language is a barrier for many people and discourages them from studying archaeology.

However, there are currently three existing resources to overcome this problem:

1. The Archaeological Skill Passport, which has been available not only in the UK but also in German-speaking countries for quite some time,

2. Since the Covid-19-related lockdown many different online tools for e-learning courses (e.g. Massive Open Online Courses, MOOC in short) have been released, improved and adapted and

3. The technical prerequisites are available to quickly and easily record videos, pictures or audio recordings and edit them using a tablet / smartphone or a digital camera.

Individually, they do not represent a particularly noteworthy achievement, but in combination, with a little sensitivity, a very useful concept for an e-learning course on the Archaeological Skill Passport can be developed.

The idea for this course arose from the background that many people don't have access to university studies and that such studies are at the same time a high language barrier. An online course offers the participant the opportunity to acquire content at a self-chosen learning pace. Thus, theoretical contents on archaeology and monument preservation can be taught and worked on by participants.

Like the Archaeological Skill Passport itself, the content is structured in modules and can therefore be adapted and expanded at any time to reflect changes. As a general addition I intend to include a basic explanation of scientific work and research. This serves to provide a general understanding of archaeological work and is usually only taught in a university context. Non-academics do not have a basic understanding of scientific working methods and are therefore not appropriately sensitised. Many small working steps - such as documentation as an important intermediate step in the process - have little or no significance for lay researchers and are therefore hardly or not at all appreciated.

The structure and content of the Archaeological Skill Passport can be taken as a basic didactic concept. From a methodological point of view I think it is important to build up such a course as multimedia as possible, i.e. with the different technical possibilities such as video, sound, pictures and text.

The basic structure of the modules should be divided into four sections:

1. Theoretical content
2. Tasks that serve the self-development and consolidation of the contents (including self-reflection on the various topics)
3. Verification by a suitable test procedure

The course itself should be based on the principle of a MOOC and should be freely accessible to anyone interested.

The advantages of such a course consist mainly of the advantages of a blended learning concept: The participants can learn and repeat the theoretical contents at their own pace. Furthermore, they are not tied to time and place and can work with the principle of "bring your own device". MOOCs are cross-platform and mostly web-based. If questions arise, answers can be worked out by other participants or academics via discussion forums. Furthermore, archaeological excavations offer a useful practical supplement.

Ultimately, such a course allows the language level to be leveled downwards and makes the contents useful not only for interested lay researchers, but also for prospective and current students. Technical terms can also be put into simple words and explained.

The long-term hoped-for effect is primarily to awaken or promote enthusiasm for archaeology. Another important point is to build up a basic understanding of the archaeological way of working and of scientific work and research. In this sense, this course can also help peripherally against fake news and false reports.

In addition to an enthusiasm for archaeology, the course is of course also intended to increase sensitivity for the preservation and protection of historical monuments. In the best case the participants of the course are therefore also interested in the preservation of material cultural heritage and are committed to its protection.

At the same time, the greatest possible reach for interested laypersons is to be created - for example, through low-threshold access to the information required. Ideally, such a course should also find acceptance in the professional world.

References

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