

MOOCs and retention: does it really matter?

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MOOCs and Retention: Does it really matter?

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have become a popular path of online learning allowing flexibility for the learners in many ways. They are free (at least the basic offering) and they can be followed from anywhere, anytime as long as you have connectivity (some platforms allow downloading all content into own device allowing the learning to take place off-line). Many MOOC platforms such as FutureLearn (www.futurelearn.com) allow registered learners to access the course materials even after a course ends allowing even more flexibility with respect to time, although these courses are generally not supported after the course end date.

MOOC platforms have millions of registered users, for example, Coursera (www.courser.org) has over 8million registered users (as of July 08, 2014). MOOCs attract massive numbers, for example a typical Cousera MOOC has 40,000 to 60,000 enrolling on them (Koller et al, 2013) while some MOOCs have attracted over 100,000 enrolments. However, only 50% – 60% of these registrants actually take part in for the first class (Koller et al, 2013). Looking at the number of ‘completions’, or the number of people participating in all (or most) of the learning activities the picture is very different. For example, in Coursera MOOCs about five percent of the students signed up have officially completed the course (Koller et al, 2013). However, it must also be noted that even though the percentage of completers is low, the number of people reaching the end of the course is much larger than a traditional class; for example considering a MOOC with 40,000 enrolments, about 2,000 (5%) people would still be completing the course.

Retention

In traditional education (including traditional distance education), students pay a fee to be enrolled on a course and the number of students graduating from the cohort who started the course is taken as a measure of success. Thus retaining learners is important for both students (as they have made an upfront financial commitment to the course) and institution/educators (the retention rate is used as a measure of success). Retention is defined in Oxford online dictionary as ‘[t]he continued possession, use, or control of something’ and the Cambridge online dictionary defines it as ‘the continued use, existence, or possession of something or someone’. So the course keeps control of its learners or retains them until the end. Retaining learners in a traditional course may be easier compared to a MOOC due to the upfront commitment learner makes for the course.

However, the dynamics are different in a MOOC where learners do not make an upfront commitment to the course. The offering is free, thus there is no financial commitment and the engagement contract becomes voluntary. This allows learners to “drop in” for specific topics in a course that they find interesting while also giving the opportunity for auditing courses or trialling them. For example, Koller et al (2013) use empirical evidence to show that in the first Coursera MOOC that provided Signature Track option, 74% of the learners who paid (\$30-90) for Signature Track completed the course as opposed to 9% in the non-Signature Track option. They show that having a financial stake could be an additional incentive to complete a course thus increasing retention rates. Thus they argue that “retention in MOOCs should be evaluated within the context of learner intent” (Koller et al, 2013: p62).

Correct metrics?

MOOCs are a disruption to traditional higher education that had been the norm for generations. In order to comprehend these disruptive innovations they are generally compared against the old norm even though they are very different. New innovations in technology were initially used to replicate what had been the norm then. For example, in distance education, the first use of the World Wide Web was used to replicate the work of print that had been used successfully then. Summarising this behaviour McLuhan in his seminal work suggests that “our official culture is striving to force the new media to do the work of the old” (McLuhan 2001, p94). Similarly MOOCs are viewed as an extension of the traditional higher education where retention, completion and dropout are used to measure the success of the offering despite them being two very different concepts. In fact, Stewart (2013) states that ‘[w]e insist on thinking about educational ventures in institutional terms’ even when those are “disruptions” to institutionalized education’. With this view, authors support Koller et al (2013) in posing the question ‘is retention even the right metric by which to measure success in a MOOC?’.

The pre-course survey of the first run (October 2013) *Begin Programming: Build your first mobile game MOOC* on FutureLearn platform showed that there were various reasons why people have enrolled on the course. For example, out of 3,611 responses, 64% said that they enrolled for the course to ‘tryout FutureLearn or massive open online courses (MOOCs) in general’ while 45% said they wanted to ‘try out learning online’. Being one of the first courses offered on the FutureLearn platform this was not surprising. However, in order to get a taste of online learning, experiment with the platform or try learning in a MOOC, learner may not need to be with the course until the end. So if a participant joined the course with only these objectives and within the first week (or so) was satisfied that their aim for the course was fulfilled, there is no reason why they cannot stop engagement at that point. It should not be a reason to view that the course as have ‘failed to retain’ participants.

Participants may want to join a course to get specific information. For example, a college student may take a MOOC on a subject s/he is taking at college to supplement a missed lesson. If this were the case trying to retain the participant on the course would not be a meaningful for the participant. Considering these learners as course have ‘failed to retain’ them would not be a fair measure on the course. Similar would apply for auditing learners who wants to explore the subjects to get a feel for them.

On the other hand, one can argue that retention is more important in connectivist MOOCs where a more social learning approach is applied. For example, losing a participant who would have otherwise contributed to a knowledge creation exercise or would have a different perspective that could have sparked a meaningful discussion could hinder the learning experience for other participants.

Opening Doors

MOOCs are an excellent opportunity for learners to experiment with subjects that they have not had the chance to study. For example, a person who had selected the option of studying Classics could explore Computer Science subjects to see whether that is for him/her while students who are in doubt which subjects to select could have taster of each for no financial. Identifying that interest in the subject could be the first step of retraining, moving disciplines or starting a career afresh.

Therefore we would like to discuss at the workshop whether retention should be a metric in MOOCs.

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