Chapter 14

Students’ Perceptions of the Online Instructors’ Roles in a Massive Open Online Course

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ABSTRACT

Scholars prefer applying metaphors to interpret the instructor’s role in online education, such as facilitators, mentors, e-moderators, and “leading the band”, but the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has reshaped the online teaching and learning practices. Accordingly, the role of instructors in MOOCs is expected to be redefined based on the precedent framework. This research inquiry thus explores students’ perceptions of the instructor’s role in a MOOC, Technology Applications in Education, regarding four dimensions of Berge’s classifications: pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical. An emerging framework of instructor’s role in a MOOC is construed to benefit professionals and academics investing in MOOC teaching and learning. Besides, designing a cohesive, structured course is evident in the roles of MOOC instructors, and instructors’ timely interaction as a “real person” also influences students’ learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Concerning the role of online instructors, scholars prefer metaphors to elucidate their perceptions, such as mentor (Roger, 2000), e-moderator (Salmoon, 2000), facilitators (Cantor, 2001), and the leader of the band (Heuer & King, 2004). Those metaphors not only reveal the revolution of the instructor’s role from traditional classrooms to online instruction, but also interpret the dynamic change of instructor’s role encouraged by the technological advancement and students’ changing needs. Heuer and King (2004) stress it is online instructor’s responsibility of fulfilling flexible roles to meet students’ varying needs. Nevertheless, online instructors have confronted unprecedented massive enrollments since online educa-
tion morphed into a new landscape featuring the expansion of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). One of MOOCs’ core values is to promote top educational resources to a wider scalability of learners (Macdonald & Ahern, 2015). Scalable audiences can thus register for supreme college-level courses in various subjects, for different purposes, and at no costs. For MOOC instructors, it becomes increasingly challenging to satisfy all of the students’ needs and foster a desired learning experience for each of them (Robinson, Kerski, Long, & Luo, 2015).

On the other hand, MOOC instructors are “no more or less noticeable and relevant than anyone else who attends the MOOC” (Haavind & Sistek-Chandler, 2015, p.332), as evidenced that students might suffer a sense of isolation, even dropping out of the course because a lack of personalized feedback from the instructor (Macdonald & Ahern, 2015). MOOCs potentially subversively refine the role of online instructors but MOOC instructors are usually not efficiently trained before offering a MOOC. Consequently, an emerging framework of what the MOOC instructors’ roles are and how they can fulfill the roles becomes more valuable for a MOOC instructor.

MOOCs embrace the notion of student-centered pedagogy (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Cormier, 2010) and students’ voice is an integral segment to delve the teaching practices in MOOC. Therefore, the research inquiry examines students’ perceptions of the instructors’ roles in a MOOC to generate a new framework envisioning MOOC instructors to fulfill their roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Berge’s Model of the Online Instructors’ Roles

Previously, Berge (1995) classified online instructor’s facilitation roles in four perspectives, including pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical. Since then, researchers have attempted to clarify the dynamic roles of instructors in the rapidly evolving online education (Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2002; Guasch, Alvarez, & Espasa, 2010; Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee, & Su, 2004; Maor, 2003), especially, Liu et al. (2004) further identify subcategories for each perspective in Berge’s framework (as Table 1). Berge (2009) argues the framework of online instructors’ roles is still valid in spite of the considerable change in the technical environment and pedagogical concepts. Berge’s statement resonates with previous attempts before the era of MOOCs as his framework entails dimensions of online instructors commonly revealed in the literature, namely “pedagogical, facilitator, instructional designer, social, managerial, and technical roles” (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011, p. 427).

Pedagogical

Online instructors fulfill the pedagogical roles through facilitating knowledge-based activities to solidify students’ mastery of critical concepts and skills (Berge, 1995; Liu et al., 2004). The pedagogical components align with the elements of online teaching practice (Anderson & Dron, 2012), such as addressing designing a course, facilitating interactions, and providing feedback. Accordingly, pedagogical roles denote instructional designer, profession-inspirer, feedback-giver, and interaction-facilitator (Liu et al., 2004). The instructional designer role is salient because the digital-format course enforces the online
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