MOOC Mania: Implications and Collaboration for English Language Teachers

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Abstract: In today's Internet ridden world e-learning is one of the crucial parts of modern education. This way of learning is surprisingly diverse but shares a predictable common denominator. Technology's transformative power enables learning interactions that might otherwise be impossible for students and teachers alike. Coursera.com is a fast growing MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) provider empowering students and educators, and enables learners to create an interactive platform. In this study, we will discuss the course "Shaping the Way we Teach English" which has brought enthusiasm among passionate English teachers. This paper will highlight how the flexibility of this course paves the way for collaborating with the online and offline teaching and learning community with the experience of digital learning. Furthermore, it also examines how the learners are adapting to the digital platform, the challenges they face, and how they are overcoming the obstacles.

Keywords: MOOC, Online course, E-learning, Collaboration

Introduction

If pedagogy is the most classical and theoretical discourse of teaching, MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) is the well-known educational buzzword in present academia. It is on the way to creating history and bringing changes and opportunities to learning styles. Furthermore, it democratizes the opportunities of lifelong learning. In this research, a group of teachers who were newbies in the online learning environment participated in a six-week online course. All the teachers were really excited and uncertain about each step and part of the course since they did not have any online learning experience, let alone with MOOCs.

The aim of this paper is to find out how MOOCs help English teachers collaborate, share and complete a course while working full-time.

Importance of E-learning in Education

According to Page (2007), in a typical high school a student has access to a teacher 40 minutes per day. That means she has access to that teacher 5% of her waking day, and even that time is shared with 25 classmates. She has access to the Internet 100% of the time. Technology is no substitute for an inspiring teacher. However, online materials are far more available. In fact it is twenty times more accessible.

Using a textbook-based lectures approach seems very static where the learning outcome is limited. If we think otherwise, a wireless laptop has access in two ways for both the teachers

and the learners. Information technology seems the magical lamp of Aladdin which allows learning anywhere, anytime and takes education beyond the classroom.

Ling (2007), in researching the extent to which a successful community of inquiry might be established online, states that the three kinds of presence (cognitive, teaching, and social presence) associated with the model can all be achieved through online contact only. Interactive simulations and illustrations create dynamic images in the human brain which can produce a much greater depth of understanding of a concept.

When virtual manipulatives are used in a classroom setting, they make a different scenario than chalk and talk. Using a projector, the teacher can conduct onscreen investigations and demonstrate concepts far more easily than with just words and arm-waving. If the students have access to the same tools over the web, they can reinforce the ideas by experimenting with the simulations themselves, anytime, anywhere. Oliver (2002), however, identifies the role of educational technologists as being both marginal (in terms of contact and security) and powerful (in terms of remit linked to "strategic priorities") (p. 245).

Some of the goals of ICT ran in parallel with perceived advantages of e-learning, as Blass and Davis (2003) state, "the control of pace, place, time and style of presentation and interaction shifts more towards the learner" (p. 229). Technology allows the learning system to be turned. Instead of teaching (push), students can be given projects that require them to learn (pull) the necessary material themselves. Here the challenge is to provide them with what they need any time anywhere, without being in the physical presence of a teacher. The MOOC courses are based on reciprocal approach which makes learning far more interesting for the learners. Students' curiosity and concern over new material and the propensity to meet the deadline of a new submission is an eye-opener. In the old days, students could write in a notebook. Their notes were confined and seen only by the teacher. Using modern technology they can make a PowerPoint presentation, record/edit the spoken word, do digital photography, make a video, run a class newspaper, run a web based school radio or TV station, compose digital music on a synthesizer, make a website, create a blog, allowing access to myriad other readers/viewers.

Collaboration

A vital skill in the new digital world is the ability to work collaboratively with others who may be physically out of reach but not virtually because of the tools such as the web, email, instant messaging, and cell phone. Instead of struggling alone on homework, students can work in small groups wherever they can work as a team. They are doing this already – but it can now be formalized and taught as a crucial skill. Students need to be prepared for this to adapt with modern world.

As Oliver (2002) highlights, the role of the educational technologist is one that emerged over recent decades in response to developing technologies. The world view of the student can be expanded because of the zero cost of communicating with other people around the globe. The Internet permits free video conferencing which allows interaction in real time with sister schools in other countries. From an educational viewpoint, it is always important to understand other cultures through dialog and collaboration which open a new horizon of knowledge.

Learners are, of course, individual and different. The target of MOOCs is basically to make a common platform for all. Information technologies can permit them to break step with the class and go at a pace and order that suits that student better. Without disrupting the class, they can repeat difficult lessons and explore what they find interesting. With time, it will become more like having a private tutor rather than being lost in a large class.

It is frequently the development of these technologies, or indeed of e-learning, that is cited as a catalyst for change (Conole, White, & Oliver, 2007), and the change this brings for academia (Salmon, 2000). Shephard (2004) identifies the differences as "helping staff to help themselves."

Students need productivity tools for the same reasons we academics do. They need to write, read, communicate, organize, and schedule. A student's life is not much different from any knowledge worker, and they need similar tools. Even if they are never used in the classroom, portable personal computers will make a student's (and teacher's) life more effective. To cash in on this benefit, schools need to go paperless. Inglis, Ling,

and Joosten (1999) highlight this – the recognition of each other's expertise as part of the collaboration – as one of the crucial factors of successful learning and teaching development.

