Experiences of practitioners and students on an academic English MOOC

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Overview

1. Our study: context and RQs

2. Our study: findings (main focus on student experiences)

3. Evaluation and discussion - transformational value; exploring pedagogic implications

Context to study

➢ 'The invasion of the MOOCs' (Krause 2014) since 2008

 US MOOC providers Udacity, Coursera, edX

 FutureLearn in UK in 2012

➢ MOOCs differed in aims:

 xMOOC: content & transmission *vs*

 cMOOC: participatory e-literacy & collaborative learning

➢ Emerging models:

 Task-based (Lane 2012)

 Process-based (Furneaux et al 2015)

Are MOOCs worth the effort?

➢ Instructors' experiences – challenging (Furneaux at al 2015)

The requirement to perform multiple roles as "lecturer, designer, mentor, institutional marketer, etc. in a highly visible and therefore highly risky environment".
Bayne and Ross (2014, p.4)

➢ Students' experiences – not yet widely explored, hampered by anonymity of platform

➢ Some emerging qualitative work (Liyanagunawardena et al 2017; Wright and Furneaux forthcoming)

➢ Range of MOOCs – including Critical Thinking at Leeds
https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/critical-thinking-at-university
Others, e.g. Coventry, English for Academic Study
https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/critical-thinking-at-university

Even Chinese language learning (e.g. Shanghai Jiao Tong, see Wang et al 2017)

What do we know so far?

➤ 5 points on current best practices for MOOC aims and delivery (workshop, Reading –Wright et al, 2015)

1. Long history of massive scale online learning behind MOOCS (starting with Usenet groups), so it is important to avoid re-inventing the wheel.

2. Initial MOOC-hype is dying down, but interest is still growing, as seen in the takeup of repeat MOOCs.

3. MOOC measurement is best avoided, especially if it is superficial, for instance only about numbers signing up.

4. MOOCs are a good way of marketing your teaching expertise and need institutional support.

5. The learners you get on a MOOC may not be the ones you expected, so there is a need to keep **(re)assessing learning goals**.

➤ Learning (and teaching goals) the key focus of today

Why this MOOC?

A beginner's guide to writing in English for university study (FutureLearn)

Feb 2014, UoR's 2nd MOOC

Developed and taught by 3 EAP lecturers in Reading's International Study and Language Institute (ISLI); 4 mentors online daily

Range of aims and goals, specifically can writing be learned via MOOC?

The UoR MOOC

5 weeks long

Aimed at IELTS 4.5

18,000 enrolled – 2,500 still active in last week

100+ countries

70% female; 65% < 35 years old

Building up to a **peer-reviewed** final essay of 350 words

Research questions:

1. Instructors and mentors (1-1 interviews):

   - Issues over design, issues over feedback, issues over efficiency?

2. Students (quant analysis of course-final evaluations):

   - Key themes arising from evaluations?

   - Issues over content, or process, or both?

   - Issues over feedback and guidance?

Findings (instructors)

Challenging to transfer expertise to platform

'EAP … is a sort of communicative and integrative approach really and I think that most of the MOOCs out there, they don't do that'

'Designing in the dark' – worry about reputation

'We wanted students to work things out but the platform didn't have that flexibility. All the time - watering down the tasks.'

'The activities drive what you can do. The whole shape of it is determined by how they are going to practise it, and how you are going to input it'

Findings (instructors, contd)

Mentor role - tension between teaching or facilitating, being 'a sage on the stage or guide on the side' (King, 1993).

'All these people desperate for feedback. Makes you feel awful!'

BUT – engaging with the teaching felt overwhelmingly positive:

'You found people all around the world who were very keen'

People were 'incredibly engaged'

Reasons for the MOOC's success (from instructors' viewpoint)

Confidence in using EAP expertise to ensure clear structure and focused goals (and willing to risk the ride!)

Using MOOC for transformative innovative teaching, matching c-based pedagogic values within a skills-based course which also had a clear content-focus.

= a model of where c meets x.

What about the students?

Methodology

Mixed quantitative/qualitative thematic approach

c. 1,000 participants' course-final comments

Participants at this stage:

Spain: 17.8%

UK : 14.8%

China: 4.7%; Brazil: 3.6%; Italy: 3.5%

Others: S America, India, Europe, Iran, Russia, Ukraine

Data analysis

Focus on student feedback from final stage of the MOOC = 693 posts = our mini-corpus

Quantitative key word frequency analysis ->

comments grouped into categories & themes

Qualitative cyclic analysis to evaluate & re-categorise main themes, mark as +/-ive

Initial search for key nouns, verbs, adjectives & adverbs linked to stated MOOC aims & outcomes

Achievement vs Experience ...

