
MOOCs: Branding, Enrollment, and Multiple Measures of Success

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Abstract

KSU redefined the MOOC value proposition through collaboration of university leadership and faculty. The new proposition shifts measures of success beyond just course completion to include measures that benefit students, faculty, and the institution. Students benefitted through access to open educational resources, the acquisition of professional learning units at no cost, and the potential of college credit at a greatly reduced cost. Academic units benefitted through a mechanism to attract students and future revenue while the university benefitted through digital impressions, branding, institutionally leveraged scalable learning environments, streamlined credit evaluation processes and expanded digital education.

Background and Context

Stephen Haggard's comprehensive literature review and study conducted for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills seeks to capture and identify issues related to MOOCs as they have evolved. In *The Maturing of the MOOC* (2013), he notes what many in higher education already realize, that smaller or less prestigious institutions have not so far engaged strongly with MOOCs. He cites "lack of appetite, lack of capacity, or lack of opportunity" (p. 4) as some of the more prevalent reasons. Yet even with issues of capacity and opportunity addressed, many state and public institutions have not been able to qualify or quantify the value proposition in order to justify engagement with the open course market.

In June 2013, the University System of Georgia (USG) entered into a state-university partnership with Coursera to leverage scalable learning technologies as part of Complete College Georgia. Kennesaw State University (KSU) simultaneously began an exploration into MOOC-Institutional-Fit to better identify the role of MOOCs at the institution.

Leadership evaluated resource needs, faculty interest, design and production capabilities, pedagogical benefits, and the external MOOC environment. Internal discussions gravitated around the central questions of: What resources and capabilities do we need? Why Us? Why Now? What will be the value to the institution and our students? How will we measure success? Faculty raised concerns about faculty time and opportunities for scholarship, but primarily focused on learner completion rates, academic integrity, and the equitable value of a MOOC to a for-credit course. In short, measures of anticipated success are based on measures of academic course success, when in actuality one is not necessarily a substitute for

the other. In MOOCs, Reich and Ho note that “dropping out” is not a breach of expectations, but may be a natural result of the environment; open, free, and asynchronous. Learners may browse, lurk, visit, engage, harvest, share and/or complete. There is no implicit contract that registering for a course is also a commitment to completing it (Reich & Ho, 2015).

So what does that then make a MOOC: a course, a resource, an advertisement or a product? We contend that it can be any of the above and discovered it could also be much more.

Kennesaw State University’s MOOC Framework

KSU offered its first MOOC in January of 2014 for teacher professional development and continuing education. The K12 Blended and Online Learning MOOC (K12BOLM) was a session based MOOC that clearly defined three distinct roles of participation: Community, Professional, and Credit Seeking. The open course model needed to be based on an existing credit hour course, drive enrollment, center decision-making within academic departments, and keep faculty and departments at the center of determining assessment criteria and transfer credit evaluation. The objective was to reach the greatest number of targeted participants possible (within limits) and have pre-defined measurable outcomes of success. The K12BOLM met these goals through scaling an existing graduate course that aligned with current graduate programs and offering K12 educators professional development; state authorized re-credentialing units (Professional Learning Units), a pathway to college course credit, and persistent resources to increase access to technology in underserved school districts. The course was adaptable to certified teachers, teacher candidates, home school markets, and interested parents.

At the community level, participants received a certificate of accomplishment for completion of each level of the K12BOLM. Additionally, participants that submitted all levels and course assessments received a MOOC completion certificate. At the professional level, certified teachers could receive up to five (5) Professional Learning Units (PLUs) in Georgia or equivalent with approval. The course's first level included 20 contact hours for 2 PLUs and focused on knowledge and understanding of what encompasses K12 blended and online learning. Optional level two included 30 contact hours for 3 additional PLUs. This allowed participants to demonstrate competence in evaluating and creating K12 blended and online learning experiences. At the credit seeking level, certified teachers successfully completing all levels and course assessments were invited to apply to one of the online graduate education programs and to submit materials for transfer credit evaluation (fee-based). With satisfactory results, participants received 3-credit hours at KSU upon acceptance to one of the graduate or certificate programs in Education.

By traditional measures, the first iteration of the MOOC aligned as expected. Enrollment decreased weekly. Of the close to 6,000 learners initially enrolled, 40% were active in week 2. At the conclusion of the 8-week guided course, 6% of the learners enrolled in Week 1 successfully completed all aspects of the course. This included weekly discussions, video embedded quizzes, readings, peer-graded activities and three unit level assignments.

