Learning with MOOCs: Hybrid Course as a Successful Academic Experiment

František Dalecký

Department of Information studies and Librarianship, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University (Czech Republic)
frantisek.dalecky@gmail.com

Abstract

The Department of Information studies and Librarianship of Faculty of Arts, Masaryk university, is the first university department in Czech Republic, which offers credentials for the study of MOOCs and additional activities. In semester Autumn 2013 and Spring 2014 was developed and tought the brand new subject: Online learning: MOOC. This hybrid course is unique combination of online learning with offline activities. For receiving credit, students have to successfully finish chosen MOOC, create the analysis and evaluation of the course and prepare the final presentation for other students and members of Department. Students can also attend seminars throught the whole semester and learn from each other and find out about key concepts of MOOCs and education technology. While the Faculty of Arts is sceptical about the subject, feedback from students is very positive and shows rapid growth of their engagement, if they can choose the subject of study by themselves. The new subject offers a special model of blended learning. This course also brought an attention of Czech media and became an PR event for the whole Department. The presentation will focus on the curriculum of the course, its learning methods and learning outcomes. The goal of the speech is also to indtroduce the key insights, which have been throught the two semesters experinece of managing this course. The presentation will offer concrete data and results from the course, as the data from students feedback. The pedagogical and technological side of the subject will be examined and summarized as a unique case study, which might inspire others to experiment with learning using MOOCs. The final part of the presentation will focus on the future of possible use of MOOC on academic background, its positives, negatives and challenges ahead.

1. Introduction

The Department of Information Studies and Librarianship is one of the pioneers of online education in Czech Republic. Our institution made the first truly massive online course in Czech environment and language. Its name was Kurz práce s inormacemi (_The course for Work with information)_ [1] and it had more than 4000 students enrolled. While the Czech online education still waits for its first MOOC, our institution is getting a lot of attention for its activities. We are currently developing a new field of study (specialization) called Technology in Education, which will combine the perspectives of Information Science, Technology and Pedagogy. One of the most visible activities of our Department was the course Online Learning: MOOC – unique hybrid course, which brought a lot of attention of media [2] and other Faculties. Our motivation for running this course was influenced by the research needs and general curiosity about the co-functioning of the traditional learning model with the online one. According to the study made by Babson, institutions work with MOOC for two main reasons - to market their institutions and increase student enrollment. Other reasons might include the ability of MOOC to incorporate Innovative pedagogy and flexible learning outcomes. [3] With our hybrid course, we certainly promoted our Department, but our goal was to learn something new about blended learning, promote online learning and to develop an effective model for blended learning on university.

2. Facilitator's perspective: Design of the course and its management

While designing this course, we had to face a legal problem: Czech universities do not allow giving credentials for online courses. The course had to be designed as a hybrid one, where online education was just one of the part of the curriculum. The expected goals of the subject were defined as following:

1) By using Open educational resources to improve student's knowledge of information science and related fields and to enhance the competence of self-directed learning.

Expected learning outcome: improvement in chosen knowledge domain, exploring resources for online learning for creating awareness about the current state of the sector of online education, building a skills for self-directed learning and creating and managing personal learning environment.

2) To learn about key concepts within online education.

Expected learning outcome: Students should learn advanced concepts in the sphere of edtech and online learning and be able to know the theory behind MOOCs.

3) To strengthen the skill of analysis and evaluation of learning process.

Expected learning outcome: The ability for recognizing the patterns of learning process, evaluation of the quality of content and other components of MOOCs [UI, Social interactions, Used technology] are considered as a main learning outcome of this course.

