Learning Experience in the MOOC COPE14

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Abstract:

Based on combination of quantitative and qualitative methods we carried out the evaluation of learning processes in the recent FHJ MOOC COPE14 with the intent to comprehend what are important factors of successful learning in the MOOC, what are requirements for learners that want to learn effectively, and what needs to be considered from teachers’ point of view. By the means of a guided reflection on learning and an online survey, both being part of the last weeks’ activities of the MOOC, we enquired what was the learning experience, what were most preferred ways to learn, and if participation in the MOOC influenced the online behaviour of participants. At the end of the paper we discuss recommendations for creating and using MOOCs as a supplementary offer for students in addition to the regular classes.

Keywords: Evaluation of Learning Processes in MOOCs, Learning Experience, Learner Characteristics, Teaching in MOOCs

1. Introduction

Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is a term coined around the year 2008. This relative new form of open online learning emerged from the movement of open educational resources. MOOCs are based on connectivism (Siemens, G. 2005), a theory of learning taking strongly into consideration communication, social context and collaboration based on usage of social media. Early MOOCs strongly leaned on connectivism, also called cMOOCS, were actively propagated by the group of academics around George Siemens. Further development of MOOCs took the basic idea of the free accessible massive course and created a version closer to traditional e-learning courses. These xMOOCs are offered via a platform and contain strictly paced assignments and mechanism for providing feedback to them (Downes, S. 2012). Many American Universities extended their educational offers with xMOOCs, Stanford being a strong leader. European universities followed this new trend

1 We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Tanja Jadin (FH OÖ). We are thankful for the data collection of the second survey and the preliminary data analysis.

The motivation to design and lounge an FH JOANNEUM based MOOC came from the desire to test new forms of learning and teaching. Together with teachers and experts from different scientific fields (ZML-Innovative Learning Scenarios, Management in Emerging Markets, Journalism and Public Relations, Information Design) we formed an interdisciplinary project team. This team further worked on shared understanding of the content that was to be offered in the COPE14 and developing an underlying didactic concept, corresponding tasks and presentation of materials in the MOOC.

2. COPE14 Structure & Participants

A team of 6 facilitators was established. In each week one of the facilitators was responsible for providing the content and posting motivational contributions. Two moderators were in charge to monitor and moderate weekly processes and discussions amongst learners. Though each facilitator was responsible for one week, the moderators where in charge for the whole six weeks.

The basis of the COPE14 was a WordPress blog that was used as a website and at the same time offered the possibility for the facilitators and the moderators to post articles there. The learners where asked to sign up on the site and could comment on every site or article to get in touch with the team. In addition, a Google+ group and a facebook (FB) group were opened where the learners could get connected with each other and the moderators encouraged them to use twitter or write their own blogs.

Topics mirror the focus of our MOOC on the economic content covered in a setting of connectivism (Siemens 2005), which is in our view a useful approach to learning. Every week contained different learning materials as videos, reading materials or links to further content. The learners were offered to complete different assignments, which were split into basic ones and those for advanced learners. The topics were spread throughout the period of six weeks, as follows:

- Week 1 - “Communication Across Borders”
- Week 2 – “Legal Cultures”
- Week 3 – “Doing Business in Emergent Markets”
- Week 4 – “Relationships & Networks in Business to Business Marketing”
- Week 5 – “International Communication and Negotiation”
- Week 6 – “Transfer into Individual Contexts”

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Self hosted blog using a WordPress-release from www.wordpress.org
With a documented activity for at least four weeks out of six, the learners could apply for a badge. The badge certified that the learners did complete, document and reflect upon a major amount of the MOOC. For learners who were students at FH JOANNEUM, the badge equaled 1 ECTS and was taken into credit within several lectures. In total 85 badges were achieved.

There were 536 participants in the COPE14 MOOC. 332 students were from the FH JOANNEUM, from 11 different courses of study (MIG, MEM, GBP, SAM, JPR, IND, BIO, SBL, IWI, ETM, BMI). Also students from other universities e.g. FH Kufstein and FH Hagenberg from Austria, and DOBA Faculty of Applied Business and Social Studies, Maribor, Slovenia, participated in the MOOC, as well as learners beyond a university context. On the COPE14 website there were 2611 comments published. In the FB group there were 226 learners in the group and 58 active. In the Google+ Community 24 out of 39 learners posted contributions. The MOOC was very international with 34 countries represented.