Multiple Measures of Success

When the first MOOC at KSU was conceptualized, a cost break-even assessment was conducted to determine the number of learners that would be required to enroll in a downstream program to offset the initial investment. The number was determined based on

current tuition rates, costs of production, faculty release, and graduate teaching assistant costs. If four students enrolled in the associated graduate endorsement program, a subsequent two course commitment, tuition revenue would cover production, design and delivery costs. The first iteration yielded 100 professional learning unit recipients and fourteen program applicants. Twelve of those fourteen subsequently enrolled, exceeding break-even projections. More relevant were the unexpected measures of success, resulting in the subsequent re-launch in 2015 with a different perspective in mind. The three level framework of community, professional and credit-seeking were left with lasting digital impressions, branding and reach beyond expectation, and notable benefit to the university, college, faculty and students.

At the community level, we evaluated the number of unique visitors, social media mentions, new Twitter followers and course-institution awareness through our grass-roots effort. Over 25,000 Twitter Hashtags Tweets and Re-Tweets were documented. In 2015, we got specific and determined the number of learners who were affiliated or previously affiliated with KSU, heard of KSU and/or never heard of KSU. More than half had never heard of the institution. Another 25% had heard of the institution but were largely unfamiliar with it. Yet each of these learners meaningfully engaged with materials produced and made available by KSU.

At the professional development level, we evaluated the number of video streaming views, unique viewers, material downloads, first level completers, PLU applications, and course completers. The 2014 offering recorded over 80,000 video lectures viewed and close to 4,000 unique viewers over a 10 month period. The 2015 offering, after only 6 weeks, has already recorded over 25,000 unique lectures viewed, 28,000 streaming views, over 6,000 downloads. At the credit-seeking level we evaluated the number of registrations, portfolio submissions, completion certificates awarded, and we continue to track the program applications and enrollments. We determined that leveraging the value of this MOOC included all of the following: re-credentialing Georgia teachers, increased access to education, scaled learning of traditional online classes, student-student, student-instructor, and student-content engagement, innovative technology testing, resulting (and in progress) research and publications, investment break-even analysis, application of design to credit hour courses, open educational digital resources, licensable virtual assessment center for prior learning assessment, and additional pathways to credit.

Haggard's survey of the literature (2013) suggests that after a phase of broad experimentation, a process of maturation is in place. MOOCs are becoming a significant and possibly standard element of credentialed University education, exploiting new pedagogical models, discovering revenue and lowering costs (p. 5). "The consensus points on MOOCs are their importance, popularity and expansion. There is consensus on the reasons that Universities, and learners, have for engaging in MOOCs. These are: brand extension, recruitment, educational innovation and revenue (or cost reduction) opportunity" (p. 12).

KSU's experience with the K12BOLM mirror's the findings of the literature. MOOCs are an effective way to extend the KSU brand to a large domestic and international audience. This brand extension has resulted in a very positive recruitment strategy for the Bagwell College of Education's (BCOE) graduate programs. While the first iteration of the K12BOLM resulted in 12 students enrolling in graduate programs, a survey of participants in the MOOC's second iteration show that over 100 participants plan to enroll in BCOE graduate programs. These growing numbers of new graduate students will bring in substantial revenues to the university and college while extending the brand and fostering the successful implementation of new pedagogical models. The success of the K12BOLM as a brand

extension and recruitment tool is a direct result of the participants positive experiences as participants and because of the significant cost savings they receive from earning course credit for their MOOC work.

Results have also been realized in educational innovations. The open course produced an award winning open educational resource, is currently under review by MERLOT, and made possible a collaborative partnership with a leading international consortium on online education. From faculty and research perspectives, “what MOOCs present...is an opportunity to conduct educational research and examine the potential for use of its elements in on campus settings as a form of flipped classroom or blended learning approach. Whatever the outcomes, the nature of higher education will have changed as a result of this phenomenon” (Glance & Forsey, 2013). This has also been confirmed through the productivity and recognition of the lead faculty member. The K12BOLM created a research rich environment that yielded a textbook transformation award, conference proceedings, peer reviewed journal articles, promotional videos, along with 13 presentations accepted and delivered in a one-year span. Additional opportunities were afforded to the faculty member, a relatively new Assistance Professor, for numerous professional service opportunities as co-editor and co-chair. This is in addition to the adaptation of new learning technologies, pedagogies, and large enrollment design and facilitation knowledge.

Conclusion:

For many, MOOC issues remain unanswered. The traditional measures of success based on participation, retention and completion tell only one side of the MOOC success story. While they bring the potential for significant disruption, they can be a legitimate and strategic element of a University’s offerings, with the capability to inform and improve enrollment, pathways to credit, award and transfer of credit. They can drive recruitment, offer cost reduction, and in essence become an educational product with reach far beyond that typically available to the University. This, while simultaneously offering the institution and her faculty opportunities to learn, grow and expand upon innovations, design, and delivery (Universities UK, 2013).

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