DID THE MOOC HELP? UNDERSTANDING THE GLOBAL LEARNER EXPERIENCES IN A UNIQUE COURSERA MOOC

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Abstract: It is relatively rare to find a MOOC designed towards helping international learners better understand American culture and academic system. Faculty members at SUNY Empire State College, USA developed a MOOC titled "iMOOC101: Mastering American e-Learning" using the Coursera Platform. The iMOOC had a total of eight modules. Each of the modules dealt with one broad area of competency. The various competencies include technology, language and culture, the American educational system, communications and professional contexts. The purpose of the study was to examine whether the MOOC helped them understand American educational and cultural system. In this paper, we present findings and next steps for the research.

Keywords: MOOC, American Educational system, Language and Culture, Professional Environment

I. INTRODUCTION

MOOCs have attracted a great deal of visitors because of the flexibility of the structure and easy of availability in many parts of the world (Jordan, 2014;Peelo&Luxon. 2007).MOOCs are hosted by variety of platforms such as Udacity, Coursera, edX and Udemy. MOOCs are offered to learners in variety of subject areas for instance, physics, sciences, history, business to name a few (Whitaker, New & Ireland, 2016;Luketin, Knežević, Grgić,Slugan, &Roguljić, 2014;Al-Atabi& DeBoer, 2014). Despite the popularity of MOOCs in traditional areas, it is relatively uncommon to find MOOCs offering guidance to international learners to successfully understand American culture and academic systems. It is important to offer MOOCs in this area given the fact that international learners face many barriers to learning in an American educational context. Drawing on many years of online teaching experience, and relevant research(Chukhlomin& Deshpande, 2011; Chukhlomin, Deshpande, & Chandra, 2013) faculty at State University of New York(SUNY) Empire State College developed a SUNY-wide cross-campus collaborative MOOC that was an open access course with a range of supporting open education resources (OER) to prepare international online learners to successfully navigate virtual learning environments in American universities, including OPEN SUNY. This MOOC was called "*iMOOC101: Mastering American e-Learning.* The goal of the existing study is to examine whether the MOOC helped them understand American educational and cultural system.

II. iMOOC: A UNIQUE COURSERA MOOC

Foreign born learners face a great deal of challenges when enrolled in online classes in the US universities (Evans &Northcott. 1999; Fini, 2009; Hew &Sum, 2014). The idea with the development of the iMOOC was to develop an online course that possessed a culturally all-inclusive design (Evans &Northcott. 1999; Fini, 2009). The iMOOC was visualized as a transition course to help learners become familiar with and better understand American culture and the academic system. The iMOOC was developed with the help of the SUNY Innovative Instructional Technology Grant (IITG) scheme. The course was designed to help international learners become familiar with and better understand American culture and the academic system, refine critically important skills, learn about virtual learning environments, and practice some of the widely utilized skills in the U.S educational technologies. The course was designed to become an OPEN SUNY tool to attract and retain international online learners; also, to support campus-based international learners in the U.S. universities. Self-regulation and self-directedness were emphasized, as many international learners come from teacher-centered environments and are not used to student-centered pedagogies employed in many U.S.-based, online courses and programs.

The iMOOC had a total of eight modules. Each of the modules dealt with one broad area of competency. The first module was an introductory module. The Module 2-6 dealt with technology, language and culture, the American educational system, communications and professional contexts. The Module 8 dealt with the how interested learners could receive US college credit for this course. Each module consisted of video-enhanced learning content and self-assessments; that allowed the learners to access the course anytime from anywhere and take it in a self-paced manner. The pilot version of the iMOOC was facilitated by six instructors. The marketing team from Courseera offered support to promote the enrollments for the iMOOC. In addition, there were supervised groups of students in SUNY ESC programs in Greece, Panama and SUNY New Platz. Furthermore, the total length of the course was 6 weeks. According to the initial course learning

analytics provided by Coursera, 4,887 students signed up for the course. The students represented 145 countries, with 21% from the U.S., 15% - China, 5% - India, 4% - Mexico, 3% - Russia, 3% - Indonesia, 3% - Panama, 2% - Brazil, 2% - Jordan, 2% - Canada, 2% - Peru. A relatively large proportion of learners from Indonesia and Panama were attributed to active marketing efforts in those countries. Out of 4,887 students who initially signed up for the course, 3,071 students visited it, 1,840 watched a lecture, 628 browsed a discussion, and 423 submitted an exercise. Overall, there were 17,368 total streaming video views and 24,020 video downloads; 430 unique participants did 3,186 quiz submissions. 278 participants submitted 1,188 unique discussion posts in 388 threads; those posts received in total 6,902 views. 48 participants chose to get a course certificate and submitted final projects for peer-review; they also provided in total 164 peer-review evaluations; as a result, 40 course certificates were granted.