### 3. Evaluation Methods

**3.1 Questionnaire**

With the help of two questionnaires we wanted to get feedback from participants and evaluate learning experience they had in the MOOC. After the first week of the MOOC i.e. introduction week called “Communication across borders” we asked the learners to fill out a short questionnaire with 10 questions. Besides demographic data the questionnaire focused on how and where the learners want to learn, what devices they use, in what social communities they’ll be active and what support they want or expect from moderators and facilitators. 56 persons filled out the questionnaire and on an overview they were satisfied with the offered content and support.

The second questionnaire that was made available at the end of the MOOC entailed more questions, directed to find out more details about motivation, activities in and around the MOOC, subjective learning success and progress, problems related to participation in general, or participation in communities (on the website, Google+ and Facebook), and evaluation of the MOOC.

254 students started the survey and 90 completed the questionnaire. The average age was 27,20 (N = 81), 45,1 % female and 54,9 % male. Majority of participants (37,8 %) had bachelor’s degree, followed by secondary or high school (24,4 %) and masters degree (14,4 %). Most of the answers came from Austria (75,6 %), others came from Russia (6,7 %), Germany (2,2 %) and South Korea, Slovenia, The Island of Bliss, Spain and UK (each 1 person).

91,5 % students indicated that they learned something new, most of them answered that they learned new facts and concepts (strongly agree and agree: 90,9 %) and got new insights and perspectives (84,7 %). Around two thirds of participants (68,8 %) stated that they have learned something unexpected. Most of them found comments of other participants
most interesting (72.6 % strongly agree and agree), and they found video most informative (77.8 % strongly agree and agree).

3.2 Reflections on Learning

Based on Kolbs’ (1984) experiential learning theory, reflection forms essential part of the successful learning process, therefore we inserted this phase as a set of activities at the end of the COPE14. As part of activities of the Week 6 i.e. last week of the MOOC, we invited all participants to reflect on learning experience and their learning outcomes, how learned content and competences will improve their work, and to think about future activities with respect to global collaboration.

The activities were divided into four tasks: 6.1. Plan for personal development in the area of global collaboration, 6.2 (Advanced) Elaborate your footprint of emergent learning, 6.3 Say goodbye and Task 6.4 Documentation and Reflection phase for those who wanted to receive the badge.

To initiate and facilitate reflection further supporting questions were listed:

- How did my participation in this MOOC influence my online behavior?
- What were my favorite ways to learn?
- What were my favorite ways to communicate with others?
- How could I remain in contact with the other guys of the MOOC?

With the intention to get quantitative and qualitative data, we incorporated and linked the feedback questionnaire into the hints of the task 6.1, suggesting that answering the online questionnaire about their learning in COPE14 might help participants to start with the reflection process.

The advance task to design footprints of emergent learning (Pauschenwein et al. 2013) is a great method to evaluate and reflect on learning processes with respect to the clusters: openness / structure (7 factors), interactive environment (7 factors), agency (6 factors) and presence / writing (5 factors). Designers of learning processes can draw a footprint about their design and learners can draw a footprint how they learned in this design.

16 participants created their digital footprints – some depicted the entire MOOC experience, some focused only on a particular week. More on the results and digital footprints can be read in the COPE14 6.2 forum (http://www.cope14.at/?page_id=1599).

4. First Preliminary Results

Reflections that were published on the website on their learning in the MOOC, followed to the great extend the supporting questions outlined in the task 6.1. In their reflections students reported that learning in the MOOC was adaptable to their individual needs and they could allocate the time for learning according to their schedule. "... I had to manage the time effec-
tive, but the basic idea of MOOC makes this possible... so you can do your learning whenever or wherever you want...“ (-Steve)

Many students pointed out that participation influenced their online habits on online media usage, i.e. time they spend online, media they use and how they use them. „...Participating in this MOOC really influenced my online behaviour. ... Now I feel more confident posting my thoughts and experiences through the web...“ (-Thomas) „...the MOOC influenced my behaviour concerning comments. ... I tried to keep my comments short and reduced to the most important information, so that they stay interesting. ...“ (-Anna)

On the other hand they felt it was time consuming to go through all of the material, resources and posts. These impressions are well aligned with the data gathered via the online survey, where in total 77,8 % – 25,9 % strongly agree and 51,9 % agree – found the assignments time consuming.

“...For me it was the first time that I participated in a MOOC and it was very interesting to see a new method of learning....But I didn't regret to be part of this project. ... On the other hand you need a high degree of self-discipline because it is very time consuming to write the assignments and read all the other comments...“ (-Andrea)

For some students the wealth of information was bordering on overload and being perceived as almost demotivating. Therefore, input and hints provided by facilitators and moderators were very helpful, as 84 % of the surveyed participants stated as well. As one of participants that learned about the MOOC in the Austrian newspaper “Standard” outlined “…For me it is e-learning at a different level. It is very helpful and inspiring to get so much input, to have competent moderators and facilitators, to be able to learn where and when I want (or am able to make time) ...“ (-Katharina) Many students acknowledge and thanked for the support and the enthusiasm of moderators in the week 6 either in their reflections or in saying goodbye.

