

Chapter 13

Online Teaching: Applying Distance Learning Principles to MOOCs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a description of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), their brief history and some examples. Then the chapter focuses on online learning and how research on distance education can be used to inform the design of these courses. In particular, the authors consider research in the following areas: improving learner experience, online activities, and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

With the latest developments in Web based technologies, the context of learning has been slowly changing both at distance learning institutions and at campus-based universities. Distance learning students are now able to collaborate and learn together using information and communication technologies and it is possible to do this, using mobile technologies. Campus based universities are also

offering courses at a distance or in a blended mode, using both face-to-face facilities and information technology. The learning environments are becoming more open and networked and connectivism is sometimes cited as the appropriate approach to learning in these environments. Connectivism is “a theoretical framework for understanding learning...learning occurs when knowledge is actuated through the process of a learner connecting to and feeding information into a learning community” (Kop and Hill, 2008). Learners are now able to take part in courses offered on social platforms

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and use Open Educational Resources (OERs) provided freely on the Web.

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) take advantage of these emerging trends and enable both open access and the participation of large numbers of students in online courses. According to the Commonwealth of Learning Web site (<http://www.col.org/resources/Pages/EmergingIssues.aspx>) MOOCs have been the most reported technology development in education over the past year. They are online courses provided by universities which are open to anyone who wants to study them. They aim to provide access to quality education to people who wish to study at home. These courses have been the subject of much interest and commentary. In some articles they are described as the future of online learning, and questions have been raised about their role in supporting formal learning and up-skilling workers. It is suggested that the main philosophy behind the first implementations of MOOCs, based on the principles of connectivism, provides insights into how learning takes place between connected learners (Siemens, 2005). Learners can be connected to other learners or learning resources. However Daniel (2012) comments on the ‘hype’ surrounding MOOCs and asserts that the prevailing pedagogy behind those being promoted in the US at that time as largely behaviourist, while earlier models promoted ‘a philosophy of connectivism and networking’.

Advent of MOOCs is a relatively new approach to online learning and has created a new area of research and development. This chapter provides an account of some recent developments and reviews some areas of research in open and distance learning which are relevant to this work. In this chapter we will present an introduction to MOOCs and then offer some suggestions based on our experience as educational technology researchers. We will consider this experience in the following areas: improving learner experience, online activities and assessment.

WHAT ARE MOOCs?

MOOCs are online university courses which are open to anyone who wants to study them and aim to provide access to quality education to people without the need to leave their homes. There is a wide variety of designs in the proliferation of courses which have been offered. Much teaching material consists of pre-recorded lectures/videos divided into weekly sections with assignment tasks. They have a specific start and finish date and students sign up online. The courses last for a few weeks and might be offered two or three times a year. A wide range of interactive and media tools are available to students to enable them to interact with other learners. For example, video lectures (some including quizzes), online discussion boards, blogs, wikis and social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook are provided. There are also opportunities to meet face to face with fellow students, in meet-ups organized by students themselves. As the learning support is provided by the online learning community, students can form support groups as they require. The assessment of MOOCs is carried out mostly using peer and self-assessment and computer assessed assignments. There is often no requirement for interaction between the teacher and the student.

The courses are offered by commercial start-ups, working with elite universities and professors and some of the best known examples are Coursera, Udacity, Udemy, EdX. The UK Open University also recently founded FutureLearn (<http://futurelearn.com/>) which will offer courses starting in late 2013. FutureLearn has 24 partners including major UK Universities, Australia’s Monash University, Ireland’s Trinity College Dublin and three non-university institutions: British Museum, British Council and British Library. The absence of Oxford and Cambridge Universities in any of the national or international MOOC initiatives has been noted by The Economist (2013).

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