

Mind to MOOC



MESSAGE

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Transcript

The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organization which promotes ‘learning for development’ through the use of open, distance and technology-mediated learning. Our perspective on MOOCs, a form of distance learning, is based on the conviction that learning is a means to advance human development. Since the majority of the Commonwealth Member States are developing countries, the key question for us is how MOOCs can be harnessed to serve the education and training needs of these stakeholders.

COL has been engaged in discussions with leading experts from both developed and developing countries on the usefulness of MOOCs to provide more dynamism and credibility to the ODL sector, which is growing at a phenomenal pace. We have published a series of blogs and created a space on our website to interpret MOOCs for our developing world stakeholders. Currently, we are partnering with the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, India, to offer a refined version of a MOOC, which has specific relevance to the needs of developing countries. The course on ‘Mobiles for Development’ (M4D) has attracted 2255 participants from 115 countries, with over 450 coming from the developing countries of Africa and from Small States such as Grenada and Mauritius.

From our experience so far, we can suggest that:

- there is a need to distinguish between the technologies that go into a MOOC and the brand and business models associated with it. For example, MOOC technologies (whether for “c” or “x” MOOCs) offer an advantage: they can scale up or down easily. Thus one can use the same platform to offer a course for tens of thousands or for a few dozen learners; this is not easily possible with an LMS.
- a MOOC is not just an online course; it is more of an online ‘event’ involving multidimensional activities featuring learner-content; learner-learner; and learner-mentor interactions. Online social engagements are as critical to the usefulness of a MOOC as the excellence of the content;
- mobile devices and services are proliferating more rapidly in the developing rather than the developed world. As such, there is an increasing demand for more content, especially OER for mobile delivery. The M4D course can be accessed from any tablet or smartphone.

What are the insights so far?

One, there are definite challenges for the faculty in designing and operating a MOOC especially when there are more than a few hundred learners. Use of media in enhancing user experience plays a critical role. ODL institutions, with their expertise in this field, have a distinct advantage. Teachers must be willing and must have the ability to use Learning Analytics to apply mid-course changes. This is especially important in the ODL context where dropout rates are very high. In effect, offering a MOOC is a full-time task for the faculty and the immediate support group, not a passing hobby.

Two, there are challenges for learners as well. The course is less linear and more meandering for a typical or first-time learner and the discussions take place in many spaces (inside the MOOC or elsewhere in online social spaces such as Facebook or blogs). This can result in an information overload. Standard MOOC practices such as peer-to-peer grading of assignments do not appeal to many learners from developing countries.

Most learners in developing countries need access to better quality content; perform better with mentoring and tutorial support and are looking for qualifications rather than just certificates of participation. How can the existing MOOC model serve these aspirations? The MOOC model for the developing world will need to be re-engineered to include blended approaches that have offline and online components to provide effective learner support. We believe MOOC technologies provide opportunities for ODL institutions, or Higher Education in general, to deploy innovations in teaching and learning for better access, quality and equity.