It is not unusual for a textbook to be costly, where they are purchased by the student; they can cost more than the tuition itself. Through the use of open, free educational tools on the web, the dependence on expensive paper textbooks can be reduced. There is a growing movement to create and publish this type of material through organizations such as OER commons. OER stands for Open Educational Resources and the idea is to follow the open source model made popular by software projects such as Linux. Material is created by the educational community itself and then freely shared with others.

Shaping the Way We Teach English (background of the course): MOOCs, as discussed above, have given learning and teaching a new dimension. This section looks at how the course "Shaping the Way We Teach English," offered to English teachers, has used this platform for teaching. Coursera's description of the course states that it is meant for teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and could be useful to both newbies and for "those already working in the field who would like to revise and refresh their methods and approaches." The five-week course was meant to enable teachers "to explain how the various materials and approaches presented will lead to better language learning." They would also "be able to choose appropriate materials and apply varied classroom activities to improve [their] students' study of English. [They would] also be able to better evaluate both [their] own and other teachers' practices."

Method and Observation

This study investigates the teaching learning process and the impacts of virtual forums (collaboration with online peers) during the course. It also determines the pattern of interactions between the learners among peers and instructors to understand the actual use and benefits. For this, interaction sessions were observed and even the researchers were directly involved in some online courses where they synchronously interacted with peers. Later, 10 MOOC participants who completed this course were interviewed and they answered a questionnaire designed to comprehend the effects and impact of the MOOC on their learning. The data was collected using a questionnaire, discussions, and interviews which were compiled and analyzed through the quantitative method. The results are discussed in terms of their experience of an online course, benefits from online forums, and the interaction patterns during the course.

Findings and Discussion

Most of these participants were first-timers at a MOOC. The underlying message which we get through it is the power of MOOCs which moves participants to engage in it. According to our survey, most of the participants were not very clear about the grading and some were really uncertain about the validity and reliability of the course since it is free and they did not have any prior experience. However, ultimately the confusion did not deter them. Rather, as time went on, their confidence increased according to their responses to the questionnaire. Most of the participants thought that the course is good for beginners, some of them thought that mid-level professionals could do it. The most crucial finding of the survey is the collaboration where all the participants agreed that the online forum was an excellent source of cooperation and a source of ideas and motivation.

The participants of this course experienced a variety of dimensions in their teamwork. In-house (institutional) discussion, international affinity, virtual connections, motivation from the American Center in Bangladesh, and a new vibe to share their learning across the border worked as a holistic approach to make the entire experience very successful. This was communicated by the participants during their interview.

Recommendations

There are some questions and controversies regarding MOOCs. Currently, colleges and universities are not accepting MOOCs for credit, unless it is offered from their own program. But the number of students and offerings from various universities are increasing. So, what does a MOOC learner need to succeed? The answer is motivation for learning, and having self-confidence and faith. An inclination to adaptation is a must as well since it is a new way of learning. Lastly, if participants do not value education as a life skill, most of the online courses are not for them because participants have to prove the validity of the certificate through their learning outcomes.

Conclusion

"Behaviorism" is the philosophy that explains the behavior where learning and practice come together and are frequently reinforced. On the other hand, "constructivist" is more about creating someone's own way of learning which deals with a learner's individual way of thinking or interpreting and discovering independent meanings of knowledge attributed to experience. "Connectivism" is a learning hypothesis which integrates network and self-generated theories that connect information and can also be referred to as Internet-based learning. If we blend the three methods to form a new theory of learning, the learners will have a unique exposure to the distinct features of learning through peer-assisted online learning, using the information to construct their own ideas or projects and continuous reinforcement of learning practices. Blended learning, flipped classrooms and MOOC models can also reallocate the contemporary education system to bring new dynamics into learners' achievements and outcomes.

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Appendix A: Shaping the Way we Teach English (Questionnaire)

1. Is it your first online course?
    a. Yes
    b. No

2. Is it the first (MOOC) you have attended?
    a. Yes
    b. No

3. What is the main obstacle you find during this course?
    a. Understanding the marking pattern
    b. The real goal of the course
    c. Uncertainty of the validity and reliability since it is free.
    d. Task completion within the time frame
    e. (Anything more) Comment:

4. Choose some features which helped you do the course alongside your professional life.
    a. It increased my confidence.
    b. It is a new style of learning.
    c. I can customize my time and learning style within the given time frame.

5. This course is better for
    a. Beginners
    b. Mid professionals
    c. Experienced teachers

6. How many times did you contact with your offline peers (If you have/know anyone) during this course in a week?

7. Do your offline peers have any influence on you/motivate you to meet the deadline and answering the questions?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Comment:

8. The online interaction on board helps to get ideas in language teaching and motivate you to share your ideas.
    a. Yes
    b. No

9. Has the teaching style of this course brought any significant change in your learning style?
    a. Yes
    b. No

10. How did you handle the difficulty of reading materials?
    a. I did not face any difficulty
    b. Seeing the video
    c. Reading other comments on the forum
    d. I answered what I have understood

11. After doing this course if you are interested, what type of course do you prefer?
    a. I am not interested
    b. Fully online
    c. Classroom (Offline)
    d. Blended (Online and offline)