

# Five-Minute Mini-Courses at the Open University of China

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**Abstract:** 5-minute mini-courses are courses that last around 5 minutes presented via video and are accessible online. They are suitable for student-oriented learning and fragmented learning. Such courses are short with exquisitely designed content and can be viewed through a diversity of mobile terminals. The Open University of China (OUC) initiated a “5-Minute Mini-Course Development Project” at the end of 2012. The project aims to create approximately 30,000 5-minute mini-courses in three years covering both degree and non-degree educational programmes. As one important component of the project, a “5-Minute Mini-Course Network” was officially delivered online on July 3, 2013. Up till now, based on the remodeling of the non-degree courses at OUC, nearly 5000 5-minute mini-courses have been produced and made available online, which cover a number of fields of study. This paper is intended to report the “5-Minute Mini-Course Development Project” and its latest development at OUC. The purpose is to share information and call for comments for further improvement.

**Keywords:** 5-minute Mini-courses; Development and Evaluation; 5 Minutes Microlecture

## 1. Introduction

With the development of the society, education for all citizens, life-long learning, fragmented learning, mobile learning (M-learning) and U-learning have become the characteristics of the information age. The ways that people use to study have turned up-side-down. With the popularity of smart phones, pads and other mobile devices, people now have new requirements for study resources. The resources should fit in fragmented study time periods and should be visualized to satisfy the requirements of cognition. Technically speaking, the resources should be accessible on multiple platforms and mobile devices. Under such circumstances, video-based mini-courses with the length from five minutes to ten minutes which satisfy the needs addressed above have drawn the attention of the OUC and the general public in China.

### 1.1. What is a Mini-course?

According to EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (2012), a mini-course is a short recorded audio or video presentation on a single, tightly defined topic. Used as a component of online, blended, or face-to-face teaching, these brief courses can be interspersed with learning activities that reinforce course topics. In addition, mini-courses provide a self-help resource for students, either at the time of the lesson or later for review, explaining key concepts or demonstrating techniques that might be difficult to master. The abbreviated format of these courses can be highly effective by focusing students' attention on a single topic for a short time, limiting the opportunities for

distraction. Because students control the playback, they can refer to the instructor's presentation as often as needed.

Penrose (2009) said that a mini-course is intended to direct and engage students in active learning with tiny bursts of information. The mini-course does this by highlighting important terms, then assigning other activities such as a research paper or group discussion to reinforce the learning.

### 1.2. How is a Mini-course Produced?

Mini-courses are typically produced by an instructor, who might begin by drafting a rough script — containing just an introduction, a list of key points to cover, and a conclusion — perhaps with help from instructional technologists. The course is then recorded, often with a webcam but possibly with only a mini-phone. Video content may feature the instructor as a talking head or may display other types of visual information to accompany a voiceover: a slide presentation, a screencast, or perhaps an animation. The result is uploaded to the LMS, a dedicated media server, or a public site like YouTube, Vimeo, or iTunes U, depending on campus infrastructure options. The title of each mini-course can be specific to the concepts discussed to ensure students are able to locate the courses they need. Keywords and metatags can also be added.

### 1.3. What are the Advantages of a Good Mini-course?

A number of studies have shown that good mini-courses have, among others, the following three major advantages over traditional normal courses:

**Simple and efficient:** Mini-courses are simplified courses with only the core knowledge and simple methodologies included instead of sophisticated theories. Students only need to learn what they truly need and what are truly useful. That means mini-courses make study more efficient.

**Accessible by students anytime and anywhere:** Since mini-courses are delivered online, you can learn it whenever you want to. What is more important, it only takes you about five minutes to study a course. A number of "mini-time periods" can produce the effect of "1+1>2". You can study when you are at the airport or at the train station, or when you are waiting for your food at a restaurant. You can use your mobile to study at any time and you can truly make it in only five minutes. There are no time or location restrictions as are in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting.

**Vivid and motivating:** Good mini-courses make full use of pictures, music and other vivid materials in their video presentations. These interesting and interactive videos stimulate students' right brain and make the study content visual. Students are thus motivated to concentrate on what is offered to them.