A course completion statement of accomplishment was given to the students upon the completion of required activities such as discussion forum participations, self-assessments and final paper completion. Figure 1 shows the snapshot of one of the lessons in week 1.

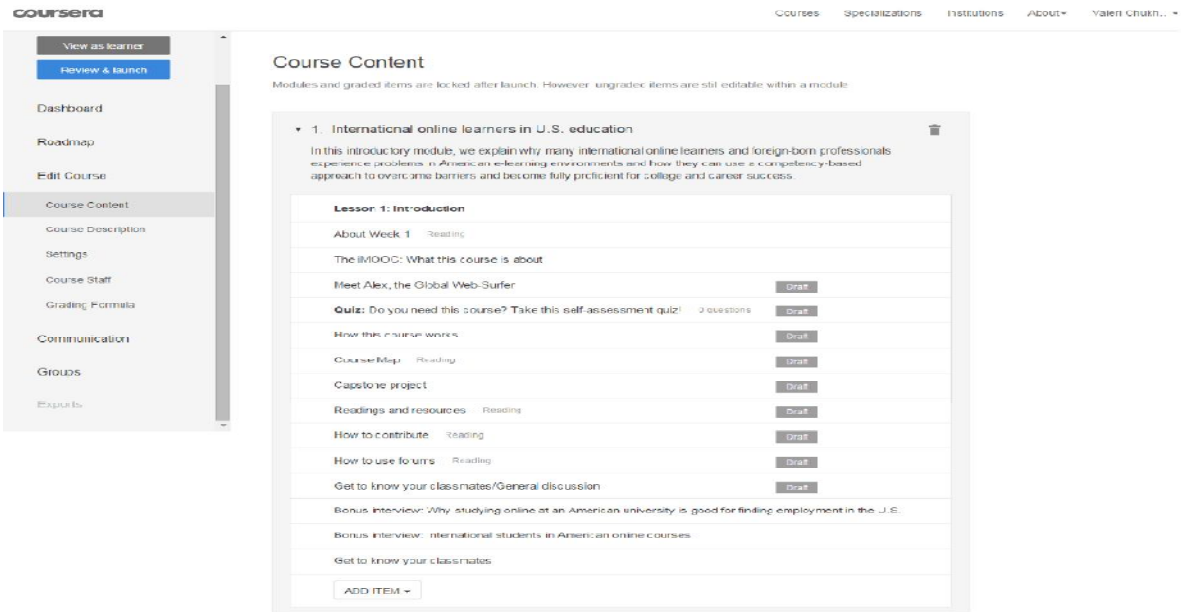


Figure 1: Snapshot of one of the lessons in week 1.

III. DATA COLLECTION, RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

A survey questionnaire consisting of Likert scale and open-ended questions was used to collect data for the research. This questionnaire was based on the instrument developed byZaharias and Poylymenakou (2009) and Zaharias (2006).The survey consisted of a total of 52 questions. Participants enrolled in the iMOOC were invited to participate in the survey. The survey was designed to capture student perceptions on how the iMOOC helped them understand American educational and cultural system. Prior consent was obtained from the respondents to participate in the study and it was made clear that the participants could withdraw at any time from the study.

A total of 77 completed responses were received. Majority of the respondents were over 35 years of age (31%) followed by 26% respondents who were in the age category of 25 to 34 years old. The results of the survey indicated that the iMOOC successfully attracted more females than males among. Majority of the survey respondents taking the iMOOC were from Mexico followed by USA 10.4% of the respondents, China (9.1% of the respondents), Spain (3.9%) and India(2.6%). The results indicated that the survey took the course because of their interest in online education and importantly to study in the US.

Overall the findings of the study revealed that respondents found the MOOC be very informative, highly accessible and the pace and structure to be user friendly. Some sample comments provided by respondents are provided below:

"M6 is very informative and interesting. I could summarize American Business Values and communication style with my experiences. Japan is said one of the typical HC societies and basically I agree with that. However, in recent years, I realize that an increasing number of people are becoming exceptional. We need to tell them what to do and how to do exactly and concretely, otherwise they don't read what others want.Of course, it depends on a person, but the situation has changed compared to when I was young. I think being direct is expected to be more and more essential in business situations."

"Previously I have taken an online learning program and this was my first experience of taking and following the lecture online in America e-learning. I am very happy to have completed the various stages in this online course and have found the course to be nice. Each student or members who attended the lectures presented in class on the online american e-learning environment has provided a lot of knowledge and experience to me. Each lecture video provided by the professor or lecturer on american e-learning has been providing knowledge and information that is very useful for me".