Results

i) Key themes denoting student evaluations at the end of the MOOC -

Achievement (eg *'write'; 'learn'; 'use'*)

and

Satisfaction (eg *'very'; 'like/love/enjoy'; 'good/great/excellent'*)

Some negative indicators: *'but'/'not'*

However, these were overwhelmingly conjoined with a positive comment, eg

'not so difficult as I think'

Overwhelming sense of positive appreciation and achievement:

Example comment:

'This is the first course I take and I complete it. I am proud of myself. Hope to learn more. I love this place.'

ii) Responses linked to both content and process

Equal spread across content *('learn', 'skills, 'structure')* and

process *('improve', 'help', useful' , 'understand')*

iii) Comments on the degree of feedback and guidance not notable

Relatively few:

- majority related to wanting more feedback, but accepted not possible in the context

- noted that any feedback received had helped

- wanted more Educator feedback, but

- valued peer feedback

Learning + teaching goals met?

Where personal goal of learning how to write academic English was met, limited amount of online mentoring and feedback not identified as a major problem.
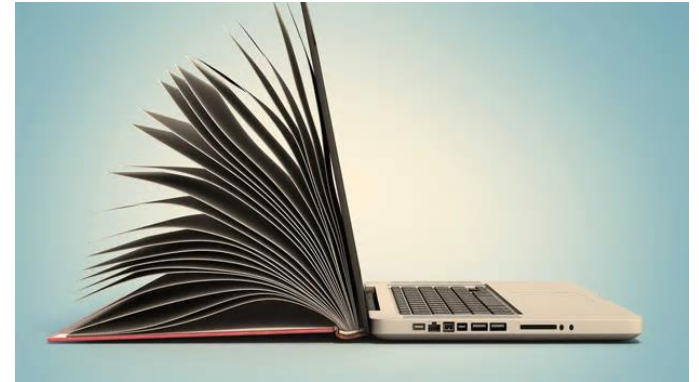
= unexpected finding (Educators had worried about this)

Some +ive feedback re value of learning to give/receive peer feedback

= element of growing e-literacy, awareness of collaborative aspect of MOOC approach

3. Evaluation and discussion - transformational value; exploring pedagogic implications

Worth the effort?

MOOCs are being scaled back:

Institutions unsupportive or unclear on learning purpose

Also, educators questioning whether OC platforms can deliver real learning of academic skills.

Our study suggests they can…

BUT digital pedagogic needs: time in developing platform awareness (design), mentor availability and skills

And help in building digital e-literacy among learners (online peer feedback skills)

Where next?

Reading – concrete evidence of continuing investment and support:

1st MOOC: A Beginner's Guide to Writing in English for University Study (beginner level)

Now on 11th iteration

276,827 learners in total; one run had 41,106, largest on any UoR MOOC ever run

And more...

2nd MOOC: An Intermediate Guide to Writing in English for University Study (since 2017, now on 3rd iteration, 35, 582 learners in total)

Writing in English for University Study Success

3rd element - separate TMA Assessment

= 'an essay of 500 - 600 words on water privatisation, which you will have read about, reflected on and discussed with other learners during the intermediate level course, or another topic of your choice.'

https://www.futurelearn.com/programs/writing-in-english-for-university-study

Now: Over to you!

1. Your experiences – have you worked on a MOOC? Which? Why? What did you learn from delivering it?

2. How would you evaluate the pros and cons of similar MOOC-based (or SPOC) teaching for future EAP practice?

3. What practical/institutional support issues are there?

4. Should MOOCs charge?

5. Broader reflection - Can EAP be a suitable route for effective process-based X+C MOOCs?

Your responses:

1. Your experiences – Which MOOC? Why? What did you learn from delivering it?

2. Pros and cons of similar MOOC-based (or SPOC) teaching for future EAP practice?

PROS   CONS

3. What practical/institutional support issues are there?

4. Should MOOCs charge? Yes =   No =

Why?

5. Broader reflection - Can EAP be a suitable route for effective process-based X+C MOOCs?

Yes =   No =

Why?

Thank you!

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