Role of Instructors’ Forum Interactions With Students in Promoting MOOC Continuance

Chenghong Zhang, Department of Information Management and Information Systems, School of Management, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Hong Chen, Department of Information Management and Information Systems, School of Management, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Chee Wei Phang, University of Nottingham, Ningbo Campus, Ningbo, China

ABSTRACT

This article describes how MOOCs, being a new global education and technology phenomenon, present both opportunities and challenges to educators and learners. The lack of face-to-face engagement introduces a sense of isolation in students, resulting in a high dropout rate. To this end, online forums are deemed to help overcome the problem by enabling interactions among the learners and facilitating their learning. Recent research further suggests that with an online forum provided in a MOOC, the presence of instructors may not be important. However, in this article, the authors provide two important insights: First, online forum indeed plays an important role in motivating learner continuance. Second, among the different types of forum activities, they find that interaction with instructors emerge as an important factor contributing to more assignment completions in addition to forum posting. The authors’ post-hoc analysis also indicates that the importance of instructor presence may be particularly salient in the Eastern vis-à-vis Western culture, which points to future research opportunities.

KEYWORDS

Continuance, Course Completion, Forum Activities, Instructor-Student Interaction, MOOCs, Online Forums

INTRODUCTION

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have been experiencing a rapid growth in recent years worldwide (Konstan et al., 2015). Leveraging the Internet’s open and highly connective nature, MOOCs allow anyone from the globe who are keen in learning to enroll in courses regardless of where they are and their current education level (Bederson et al., 2015). Thus, MOOCs have been regarded as a “budding revolution” in education with large-scale and disruptive potentials (Christensen et al., 2013).

Yet, despite the massive enrollments to MOOCs, the dropout rates of these courses are astoundingly high. According to some estimates, the dropout rates of MOOCs may reach as high as 90% on average (Xing et al., 2016), with completion rate estimated to be only 19.2% (Dubosson & Emad, 2015). An important reason to this is a lack of face-to-face engagement in MOOCs, which makes it likely for the students to experience isolation and feel being disconnected from others (Waugh

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& Su-Searle, 2014). One way to combat such feelings of isolation and disconnection, as noted in the literature, is through the use of an online forum (Dubosson & Emad, 2015; Warren et al., 2014).

Online forums allow learners to interact with each other thus affording a sense of social presence; not only this, they also facilitate mutual learning among the students, leading to what scholars termed as “collaborative learning” (Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Williams et al., 2011). In collaborative learning, contents are co-constructed among the learners. It is even suggested that learning under this mode might be more effective in the absence of an instructor as it encourages students to learn and explore more independently and more openly (Mitra & Arora, 2010). A recent research by Tomkin and Charlevoix (2014) seems to support this notion. By separating students from a MOOC into two groups, one with instructor-student interaction in the forum and the other without, they found that the two groups did not differ significantly in terms of their overall completion rate (taken to be whether they achieved a threshold of 70% grade in quizzes, discussion portfolio in the forum, or final project). It was therefore concluded that “[t]he active involvement of the professor did not matter in this MOOC” (p. 75). The finding has raised interest in the educator community, e.g., it was featured and discussed in education blogs such as “Virtual Canuck”1 and “Art of E-learning”2. However, can we make a conclusion yet? This leads us to investigate the following research question:

*Given the importance of online forums, can their presence substitute for the involvement of instructors in MOOC?*

Answering the question is important because it may shape how online forums are employed and how instructors perceive their role in MOOCs. Being an emerging learning paradigm, MOOCs remain not well-understood. In this study, we examine a course offered on a major worldwide MOOC platform3 with dataset from the course consisting of objective behavioral records of more than 20,000 students. We focus on investigating the effects of the participants’ forum activities while controlling for their other behaviors that occurred during the course. For the dependent variable, we examine the number of assignments completed by the students to capture their progressive continuance in the course.

Based on the connectivism learning theory (Siemens, 2005), this study develops a research model to explain the effects of the participants’ forum activities on their MOOC learning continuance. In our hypotheses development, we expect the following forum activities, i.e., visiting the forum, posting, interaction with peers, and interaction with instructors, would positively be associated with MOOC continuance. Our study may contribute to a better understanding of the effects of different online forum activities, and help clarify the importance of instructors’ presence in the forum in motivating learners’ MOOC continuance.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The literature review related to the MOOC research is discussed first, followed by an elaboration on the theoretical background and hypotheses development. The research methodology introduces the research design of this study, followed by data analyses and results. The last section is discussion and conclusion.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The concept of MOOC was first proposed by Canadian scholars Dave Cormier and Bryan Alexander in 2008, and since becomes a global phenomenon within just a few years with the New York Times declaring 2012 as the “Year of the MOOC” (Bederson et al., 2015).

MOOCs present a revolutionary form of online learning with their own unique features. First, the scale of student enrollment creates a human-computer interaction setting in which abundant data about learner behaviors is afforded for scientific research (Bederson et al., 2015). The second characteristic of MOOC is the highly structured course experience that may help alleviate students’ confusion and dissatisfaction with unstructured online learning to some extents (Bouhnik & Marcus,
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