"Thank you very much iMOOC101: Mastering the American eLearning which has provided a new model of learning in the lecture for me :)
"With all my appreciation I want to thank this course for its freely available on open source systems"
Overall 85% strongly agreed or agreed to the view that the iMOOC helped international students become familiar with and better understand American culture and the academic system. Majority of the respondents(Over 70%) also felt that the MOOC was enjoyable and provided instruction and training that matched the learners experience. Furthermore close to 35 % of the respondent agreed and over 55% of the respondents strongly agreed to the view that various resources (such as video based lectures and interviews, weblinks, case studies etc) present within the iMOOC were valuable for supporting learning.
Vast majority(over 80%) of the learners reported that the iMOOC provided them with control of their individual learning. Also vast majority(over 75%) of respondents indicated that the iMOOC provided them with an opportunity to support learning via interactions.
Qualitative analysis of the data revealed that majority of the learners indicated that overall the iMOOC course helped students understand more about the American culture and academic system and vastly benefitted the students. Some of the comments received from respondents were supportive of this:

"I have a better appreciation of the learning resources of each academic institution. I also learnt a couple of new concepts that broadened my horizons about e-learning and American cultural context."

"iMOOC give me a lot of information that i never know before about the cultural. and it is more than worth it!!"
"I know how to create e-portfolio and what skills are more important nowadays.I hope to get higher position at work and now I know what I should do"

"Specifically, so far, by the end of unit M3, I got to know ePortfolio, as well as high-low context, which was enlightening."
In regards, to some of the challenges faced by the learners the respondents indicated that:

"Sometimes, it's too busy for me to completed as planned."
"Want to start this course again another time, prefer "Learning How to Learn". Less volume, less focus on distracting forums, easier to navigate on iPad, more vid lectures, more enjoyable."
"Time management is the challenge I really had with this course as I am very busy with work and other activities in my home country."

IV.DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

The purpose of the study was to examine whether the iMOOC helped learners understand American educational and cultural system. The idea with the development of the iMOOC was that typically international students attending US institutions face challenges and barriers to learning from an academic and cultural standpoint. It is our hope that the course such as the iMOOC can be used by many U.S. institutions either distance learning, or on-campus or both to help students acclimatize with the cultural and academic environment of the US. The course can be used as a supplementary resource for on-campus international students. It can be further adopted by partner universities from abroad to complement their dual degree partnership programs with American universities.
Overall students were very satisfied with the learning offered by the iMOOC. Vast majority of the respondents indicated that activities and resources within the iMOOC helped them understand more about American academic and cultural system. The research also indicated that there is a need to provide more interactive content to help increase the student motivation to learn. Respondents also recommended that more interactive video content will further enhance the course. Also, recommendations were made to include more cohort based activities such as group projects and role play activities, and Web conferencing with the cohort. As a part of further refinement of the course, planning has already begun to make videos more dynamic and engaging and more cohort based activities are planned. MOOC literature emphasizes on providing interactive content and these results further support the view on providing more video based interactive content to enrich MOOCs to enhance learning experience. Thus, for MOOC designers the emphasis should be more on interactive elements rather than talking heads.
MOOC educators should consider inclusion of focused content to further assist in learning experience. Also as much as possible content should be evenly distributed from one week to other, so that the time devoted for the content is uniform. As part of MOOCs, cohort support group forums can be established where students can discuss time management issues. Sharing and exchanging of strategies can further help students learn from each other and devise individualized strategies. MOOC

educators must proactively monitor student communication both in discussion forums and via email and assist students facing such challenges to help improve MOOC retention.

For communications, the existing iMOOC relied on discussion forums and email communication. Future iterations of the iMOOC can explore ways in which more synchronous communication tools can be incorporated in the course. Majority of participants of the iMOOC did not face any significant technological or internet issues and found that the content was readily available. This is important because internet issues and technical challenges have been identified as hindering factors in student satisfaction of a MOOC experience. As Coursera was used as a platform for the iMOOC, future research could look at how the features of the MOOC platform impact the delivery of the iMOOC.

As next steps, faculty team responsible for developing the iMOOC has also secured a phase II of the SUNY IITG grant funding and will work on further refining of the iMOOC. In addition, the faculty team at ESC is also currently working on a course titled "International e-Learning Skills: Educational Planning Workshop for International Students" to allow students get academic credit for the iMOOC through SUNY ESC. This is a 2 credit, lower level study offered by SUNY ESC in the broad area of educational studies. The course is offered in Moodlerooms. It can be used in any undergraduate degree program as part of the educational planning requirement. Upon completion of this course, students can request an official college transcript. IeLS is designed as a continuation of iMOOC101 and relies upon iMOOC101's learning materials and resources (content guides, instructional videos, self-assessments, linked websites). The IeLS will allow students to access SUNY ESC academic services and resources, including the virtual library and help desks. During this course, instructors will walk students through the College systems and resources to practice the competencies and skills that students have acquired in iMOOC101 to make sure that students can now successfully navigate U.S. virtual learning environments.

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