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“Like having a little conference every day”: participants’ experiences of social learning and digital engagement on a MOOC

Eileen Kennedy and Diana Laurillard

The term “MOOC” has different meanings for different people, ranging from static, online resources available on-demand for self-study, video-led courses where interactivity is limited to multiple choice quizzes, to vibrant communities of practice where participants exchange knowledge and experience with their professional peers. Technology is central to the experience, with digital platforms built to accommodate tens of thousands of simultaneous learners. Beyond that, however, there is great variety in how technology is used to support learning experiences. Similarly, the incorporation of discussion and social learning varies substantially between platforms and courses.

This paper presents findings from in-depth interviews with MOOC participants using an adapted repertory grid technique. In online, participant-led interactive sessions, interviewees were asked about their experience of social learning and interactivity on a MOOC. Participants were asked to compare a range of MOOCs and other online learning experiences, as a means to articulate how they made sense of their varied experiences.

This has resulted in a rich set of insights into learning online at scale, and has highlighted the importance of six factors in participants’ learning experiences: Deep Learning; Applied Learning; Inclusive Learning; Social Learning; Digital Engagement and an awareness of Learning Design. The paper reports on the ways – positive and negative – that participants experienced social learning and digital engagement in MOOCs. We consider the role played by educators, the importance of discussion prompts and participants’ experience of learning from peers. In terms of digital engagement, we point to the varied degrees of interactivity within MOOCs and the ways these were experienced. For many (often professional) participants, active participation in a vibrant discussion with peers was a vital part of learning, where they felt they learnt from others who helped clarify and apply the ideas in practical ways. However, many participants also pointed to experiences where the discussion was lacking, not structured or meaningful and where educators were absent. Interactive, digital engagement was something many participants valued, but online experiences often failed to live up to expectations.

Our findings show that more effective design of MOOCs, foregrounding meaningful discussion and digitally engagement, would better support the learning of participants, particularly professional learners. In conclusion, we argue that a shift towards MOOCs for interactive, social learning could change popular understanding what MOOCs are capable of achieving, with the potential to transform universities’ approach to knowledge exchange with professionals.