2.1. Official and Hidden Curriculum

If the learner wants to get a credit for the course, he has to successfully complete the MOOC he chose. That course should be related to the field of Information science or it has to be important for the individual development of the learner to be recognized. While having certificate in the end is one of the results, we need to have other ways for demonstrating learners activity. For all learners is mandatory to write an analysis and evaluation of the MOOC in the form of article and in the end of the semester to present their learning experience. The final presentation has to be shared online later for further spreading of knowledge and experience. [4] Because some of the learners were interested in MOOCs quiet deeply, the Department started with seminars, which should help to build an offline learning community and support the quality of learning outcomes. These seminars focused on the most interesting topics concerning MOOCs and students chose them by their interests. The topics ranged from pedagogic theory of connectivism and history of online education to the technical requirements and different types of online courses. The discussion was also developed about future of MOOC, its business models and impact in the third world. The role of the facilitator was just to collaborate with learners and share the knowledge they searched for, while in the same time to facilitate the group discussions and creative group work on the seminars. When the course was evaluated lately, we realised, that we used primarily the elements of non-formal and informal learning in the formal environment – which might be a good practice for running hybrid courses in general, because they support making connections among participants, team work and role modelling [5]. The hidden curriculum of this course also included team work, improving presentation skills and enriching the information, media and technology literacy. This non-formal and informal approach for running the course combined with the relative freedom of choice is was by our final conclusion one of the reasons, why our hybrid course was so popular and positively rated. Apart from these activities, the course used a Facebook group, which produced 48 posts in the semester and almost half of the posts was generated by the participants. The group is still active and helps to enhance the learning experiences for past and current students of the class.

3. Student's perspective: Learning outcomes and feedback

The student feedback was overall positive, the only problem some of them had, was the wrong choice of the MOOC in the beginning. Some of them did not know the difference between cMOOC a xMOOC and therefore were disappointed when their learning experience did not meet their expectations. The completion rate of the course was 69%, from 23 students, 7 were not successful. The main reason of not finishing well was in the online part of the course – all of these students were unsuccessful

because of missing deadlines in the MOOC. From the feedback in the end of semester there were some important notions for next development:

1. One of the student proposed, that there should be a guidance within the choosing of the MOOC in the beginning, because the students do not know the theory yet and wrong choice in the beginning can lead to the failure of the whole course.

2. Three students of the course showed an advanced interest in learning about MOOC more deeply and they would like to participate in designing and creating learning objects and environments, including MOOCs. For the next year we now think about using this creative potential and enable learning by doing in the matter of the MOOCs.

In general, final presentation and sharing experiences were among the most positive activities of the subject. The role of facilitator and his expertise were evaluated as high, by 11 of the 16 people who completed the whole course. As the Department, we also valued the feedback from people, who were not successful in their study: *I would like to say, that even I failed to finish this subject, because of missing the deadline, I consider this course as one of the best I had on the university. Mostly because of the fact, that the student can design and manage his own learning and he is fully responsible for his actions and results* [6].

The key lessons learned for the whole Department and facilitator of the course are following:

1. Communication and collaboration is the key.
   Although students could manage most of their learning by themselves, they knew they could ask for advice in group settings and individually by using consultation or email conversation. Open atmosphere and culture of sharing both ideas and obstacles is critical for success.

2. Self-direction is the most valued element of this course.
   This course was run mostly by students. They chose what they want to learn in MOOCs and also on the seminars. The facilitator was just delivering and serving their learning needs and curiosity. Student-centered approach is absolutely necessary for running hybrid course like this.

3. Permanent feedback as a guarantee of continuous improvement of the course.
   The role of facilitator was not just to deliver the content and create environment – his goal was also to get as much feedback as possible. That is way the classes were open for discussion and feedback was gathered in formal way (through information system) and non-formal way (discussion with students).

Conclusion: Future of Learning with MOOCs in Academia

According to the study made by Ernst and Young [7], MOOC are one of the drivers, which will change the state of higher education around the globe. There is a lot of criticism about the low rates of completion and some of the academics are quite skeptical about them in the moment. But we need to face the fact, that MOOCs are going to evolve and so will Academia [8]. The cooperation of these two worlds is necessary – the popularity of online learning is rapidly growing while the higher education is facing many challenges. It is possible, that further development of blended learning will be attached to different forms of online courses, for example DOCC [9]. There are some great possibilities for supporting learning outcomes in academia using the online courses and the universities of future will use the online ways of learning to improve the performance of their institutions. Some of these emergent opportunities include the choice of lecturer to become an instructional designer, facilitator and co-learner and bring more elements of non-formal learning to formal education. The second opportunity lies in the way, how Faculties and its stuff works – online courses can be used for outsourcing of time consuming activities like evaluating assessments and can be replaced by peer review for example. And finally, from the student perspective the teacher is not anymore the main force in his learning quest – it is the learner, who is in the centre and his ability to be self-directed, use open educational resources and create an individual and personalized learning experience [10]. The future of education might be exactly like this: blended, self-directed and personalized. Running hybrid classes, gathering data and constantly improving is the way that we prepare for the future on our

Department. Our controversial, but successful academic experiment is showing us, we have started an amazing education journey.

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