Rethinking MOOCs: The Promises for Better Education in India

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ABSTRACT

Indian users are the second largest population enrolled in MOOCs; yet little is known about them. In this qualitative study of MOOC users in India, the authors aim to understand how and why they use MOOCs. The findings show how MOOCs fit into the Indian context, specifically how they compare to the interviewees’ educational experiences and the trade-off between language and content. This article also examines a group of ex-users, that is, a group of previous users who have turned away from MOOCs despite having an educational need. Furthermore, it highlights how the findings contribute to the debate on MOOCs and the promise for better education. Proponents of MOOCs have claimed that they are an improving force for education because they provide free access for anyone with an internet connection to high-quality teachers and materials on a scale not possible before. The authors use the emergent themes from the data to challenge these claims.

KEYWORDS

E-Learning, Emerging Markets, India, Massive Open Online Course, MOOC, Online Education, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of 2012, massive open online courses (MOOCs) took the world of higher education by storm. Millions of users joined the two most popular platforms, EdX and Coursera, alone. Proponents declared MOOCs to be a disruptive force in higher education, namely because they provide free access for anyone with an Internet connection to high quality teachers and materials on a scale not possible before in higher education systems (Bryson, 2017). Bound up in the rhetoric of MOOCs was the claim they could democratize education (Hyman, 2012). Exemplifying this claim, Rick Levin, the former CEO of Coursera, stated: “[MOOCs have the] capacity to expand the mission of our great universities, both in the United States and abroad, to reach audiences that don’t have access to higher education otherwise” (Guttenplan, 2014).

How MOOCs may improve access to higher education, though, is complex and somewhat ambiguous, both as stated in rhetorical claims and as evidenced by research. One way MOOCs may improve access to education is through expanding it: this claim of improvement through expanded access appears in many studies about MOOCs (Fadzil et al., 2015; Guzdial & Bruckman, 2018; Kizilcec et al., 2017). Open access to education via MOOCs may hold particular promise for developing countries (Erdem-Aydin, 2015; Stracck et al., 2018; Wildavsky, 2015) where the need to access high quality educational resources is seen as urgent (Cutrell et al., 2015). Like Jaggers (2014),...
however, this study notes that expanding access is an insufficient criterion for holistically assessing improvements in education.

MOOC users come from all over the world, but the biggest groups on the most well-known and widely-used platforms (such as EdX and Coursera) are from the US and India (Kulkarni et al., 2015). Despite the large quantity of Indian MOOC users—about 1.7 million users on Coursera alone—little is known about their backgrounds and experiences. Thus, this qualitative interview study of MOOC users in India explores how and why they use MOOCs.

This paper begins by surveying the literature on MOOCs and how they may promise better education for Indians; then it describes the methodological approach used to collect and analyze the data. Finally, it presents the findings that emerge from taking the interviewees’ perspective on MOOCs, including how MOOCs fit into the Indian context, how they compare to the interviewees’ educational experiences offline, how the trade-off between language and content plays out, the barriers to access and using MOOCs, and the ways in which MOOCs are used beyond individual use at home.

RESEARCH ON MOOCs

The most popular MOOCs follow the format of a traditional university course and feature lectures, assignments, start dates, and deadlines. One of the most striking characteristics of MOOC ushership is a major drop out in course enrollment between initial registration and final certification, as more than 90% of participants eventually drop out (Xing et al., 2016). This statistic has been characterized as a funnel of participation (Joo et al., 2018), with students “leaking out” of a course over time (Cristea et al., 2018). High dropout rates have sparked debate about the efficacy of MOOCs as well as conversation about how to retain users over time. However, simply comparing MOOCs with traditional education or e-learning does not seem sensible either (Joksimović et al., 2018). The low signup costs and openness of MOOCs—features at their very core—mean people can more readily register as well as dropout.

Even though a range of people from different age groups, countries, and backgrounds have enrolled in MOOCs, global users tend to be young, employed males with Bachelor’s degrees (Joksimović et al., 2018). Countries with the highest MOOC user populations are the US, India, and Canada (van de Oudeweetering & Agirdag, 2018). Various studies have examined learners’ motivations for enrolling and how their motivations impact course completion (Tracey et al., 2018). In one early MOOC study, 55% of survey respondents enrolled “for the knowledge and skills they would gain,” 25% for “personal challenge,” and only 9% for “employment and job advancement” (Breslow et al., 2013). The study found no correlation between motivations and course completion, although the survey was only administered to those who had persevered through the course. In another study, the top motivations for enrolling in computer science courses were fun, challenge, and interest in the topic (Kizilcec et al., 2013). The authors conclude that MOOC providers might consider how to better satisfy the needs and goals of those learners who enroll for personal enrichment. Elsewhere, the main reasons for enrolling in various Coursera courses were “curiosity, just for fun” and to “gain skills to do my job better” (Christensen et al., 2013).

The preceding studies and other large-scale surveys of MOOC users’ demographic data provide a high-level picture of who uses MOOCs and their apparent motivations. However, they provide little detail or nuance about who the users are, how they utilize MOOCs for their own purposes, nor whether their interactions with MOOCs were successful. This study seeks to explore these user-specific details and may provide potential new areas for research on MOOCs.

MOOCS AND THE PROMISE FOR BETTER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Higher education in India consists of a set of elite institutes (IITs, IIMs, etc.) with the best teachers and facilities attended by the top 1% of students, with the remaining 99% educated at colleges throughout
Distributed Deception: An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Deceptive Communication in a Computer-Mediated Environment

Linking Mathematical Praxeologies With an Epidemic Model