Chapter 3
The Use of MOOCs in the Continuing Education of Individuals and Organisations

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ABSTRACT

In today’s world, due to the evolution in technology and science, old knowledge is fast becoming obsolete while new knowledge is produced in exponential rates. Therefore, lifelong learning is essential for knowledge-intensive persons such as engineers and scientists, as well as, organisations which want to stay competitive in today’s globalised environment. It is the aim of this chapter to examine the use of MOOCs in the continuing education of employees in knowledge-intensive workplaces, as well as, organisations based on the knowledge economy. Initially, the main characteristics of the modern learning landscape will be presented; the need for continuing education and lifelong learning will be discussed. An extensive presentation of MOOCs will take place. A survey of the open research problems in the study of MOOCs will be presented. Finally, educational policies, enterprise policies and suggestions for self-directed continuing and lifelong learning via MOOCs will be proposed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to propose MOOCs as a means for continuing education, specialisation and lifelong learning to individuals and organisations based on the knowledge economy. In order to prepare the background necessary, we shall first refer to the modern learning landscape as formulated by the contemporary globalised environment of economy and knowledge and second, to the need for continuing education and lifelong learning, which applies to both individuals and organisations. The value and need of informal and continuing education will be discussed.

Organisational development is inseparable from the personal development of its employees. Thus, it is for the benefit of organisations to promote and facilitate employees’ development through continuing education. However, formal knowledge management schemes do not seem very efficient and popular;

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traditional formal or semi-formal e-learning courses show considerable shortcomings. The “lonely learner” model seems inadequate in both traditional and distance learning frameworks. Therefore, organisations turn to alternative ways to educate and re-educate their staff, and Communities of Practice (CoPs) constitute a vital alternative.

Enterprises may facilitate the personal development of their employees through the participation in MOOCs focused in specific skills mostly wanted by the organisation. Since the budget of most SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) is limited, MOOCs offered for free (or, at low cost) constitute an attractive solution. However, since the drop-out rate in MOOCs is high, support measures to be taken by enterprises will be proposed.

Correspondingly to the personal Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), we shall informally define the concept of organisational Zone of Proximal Development. The development of the organisational ZPD towards a specific direction depends on the development of (some of) its human capital towards this direction, and MOOCs might be a useful keystone.

MOOCs take advantage of modern portable devices, as well as, multimedia technologies, in order to facilitate modern learners; videos and portable devices “rewire” our brain, in a sense that the learning process is different than it was ten or twenty years ago; an “old-fashioned” learner will have difficulties in attending a contemporary continuing education programme; therefore, we shall also discuss this issue.

Familiarity with new technologies and new media is one of the competences demanded in contemporary and emerging knowledge-intensive workplaces. The skills needed by contemporary workers in order to successfully attend MOOCs will be mentioned.

For this, we shall propose educational policies, enterprise policies and suggestions for continuing education and lifelong learning via MOOCs, for organisations as well as for individuals. These policies might prove especially useful to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) with limited budget; in these cases, free (or low cost) MOOCs provide an attractive solution. Finally, some propositions for universities are presented, which will enable them to offer degrees and specialisations competitive to MOOCs, tailored to the contemporary SMEs needs. The chapter concludes with future research directions and some final reflections about MOOCs.

In order to establish the background necessary for the discussion, concise definition of terms like CoPs and ZPD, along with the corresponding literature review, will be given. Also, an extensive presentation of MOOCs will take place. A side product of this presentation is a survey of the open research problems in the study of MOOCs.

For the needs of this work the author has participated in twelve different MOOCs during the last seven months: nine from Coursera, two from Futurelearn and one from Udemy.

2. THE MODERN LEARNING LANDSCAPE

The evolution of ICT has gradually formed a modern learning landscape characterised by:

1. The production of information and new knowledge in dizzy rates (Andreatos, 2012);
2. Information overload;
3. The emergence of Web 2.0-based technologies, media and applications (Andreatos, 2012);
4. New portable devices and the possibilities they offer in learning (Grunwald Associates et al., 2012);