

Designing Learner-Centric MOOCs
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Lecture 06
Known Challenges

Designing Learner-Centric MOOCs:
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Hello and Namaste.

The rise of MOOCs has also brought in large amount of discussions between researchers and practitioners who are trying to make better sense of this phenomenon. Most of the key discussion revolves around the challenges that MOOCs face in their current form.

One of the most cited initial works on challenges faced in MOOCs was the paper by Doug Clow from Open University in UK that he presented in the third conference on learning and analytics in 2013. Titled, MOOCs and the Funnel of Participation, the paper provided an overview of the attrition problem in MOOCs that starts right from awareness, and goes on till the actual course completion.

In a research commentary written in the journal Higher Education in 2014, two years after when most popular MOOCs were created, Gerhard Fischer talks of the spectrum between the hype and underestimation, and tries to present the challenges faced by initial versions of MOOCs. He highlights that most MOOCs till then were focusing more on delivering the content or the learning about agenda rather than focusing on existing research about pedagogy in online and distance learning. For example, enabling learners to think critically, asking deeper questions or encouraging diverse views, these were absent.

In the paper that came in the journal Computers and Education in 2015, researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University evaluated 76 random MOOCs using an instrument that they created based on the best practices in online learning. The highlight of their findings is that most existing MOOCs lack good instructional design.

The problem of completion rates got much better traction, thanks to the work by the researcher Katy Jordan from the Open University in UK, who had created an interactive plot based on completion rates reported by several MOOCs from the years 2012 to 2015. She had put all this data in the public space through her website and the completion rates are mapped against other variables like assessment type and course length.

Let us now pause for a minute and examine this graph little more carefully to see what exactly is the problem all about and one of its key implications that instructors should take away.

As you see, the x-axis of the graph shows number of people enrolled in the course and the y-axis shows completion rates. Let us focus our attention at all the courses that have enrolment greater than 10,000 learners. Can you identify the completion rate region, where you see the maximum concentration of these data points, and once you have identified this region, can you now calculate how large or small this number is actually?

You can pause this video while you answer this question and resume once completed.

So, as evident from the graph when the enrolments are greater than 10,000, the completion rates are maximum between 5 to 10%. This means that for a course of strength 10,000, roughly 500 to 1000 people completed. Though, we know that 5 to 10% is a very small completion rate, you and I will agree that 500 to 1000 people completing a course is actually not a really small number.

So, the point to remember as a course instructor is that when you create a Massive Open Online Course, even the small completion rates are not exactly small numbers and we have to ensure that we cater to such diverse numbers who are actually active in the course.

What you have seen till now are the evidences and analysis provided by the research community. But the evidences are not just limited to research and if you carefully search the internet, you can see that there are also blogs and discussions by people working in the online learning space as well as MOOC learners that highlight the various factors that contribute to the problem of high attrition or low completion rate.

So some of these problems are like, lack of connect, lack of any constructive feedback from the instructors, gradual loss of the interest due to intellectual challenge that they face in the course or lack of authentic context.

As you see, most of them are unanimous on the need for a better pedagogy for MOOCs as we know of it now. Having summarized the various challenges, we should acknowledge that MOOCs are still a recent phenomenon and MOOC practices are continuously evolving with inputs from several stakeholders like the researchers, practitioners and administrators.