ABSTRACT

Media reports concerning massive open online courses (MOOCs) have vacillated between talk of an educational revolution and disillusionment with an over-hyped instructional technology. This paper reports how a group of university faculty and staff designed and delivered a MOOC to more than 800 students. The delivery of the MOOC was a labor-intensive, costly process that resulted in a variety of educational and institutional outcomes. The case report contains lessons for other groups who may have an interest in delivering a MOOC. The paper concludes with an interpretation of the significance of MOOCs for higher education.

Keywords: Case Study, Faculty, Labor Costs, Instructional Design, MOOC, Students

INTRODUCTION

On November 2, 2012 the New York Times published an article describing 2012 as “The Year of the MOOC.” The acronym MOOC stands for “massive open online course,” and 2012 was a period when this form of course delivery received considerable media attention. Some of the firms now considered flagships of the current “MOOC movement” were founded or experienced their first period of substantial growth in 2012. These included Coursera, a firm established in 2012 by Stanford professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller; Udacity, a company created by Stanford professor Sebastian Thrun and based on a large, free computer science class he offered in 2011; and EdX, a non-profit consortium established by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor Anant Agrawal in May 2012 with substantial funding from both MIT and Harvard. Some of the representatives of these organizations, as well as others in higher education, initially offered optimistic views of the revolutionary character of MOOCs to transform the higher education enterprise.

Fast forward to the present, and the view of MOOCs appears much more sober. The higher education press – including the Chronicle of Higher Education and the website known as “Inside Higher Ed” – has reported numerous examples where MOOCs have run into road-
blocks. These roadblocks include high drop-out rates, resistance by faculty members affected by MOOC offerings, cancellations of in-progress MOOC courses, and negative reviews by students who have participated in MOOCs (Malliga, 2013). To some degree both the initial excitement and the subsequent disappointments may simply comprise a typical path into the so-called “Hype Cycle” (sometimes attributed to economist Carlotta Perez, but now a copyright protected tool of the Gartner IT group). The Hype Cycle, which addresses the popularity of newly introduced technologies, begins with a period of excitement that often precedes a period of disenchantment that in turn moderates into a more realistic view of the new technology’s potential. Alternatively, one may attribute this series of setbacks in the search for revolutionary learning technologies as part of the current zeitgeist in higher education: Public disapproval of years of steep tuition increases that has led to widespread soul-searching concerning the societal value of a college education and a commensurate hunt for alternative educational models (Immerwahr, 2012).

The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. While MOOCs no longer seem poised to rend the essential fabric of higher education, several innovations have arisen from the financial investments that the leading MOOC firms and others have obtained (Pritchard, 2013). MOOC firms that have focused on the development of high quality instructional content have arguably elevated the general level of respect and acceptance of online learning opportunities (Baggaley, 2013). New modes of teaching and learning, such as those using game-like characteristics, have emerged in the context of MOOCs (e.g., Romero, 2012). The “back end analytics” that MOOC learning platforms have afforded may have the potential to inform better design of teaching materials, tutoring techniques, and assessment methods (e.g., Seton et al., 2013). As a result of having to teach a large number of geographically distributed MOOC students, instructors have created a range of innovations around the use of social media to create learning communities (e.g., Alario-Hoyos, 2013). In the end what matters most is student learning; whether a course is open or closed, massive or tiny, online or blended or face-to-face has less significance than whether the learning experience afforded to students has sufficient value to justify the costs and challenges involved in developing MOOCs.

To illuminate these trade-offs, the present paper reports a case study describing the labor investments in the development and delivery of a MOOC – the first MOOC ever offered by one private, non-profit university based in the eastern U.S. The case study opens the curtain around the extensive planning and instructional development process and includes a review and analysis of the costs of the preparation and delivery of the MOOC. The case also reports a variety of system indicators from the online platform that was used to deliver the MOOC. These indicators summarize how the platform was used and, by extension, where the MOOC instructors put their effort during the delivery of the MOOC. The paper concludes with recommendations concerning the development and delivery of future MOOCs, as well as some of the possible implications for the future of MOOCs in higher education.

BACKGROUND

The concepts behind MOOCs are not new, but MOOCs have achieved wide attention in their current technological form only recently. Recall, for example, that at one time correspondence courses were considered a disruptive innovation that could provide flexible opportunities to attend college for very large groups of students (Simpson & Anderson, 2012). Charles Wedemeyer, Director of Correspondence at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, obtained Carnegie-funding and designed and implemented his Articulated Instructional Media Project (AIM), between 1964 and 1969 (MacKenzie et al., 1968). Wedemeyer imagined a plan, infeasible with 1960s technology, to connect learners using multiple forms of media and technologies. Of great importance to the
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