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# What makes a course like *23 Things* go viral?

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## Practice paper outline

The “23 Things” course model has gone from a small US library to Oxford, Cambridge, Melbourne, and New Zealand. The 23 Things programme has gone viral in that over 500 public iterations have been recorded globally since 2006, each one adapted to the organisation's needs, and it continues to spread. This paper considers the features that have led to this growth in the context of our own experience running 23 Things for Research for staff and doctoral students and 23 Teaching Things for student teachers at the Faculty of Education and Social Work of the University of Auckland.

23 Things offers online, self-paced, à la carte learning. It is delivered via blog posts and related digital communication tools. The activities scaffold learners to apply the learning by creating artefacts that are relevant for their contexts, and reflecting on how those artefacts might be used in their practice. 23 Things curates free, open source content and is Creative Commons licensed to freely share and repurpose for non-commercial gain. Success is reflected in the participants' reports of their increased confidence and ability, the formation of professional learning communities, and the subsequent spread to new contexts and audiences.

## Introduction

As tertiary institutions are challenged to respond to the prevalence of digital technologies, there is a corresponding need to develop staff and student skill in using online and blended modes of learning (Gregory & Salmon, 2013). However, for staff it is one of many claims on their precious research and teaching time. Students in a crowded teacher education curriculum already have many demands on their time to meet the graduating teacher standards but also the need for digital competence for future-focused learning.

The Centre for the Creative Application of Technology in Education (CreATE) at the University of Auckland has a remit to enhance learning, teaching, and scholarship through digital innovation. This includes provision of professional development opportunities for staff and supporting student use of digital technologies for teaching and learning. We sought a timely solution that could be quickly and inexpensively integrated without broad structural and institutional changes - and, crucially, one that participants would elect to do, even though there was no associated course credit or academic workload credit. In short, something viral.

We sought to integrate technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), and recognised the need for tertiary online teaching to incorporate personal, pedagogical, contextual, and organisational components (Baran & Correia, 2014). We also sought for participants to benefit from mentoring and support via a Community of Practice (Kopcha, 2010).

## The practice under scrutiny

“23 Things” was first developed by Helene Blowers in 2006 to educate library colleagues about Web 2.0 and provides flexible means to deliver online learning via blog. It has since been adapted many times by other tertiary institutions to suit their own learning outcomes. By using online, open source components, minimal resource is required other than staff time to develop and customise the course (Blowers, 2008; Erikson & Healy, 2013).

Firstly, the CreATE team identified a need for professional development on digital tools for research, for academic staff, professional staff, and PhD students. 23 Things for Research ([www.23research.com](http://www.23research.com)) was adapted to the University of Auckland context by Damon Ellis and the CreATE Team from versions of the programme recently delivered at the University of Melbourne and Oxford University. The programme was delivered for the first time in 2014 and a second iteration ran in 2015.

Next, the CreATE team identified a need for professional development on digital tools for teaching and learning, for faculty student teachers. A second version of the programme was developed to support the needs of our student teachers to be confident and capable users of digital technologies in classroom environments. 23 Teaching Things ([www.23teaching.com](http://www.23teaching.com)), was developed by Lucie Lindsay, the CreATE team and Bronwyn Edmunds, E-learning Leader at Freemans Bay School.

Both 23 Things programmes began with content and activities delivered by blog posts. Each post was about a ‘Thing,’ focusing on a specific aspect or affordance of technology: professional social networks, content curation, cloud storage, and so forth. The programmes ran over 12-15 weeks with two new topics released every week.

For 23 Things for Research, in addition to the intrinsic value of the learning, we moderated the process by providing proactive consistent feedback to participants. Additionally there were spot prizes to incentivise weekly participation. In contrast, 23 Teaching Things had minimal facilitation or prizes for the student teacher participants. Instead, participation was motivated by the intrinsic value for students who are creating portfolios, in their job search and to demonstrate graduating teacher standards.

## Discussion/conclusion

The immediate outcomes for participants corresponded to the benefits identified by Stephens (2012): increases in participant confidence, curiosity, and communication around online tools. In pre- and post-course surveys, participants have identified both that they intend to use more tools, and that they intend to extend their use of these online tools into new domains (from personal use into teaching, research, professional development, and other professional activities). Across the board, participants have provided consistent feedback on the value of moving beyond technology boosterism in order to critically engage with the tools in practice.

Longer term, the 23 Things courses have demonstrated their virality by spreading organically beyond the boundaries of the programme. ‘Graduates’ of the course have used their artefacts to effect change with external stakeholders, host their own online communities of practice, and initiate and lead training programmes with other staff. 23 Things has even extended outside our planned audience: current classroom teachers spontaneously adopted the course to structure their own school’s professional development.

## Take home message

What makes a professional development programme like 23 Things go viral? The modular and re-purposable nature of the open source framework gives considerable opportunity for designers to customise and contextualise. Likewise, the course approach is flexible according to the needs of the designer: it can be self-paced, but also offers the opportunity to engage with participants relatively synchronously as a community of practice. The content is strongly relevant to multiple practices, and the unity of subject matter and process (using the tools it teaches in the act of teaching them), thus combining technological, pedagogical and content knowledge in ways that can be easily repurposed and adapted to meet the needs of specific audiences, purposes and criteria. Christakis (2010) describes how innovative ideas spread like the flu through social networks. The 23 Things model will likely continue to spread and grow.

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