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Facilitated MOOC support - closed bubbles in an open sea

Innovative impact

Many of the people who could gain most from open online education lack the necessary study skills and digital literacies to participate effectively. Although most MOOC providers offer some online support services, they cannot provide personal, face-to-face support. Many people are unfamiliar with the principles of online learning and need practical support and advice from a trusted mentor or friend to learn effectively. By forming local support groups, various organisations and communities can provide that vital support to give learners the skills and confidence needed to complete an online course.

In the long term there are signs that new learning eco-systems are growing around MOOCs and this can enable more people to benefit from open education in the future.

Introduction

A frequently voiced criticism of MOOCs is that they attract digitally literate graduates rather than learners who would most benefit from open education. Possible reasons for this include lack of awareness of open education, low levels of digital literacy, lack of experience of online learning, language issues, and lack of independent study skills. Those who do participate may find the massive and open nature of MOOCs overwhelming. This chapter looks at ways in which third-party organisations are offering structured social interaction and support for MOOC-based learning, both online and offline, with reference to a growing body of literature in this area.

MOOC Meetups

There are many reported instances of MOOC learners organising themselves into self-help groups to discuss course issues, technical problems and get moral support. For example, the IDCourserians group, based in Indonesia, organise local support communities with face-to-face Meetups, online discussion and a Facebook group (Firmansyah & Timmis 2016). Through these networking activities, a wide community of practice has formed, independent of any particular MOOC or MOOC platform. Participants reportedly appreciate the support of their peers, and the sense of community developed by this initiative. In the USA, an ethnographic study on P2P University Learning circles (Damasceno, 2017) showed that learning circles reduced the digital divide and provided a supportive learning environment for learners to gain confidence and develop their own online learning strategies.

A study of over 4,000 MOOC-related events in 140 countries by Bulger et al (2015) found that, while meetups generally tend to focus on course-related activity, there was greater emphasis on social and professional networking in developing countries than industrialised countries. They speculate that this is because learners in developing countries do not find a critical mass of peers on the same courses in their local areas.

There is evidence that informal support groups contribute positively to retention rates on MOOCs. Brooks et al. (2015) found that learners signing up for a MOOC with friends or family members correlated positively with levels of course completion, achievement and discussion forum usage. Damasceno (2017) found that P2P Learning Circles running in public libraries across Kenya had remarkably high retention rates among learners with no previous experience of online education. Coursera, which has teamed up with a number of local organisers to

form Learning Hubs where learners can meet and interact, reports that participants show significantly higher completion rates, ranging from 30 to 100%, compared to the 6.8% Coursera-wide average.

Wrapped MOOCs

In wrapped MOOCs, the online MOOC is supplemented by regular classroom or online meetings, arranged by a third-party educational institution. Learners participate fully in the MOOC and are also able to discuss concepts and issues arising from the MOOC in local (or online) groups, often in their own languages. The MOOC is thereby given local relevance, and the learners can discuss in a safe and supportive environment that enable open courses to be more inclusive and improve the likelihood of course completion for these learners. One successful example is the University of Cape Town's MOOC, 'Becoming a Changemaker: Introduction to Social Innovation', which is run as a wrapped MOOC by a local non-profit organisation called RLabs, which aims to empower members of disadvantaged communities in Cape Town to become social entrepreneurs.

Another innovative approach to wrapped MOOCs was a pilot study in northern Sweden where MOOCs were offered to unemployed learners with support from local learning centres (Norberg et al 2015). This support was in the form of local study groups who met together with a tutor to discuss course content in Swedish, and if possible, link up with local experts in the field as well as a subject expert at the university. At the end of the course they had the option of examination and university credits. The target group would probably not have been able to complete an online course without this form of support.

Several proposals have also been made regarding models for designing MOOCs to expressly enable support for local, facilitated groups. An option for MOOC providers could be to facilitate locally wrapped courses by providing teacher guides in a variety of languages with lesson plans, extra resources (free to adapt) and guidelines. Sanchez-Gordon & Luján-Mora (2015) propose an 'architecture for accessible blended learning' using MOOCs, involving a loose partnership of learners (who in their scenario are non-native speakers of English), local instructors and MOOC authors. The learners meet in local study groups, guided by local instructors, using materials produced by the MOOC authors in a variety of alternative formats. Laurillard & Kennedy (2017) present a cascade model for MOOCs whereby a local teacher signs up for and fully participates in a MOOC whilst simultaneously teaching a local class on-site and adapting the course to local issues. Teacher guides and resources would be provided. The cascaded class would not be directly involved in the MOOC but would benefit from their teacher's participation in it.

Support for refugees in MOOCs

Research points towards the importance of face-to-face networking around online learning for refugees. Colucci et al. (2017) found that, whilst a wide array of free digital learning resources were available for refugees in Europe, blended and facilitated learning support involving

MOOC learners in refugee camps in Kenya.

Kiron is a non-governmental organisation Germany, which offers refugees five 'study tracks' with pathways through selected MOOCs in English and German.

MOONLITE is an Erasmus+ project that aims to develop cross-national cooperation services to explore larger-scale uptake of MOOCs in Europe as well as creating learning and collaboration opportunities for refugees, stakeholders and MOOC providers in member states.

In 2016/17 the Catholic University of Louvain offered refugees in the local area the opportunity to attend regular classes for MOOCs, as well as technical support and individual tutoring.

Webinar recordings: Facilitated MOOC support – closed bubbles in a sea of openness by Alastair Creelman & Gabi Witthaus, 14 May 2018. Many people are unfamiliar with the principles of online learning and need practical support and advice from a trusted mentor or friend to learn effectively. This webinar presented a selection of solutions to this issue, such as MOOC Meetups, wrapped MOOCs and support services for refugees.

face-to-face mentoring or guidance were optimal. This finding was echoed elsewhere, with Syrian refugees in refugee camps in Jordan saying that online education alone denied them the life skills they would gain through the campus experience (Bothwell, 2017). Female refugees are at particular risk of losing out on higher education in the absence of local, facilitated support (Locke, 2017; Bothwell, 2017).

There are several examples of support groups for MOOC learners in refugee camps. The aid agency CARE International offers weekly 'MOOC screenings' in a refugee camp in Jordan (Bokai, 2017), to help refugees there prepare for future employment. They have also found that offline meetups led to better learning. Crea (2015) reports on a four-year pilot of the Jesuit Refugee Service's provision of local classroom support for online higher education programmes in refugee camps. Positive impacts were reported, with graduates going on to serve their local communities in new ways. The inZone MOOCs4Peace Centre helps learners in a Kenyan refugee camp to gain conflict resolution skills through locally facilitated MOOC study and workshops (Moser-Mercer, 2014).

Another model for supporting refugees has emerged in Germany: Kiron Open Higher Education offers a programme of curated MOOCs to refugees, along with support from volunteer tutors and mentors. The credits achieved by refugees in this way are recognised by some German Higher Education Institutions. Early findings indicate that offline, face-to-face support plays a critical role in the retention and success of Kiron learners (Suter & Rampelt, 2017).

Conclusion

Inexperienced online learners who want to benefit from the opportunities offered by open education may need to first establish a secure and supportive group of colleagues - ironically, the key to participation in open education is a safe, secure and restricted base where they can discuss course content with trusted peers in their own language and apply the lessons to a local context. These 'safe bubbles' can be either closed online groups or physical meetings, organised by the learners themselves (from book circles to MOOC circles) or by third parties such as libraries, community centres or local education institutions. A filter bubble can sometimes be positive!

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