## 2. "5-Minute Mini-Course Development Project" at OUC

In order to meet the requirements of the development of society and education, greatly promote the in-depth integration of modern information technology with education and fulfill the demands for academic and non-academic education and personalized learning, the Open University of China (OUC) launched a "5-Minute Mini-Course Development Project" in 2012. The project aims to produce approximately 30,000 5-minute mini-courses in three years covering both degree and non-degree educational areas. As one important component of the project, a "5-Minute Mini-Course Network" (<http://wfz.nerc-edu.com/>) was officially delivered online on July 3, 2013. Up to now, based on the remodeling of the non-degree courses at OUC, nearly 5000 5-minute mini-courses have been produced and made available online, which cover a great number of fields of study.

The "5-Minute Mini-Course Network" consists of several content blocks, such as Meet Mater Educators, Featured Topics, Peer Space, Group Chat, Mini-Course Training, and Personal Sharing Area. Students can choose what they like to learn from the mini-courses offered. They can also take part in peer or group activities online, asking questions, sharing experiences and co-developing mini-courses of their own. The network is a place for personal, flexible and collaborative learning of mini-courses. More interestingly, students can earn credits

from the mini-courses and save them in the credit bank of OUC. These credits can be transferred to their future degree programme study.

### 2.1. Application of the 5-Minute Mini-Courses

The 5-minute mini-courses of OUC are intended for mobile learning in the first place. For this purpose, a special App has been developed by OUC. Students can use their cell phones and/or iPad to access the mini-courses.

Secondly, the 5-minute mini-courses can be embedded in other online courses as one supportive component. They are especially useful for those knowledge-based courses, where key points and difficult points need to be explained and illustrated in a very visual and interesting manner. For example, such online courses as Auditing, Modern Chinese Literature and Data Structure at OUC have all included some mini-courses from the "5-Minute Mini-Course Network".

Thirdly, the 5-minute mini-courses can be used as resources for developing other new courses. They can be used both for degree courses and for non-degree training purposes. Like biscuits, these mini-courses can be combined or re-organized in a flexible way to suit the needs of different courses. For instance, such mini-courses as Literature Appreciation and Public Economics have been applied to a number of new courses at OUC.

In classroom settings, the 5-minute mini-courses can be integrated with classroom activities. The mini-videos, as one effective teaching medium in the classroom, can play different roles: course introduction, core concept explanation, demonstration of an experiment process, etc. In this case, the teacher will be free from giving lectures and talks. Instead, the teacher can have more time to organize interactive activities in class like peer work and group work. A flipped classroom will then be established.

Of course, it is worth mentioning that mini-courses are not simply mini-videos. They are courses. Like other traditional courses, they involve a complete teaching and learning process. They need good teaching support and interactive learning communities. Without human commitment, mini-courses are nothing but some written or visual resources.

### 2.2. Future Development of the 5-Minute Mini-Courses

According to the plan of the "5-Minute Mini-Course Development Project", OUC will produce 30,000 mini-courses within three years. These courses will cover hundreds of fields of study and will be used for both degree and non-degree purposes.

To make a bridge between non-degree training and degree studies, OUC will add a "mini-credit" label to each mini-course. Therefore, it is possible for students to start learning a mini-course for personal interest. Then when they complete a number of mini-courses and obtain a few

credits and when they want to move further ahead for a degree, the credits will be transferred to the degree programme. This is the idea of credit banks which are being developed by OUC currently. The barrier between academic and non-academic education, as well as between formal and informal study will be broken down.

In the meantime, efforts will be made to improve the functions and services of the "5-Minute Mini-Course Network", which will be turned into an integrated platform for sharing learning resources, providing learning support to students, implementing learning management and carrying out research studies. It caters for the needs of lifelong learning and personalized study. It promotes the development, popularization and application of high quality digital learning resources. In the future, OUC will, relying on these 5-minute mini-courses, make course combinations to serve education of different forms and different purposes and will provide better services for students at all levels.

### Conclusions

Web-mediated mini-courses are a new invention only in recent years. They are new to OUC as well. This paper has reported a "5-Minute Mini-Course Development

Project" initiated at OUC. It describes the status quo of the project and its future plan. As the second part of this research plan, the researchers will continue to conduct empirical studies in the near future to investigate the effectiveness of these mini-courses. There are many issues that need to be explored. For example, what is a good mini-course? What is the standard for a good mini-course, both pedagogically and technically? How shall we teach, learn and assess a mini-course? How shall we integrate a mini-course with a specific application context, such as different disciplines and student groups? How shall we use mini-courses to effectively promote learners' formal and informal study? These questions can only be answered through teaching practice and action research in the future.

### References

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