Surprisingly, for students mainly used to attend face-to-face classes and learn in small groups, it was somewhat difficult to see the advantage of learning in a MOOC setting and online. „...Basically I once more realized that I prefer offline learning. ...I like paper and ball-pens instead of sitting in front of my computer display for hours...“ (-Stef)

Several participants suggested an e-learning course as an alternative solution to a compulsory part of a lecture in form of a MOOC. This was perceived as better solution due to the smaller and closed group that could provide more feedback and more discussion.

Participation in the MOOC needs to be on a voluntary base, as this contributes to the motivation of students to participate and be proactive in the discussion. “…For me the participation was half voluntarily/half obligatory,... I am happy to say, that it was the right choice to participate, because the topics were very interesting and people from all over the world joined the MOOC, which made it totally international and open minded....“ (-Florian)

It was observed when students feel like they have to participate in the MOOC, they might perceive this as additional workload and some could approach this type of open learning with
preconceived negativity. “... And I also think many of us, who had to join the MOOC as a part of an FH-course, were busy enough dealing with the assignments that they didn’t have the time to respond to other posts. Or as I, a lot of people were “forced” to take part, they maybe just couldn’t find the motivation to interact.” (-Ines)

Watching videos, and listening to discussions were listed as favourite way of learning. In addition, students preferred to use FB and MOOC web site. Many students discovered “learning from each other” i.e. learning by reading posts of others about their thoughts and experience. “... I never spend as much time online as I did in the last 6 weeks. I watched all the videos, but most interesting were the tips regarding videos, websites etc. posted by other MOOC members....“ (-Eva)

That was also reflected in the online survey, where 82,8 % participants agreed and strongly agreed that the collection of the learning content delivered by other learners was helpful, and 88,4 % state that they could gain new insights from the opinions of other students.

Students appreciated the opportunity to enrich the knowledge and at the same time to practice and improve also English. Several students stated that they like the challenge of assignments with accompanying research, analysis and synthesis as opposed to the multiple-choice tests. “…I learned how to communicate with international people in online blogs and how to absolve assignments without getting direct information about the task from teachers....“ (-Schnittlauch) They also stated that participation in the MOOC through connecting with many other people from the whole world improved their understanding for other people thus their communication and collaboration skills.

5. Discussion

Although the drop out rate of the COPE14-MOOC was with 36,9 % lower than expected in MOOCs – as reported by (Matkin 2014) from all enrolled at the beginning only 7,5 % reach midpoint and 5,4 % stay to the end – the participants that finished the COPE14 depicted learning in MOOCs as very open nevertheless quite challenging. Furthermore, it was observed that some students did not respond well being confronted with a very open learning space. Mayor reason for not accomplishing an assignment (53 %) or not participating in the discussion (59,5 %) was lack of time.

For majority of students and learners the Cope14-MOOC was a wonderful opportunity to increase their knowledge, explore their learning preferences, and discover new ways of communication and usage of social networks for collaboration and knowledge exchange. They outlined videos and exchange of experience with other participants as their preferred way of learning.

Curiosity, open mindedness, explorative and experimental spirit, some amount of digital literacy, self discipline, being able to allocate enough time for participation, want to communicate internationally and exchange of opinion, are students characteristics and necessary compe-
sentences that contribute to the positive learning experience in the MOOC. These might be pointed out prior the MOOC in form of a self-assessment questionnaire.

Several teachers, especially those where students had to accomplish part of the classroom work via the MOOC, experienced problems with some students that were not very open to this form of learning. From the teachers perspective it is important to create a possibility for students to choose the way of participation in the class, where a MOOC could be one option. It helps to present the MOOC topics prior the decision and outline some personal experience in learning in a MOOC. Nevertheless students should be aware that they have to be active learners and though being able to choose individually times to learn, a certain amount of self discipline for regular participation and learning is needed and expected.

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6. Literature


Authors:

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Pernold, Erika, Mag., is scientific assistant at the FH JOANNEUM. She studied economic sciences at Graz and Japan. Her research fields consist E-Learning, emergent learning, Footprints of Emergence and reasonable didactic scenarios in small or big online groups. She is responsible for building up competences around producing videos, which should expand teaching at FH JOANNEUM. In the presented MOOC she was employed as a moderator and supporter for the learners.