

Chapter 33

Iff and Other Conditionals: Expert Perceptions of the Feasibility of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) – A Modified E-Delphi Study

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ABSTRACT

For the past several years, a new form of online learning has emerged, which has captured the popular imagination, and with it, plenty of support from private universities, angel investors, and foundations. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are a scaled-up version of online learning, albeit on open socio-technical platforms, which enable digital content organization, learner interactivity, computer-based assessments, and peer assessments, as well as back-end “big data” data mining of learner behaviors. MOOCs are being discussed as for-credit university courses, supplementary professional development trainings, and informal and nonformal learning opportunities. They are considered not only for adult learners but also for high schoolers and even potentially for younger age groups. For all the hopefulness that many masses around the world will have access to high-level and well designed college courses, the emergence of MOOCs has sparked a range of forecasts. Some predict that MOOCs will socialize learners around the world to a common academic culture and unleash human potential. Some predict that MOOCs are a threat to the existing higher education status quo. Others suggest that MOOCs have been overly hyped and are an unworkable passing fad. To gain a sense of the attitudes towards MOOCs and their feasibility, a modified electronic Delphi (e-Delphi) study was conducted using the Qualtrics™ survey platform (aka K-State Survey). This chapter describes the processes of setting up the modified e-Delphi study. It describes the extensive literature review undertaken for the development of the survey instrument. The writing describes the major findings from this qualitative and mixed-methods research based on both manual and NVivo-based data analysis. There is a focus on issues that may need to be addressed individually and collectively in order to rollout successful MOOCs.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7230-7.ch033

Big breakthroughs happen when what is suddenly possible meets what is desperately necessary. The costs of getting a college degree have been rising faster than those of health care, so the need to provide lowcost, quality higher education is more acute than ever. At the same time, in a knowledge economy, getting a higher education degree is more vital than ever. And thanks to the spread of high speed wireless technology, highspeed Internet, smartphones, Facebook, the cloud and tablet computers, the world has gone from connected to hyperconnected in just seven years. Finally, a generation that has grown up on these technologies is increasingly comfortable learning and interacting with professors through online platforms. – Thomas Friedman, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Of late, massive open online courses (MOOCs) have provoked wide interest and support from a range of universities and institutions of higher education. Well-known MOOC platforms—Udacity, Coursera, edX, and others—have sprung up to offer such courses with massive enrollments. Dozens of universities have joined consortia to offer university courses in the sciences, the arts, business, and other areas. While early MOOCs involved a few thousand students, more recent ones have involved enrollments well in the range of over 100,000: one MOOC involved some 160,000 students hailing from over 190 countries. This approach of massive online teaching and learning has even captured the funding dollars of angel investors and foundations; it has caught the eyes of digital content creators, software companies, assessment centers, learners, and other potential stakeholders. MOOCs are being offered throughout the U.S., Canada, and parts of Europe, with learners from over 190 countries. A simple description of a MOOC follows:

An online phenomenon gathering momentum over the past two years or so, a MOOC integrates the connectivity of social networking, the facilitation of an acknowledged expert in a field of study, and a collection of freely accessible online resources. Perhaps most importantly, however, a MOOC builds on the active engagement of several hundred to several thousand “students” who self-organize their participation according to learning goals, prior knowledge and skills, and common interests. Although it may share in some of the conventions of an ordinary course, such as a predefined timeline and weekly topics for consideration, a MOOC generally carries no fees, no prerequisites other than Internet access and interest, no predefined expectations for participation, and no formal accreditation (Cormier, McAuley, Stewart & Siemens, 2010, as cited by Schroeder & Levin, 2012, p. 1).

Higher education and technology pundits are talking about potentially unlimited enrollments, with information and communication technology (ICT), designed and structured course materials, mediated charismatic “star” instructors, and other peer learners as the critical stand-ins for more classic university educations.

As emergent phenomena originating in 2007–2008, MOOCs are being designed and deployed with professional instructional design support, but there is a sense of experimentation with forms and structures. From the descriptions in the academic literature, most MOOCs are headlined by prominent professors in their respective fields. The courses have defined learning objectives, clear learning structures (often based on weekly lessons and work; clear start and end dates or open-entry/open-exit schedules; purely asynchronous learning or with some synchronous events), recorded interactive video lectures, automated assessments, and some defined level of interactivity with co-learners. (Some MOOCs with more complex as-

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