Chapter 11

Toward Mobile Assisted Language MOOCs

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ABSTRACT

MOOCs are presented in this article as a fundamental change in the access to education in the world. While not necessarily a completely new invention, the technological context was ripe for them to take off and become established as an important step forward in providing open education for a large number of people. It is argued that MOOCs, if correctly structured and managed, can harness the best of both formal and informal learning, to help students develop their receptive, productive and interactive language competences. It is, therefore, possible to talk about Language MOOCs, or LMOOCs, as a sub-field within MOOC research and practice. Activities that revolve around collaboration and peer review, resting upon basic linguistic notions of the target language, while arguably not as fruitful or enjoyable as direct interaction with native speakers, can still greatly motivate students to experiment with new language and become more proactive than they would in other learning environments. Furthermore, while focussing on the mistakes of other students, they are implicitly reviewing and refining their own comprehension and production. If mobile assisted language learning, or MALL, is talked about as the application of mobile technology to language learning, then given the potential of such technology to increase both the access of students to LMOOCs and also provide them with complementary tools for the courses, we can begin to talk about Mobile Assisted LMOOCs, or MALMOOCs. In this chapter, the nature of LMOOCs is discussed together with the potential role of mobile devices, argued to be the digital equivalent of the Swiss army knife, offering a rich and flexible way of interacting with the real world based upon the array of sensors present and the apps that can be installed on them.
INTRODUCTION

Several different factors have combined to make MOOCs possible. Firstly, widespread access to the Web has become a reality, even in a lot of the vulnerable parts of the world (although not for everyone). Secondly, as potential student (that is to say, people who want to study) numbers increase, possibly to more than 100 million by 2020, it will be impossible to attend the demand in standard universities and other similar educational establishments. Thirdly, in a related fashion, a large percentage of the potential student community is not sufficiently fortunate to be able to afford the costs of attending university, especially the higher echelon of Ivy League universities, whose entry fees are far beyond what most people can afford. Fourthly, even if money were no object, there is not enough space for such an increase in student numbers and more and more campuses would need to be built. Ironically, as the demand for higher education increases, the competition between universities is ever higher for fee-paying students. As a consequence, the socio-economic divide is growing. The MOOC phenomenon appears to have arisen from these factors. Furthermore, the initial impetus for the initiative has come from prestigious universities, which need to attract new students and find new business models. From this perspective, MOOCs represent a potent publicity vehicle.

Therefore, MOOCs did not just appear from thin air as some new educational revolution, but represent a natural evolution of previous initiatives. As such, even though the term MOOC has been coined to describe massive, open, online courses, many do in fact violate at least one of the letters in the acronym (leading some authors to argue that the term is spurious, fuzzy or has little value (Hill, 2012). To reflect such differences, a number of related terms have arisen (e.g., TOOCs¹, SOOCs², etc.). Furthermore, when the term is actually examined, a large number of questions arise regarding whether, or not, a given course should be considered a MOOC: how many students must a course have to be considered “massive”? In what way should the course be open? Could there be quantitative, qualitative, financial, administrative, etc., entrance restrictions for MOOCs? Could MOOCs offer blended training and include face-to-face sessions? etc. Authors such as Siemens (2012)³ have pointed out that the more we try to define the term, the more open-ended we leave it, and the harder it becomes to differentiate MOOCs from other Education 2.0 initiatives.

In the literature, rather than dismissing MOOCs as an independent concept, some authors have tried to actually classify the different types. For example, Clark (2013) identifies eight types: TransferMOOCs, which are a copy of an existing eLearning course hosted on a MOOC platform, using a standard knowledge transfer (from teachers to students) pedagogic framework (e.g., the courses offered by Coursera); MadeMOOCs, which use video materials that have been are carefully crafted in an innovative way, together with assignments that contain more difficulty for the students (e.g., the courses offered by Udacity); SynchMOOCs, which are MOOCs with fixed start, end, and assessment dates, something argued to help students plan their time and undertake the course more effectively (e.g., by platforms like Coursera and Udacity); AsynchMOOCs, which are the opposite of synchMOOCs; AdaptiveMOOCs, which try to present personalised or adapted learning experiences to the students depending upon their progress in the course (e.g., The Gates Foundation promotes this approach for future online courses); GroupMOOCs, which restrict student numbers to promote collaboration; ConnectivistMOOCS or cMOOCs, as per the original MOOC defined by Cormier, defined above; and MiniMOOCS, which focus on content and skills that can be learned in a small timescale and are suitable for specific tasks with clear objectives.