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The Tangible and Intangible Benefits of Offering Massive Open Online Courses: Faculty Perspectives

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and Michelle Johnson^E



The primary purpose of this study was to establish perceptions of faculty members regarding the benefits of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in higher education. In addition, the study sought to determine what the challenges of offering MOOCs were and what accounted for the low completion rates of MOOCs. Data were collected using an online survey from 1,057 faculty members in a major university system based in the southern United States. Of the 1,057 target faculty population who completed the online survey, 939 responses were viable, and only 396 of the faculty respondents provided answers to the open-ended question regarding the benefits of MOOCs. Overall, the researchers analyzed 396 faculty responses using the Atlas Ti qualitative program. Open-ended coding was conducted to determine what key concepts faculty provided in their responses to describe the benefits of MOOCs. Axial codes were developed to group primary codes into broader concepts which enabled the researchers to create themes based on the axial codes. The responses provide rich and robust descriptions about the benefits and drawbacks of MOOCs. The paper presents the results of the open-ended question.

Keywords: MOOCs, massive open online courses, higher education, online education, distance learning

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Introduction

The need to transform the way university leaders think and run their institutions, especially in this technology-driven learning environment, has become more pronounced in the 21st century than ever before (Clark, 1998; Nafukho & Wawire, 2004; Ziderman & Albrecht, 1995). On the significant role of technology in higher education, Miller (2014, p. 1) noted, “Most students graduating from college in the present era will experience at least some part of their education via technology, whether as an enhancement to the traditional, face-to-face approach, fully online or some mix of the two.” The academic institution has changed and evolved based on its consumer needs as well as the available societal resources. One such resource which has altered common educational practice has been the rapid surge of technology. A new challenge for academia is determining the technology tools best suited to provide strong pedagogical practices to a technology-savvy population. As new technologies emerge, and student needs shift, universities search for ways to support student learning and growth. In addition, university leaders and professors are challenged to develop entrepreneurial ways of delivering educational products and services to their students (Nafukho & Muya, 2014).

Today, technology is commonplace. First-year college freshmen have lived with cell phone technology, Internet, and social media. Students can watch movies, listen to music, conduct banking business, and

communicate with an unlimited number of people through personal cell phones. As a result of the technological impact on society, our higher education delivery system has also morphed. An increasing number of universities and campuses are offering distance education courses as a result of this shift. According to the National Governor’s Association, “the number of students taking an online course has nearly quadrupled over the past decade, with nearly one-third of all postsecondary students in the nation – including many working adults – currently taking at least one course online” (NGA, 2013, p.1). This information is corroborated by the Sloan Foundation’s 2010 Survey of Online Learning assertion that more than 30% of all students take at least one online course during their college career (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012). Although the term “distance education” has historically meant “correspondence course”, today that definition is more inclusive.

Distance Education (DE) has been implemented in the United States for several decades. The evolution of DE has typically been classified by the technology as well as the pedagogical approach utilized. Anderson and Dron (2012) summarized the three generations of the technology used as: 1) postal correspondence; 2) mass media of television, radio and film production; and 3) interactive technologies. Although the generations are each unique, they overlap and intertwine.

No matter the learning modality or grade level, a common challenge for teachers is student engagement (Jensen, 2005). Educators today must create instructional

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opportunities by utilizing technology to empower learners to solve problems, access information, and create relationships outside the classroom using the digital tools (November, 2010). In the online environment, this challenge is exacerbated by several factors, including the lack of face-to-face contact, a hindered ability to share emotions like enthusiasm, encouragement or concern, learner/instructor isolation, and the unrealistic expectations of students that online coursework is easier and requires less time (Cull, Reed, & Kirk, 2010). These challenges are likely further compounded in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), where the sheer number of students lessen the ability of the instructor to engage individual students, and can manifest into high withdraw/dropout rates in MOOCs, as reported by Koutropoulos and Hougue (2012). Jordan (2013) found that the average MOOC course is found to enroll around 43,000 students, 6.5% of whom complete the course. Despite these challenges, the online learning environment has unique components for fostering student engagement and learning, including flexibility, interactivity, and creativity for online instructors to generate a variety of learning experiences that are both structural and pedagogical in nature.

The flexibility of learning anytime/anywhere can empower students to take charge of their own learning, and focus on important intellectual tasks at optimal times. Flexibility of learning has been cited as a major factor in the sustained growth of online courses over ten years from less than 2 million in the early 2000s to 6.7 million in the fall of 2011 as reported in *Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States* (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Additionally, online courses afford a unique platform for interactivity, collaboration, and community building using tools like

discussion boards, blogs, wikis, collaborative documents/presentations, and social media groups. When carefully scaffolded by the instructor, these activities can allow for rich communication and collaboration, as well as creativity to build upon ideas and projects using the vast resources of the Internet. Moreover, the Internet allows students to connect with experts in the field, and bring in perspectives from outside of the online classroom.

Finally, online instructors can call upon imagery, audio, video, music, and interactive elements to enhance the design of an online course, and express creativity in the design of instruction for online students. In terms of pedagogical strategies for engaging online students, the online learning environment allows instructors to establish course goals and relevance and clearly communicate expectations before the course begins, and at each assessment benchmark during the semester. Because of the 'backwards design' of an online course, and the necessity to view it through the learner's lens, an online instructor can set online students up for success through organization and good design. Communication can be enhanced in an online course through behaviors congruent with immediacy and presence, both of which have been shown to enhance student engagement (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Witt, Wheelless, & Allen, 2004). Online instructors can use asynchronous tools like email and discussion boards, and synchronous tools like chat, Skype or Google Hangouts to connect with and support students. Finally, online learning environments allow for multiple forms of formative and summative assessment. Online instructors can provide timely feedback in written/text form, as well in audio/video format.

Purpose of the Study

Although delivering learning content online is associated with numerous advantages, Massive Open Online Courses with thousands of students enrolled have faced scepticism; especially from faculty members based in major research universities. When it comes to learning, both high-tech (online learning) and high-touch (face-to-face learning) issues become important, especially to faculty members involved in the design and delivery of face-to-face, blended and online learning. In terms of engaging students in the learning process, it has been established that utilizing a mix of face-to-face and online instruction promotes optimal learning (Bonk, 2002). While MOOCs are now becoming a reality in higher education, limited studies have been conducted, especially among faculty members regarding their perceptions on the learning effectiveness of MOOCs. The primary purpose of this study was to establish perceptions of faculty regarding the benefits of MOOCs in a major southern university system in the United States.

Conceptual Framework

Anderson and Dron (2012) have offered a broader view of distance education by classifying the three generations by the type of pedagogical approach employed. The three theoretical frameworks are termed: cognitive/behaviorist, social constructivist, and connectivist. The following synopsis of the three pedagogical frameworks provide a broad overview of this distance education technology development.

The first phase, or generation of technology adoption in course delivery was that of postal correspondence. This concept was popular during much of the 20th century

and used the postal service as its technological means of exchanging communication and between instructor and student. In this course delivery system, one instructor could instruct and communicate with one student or several students in different locations. This instructional method utilized a cognitive/behaviorist approach in which the focus is on the individual learner. No longer was it imperative for students to travel to a campus to receive instruction. Through this type of distance education, students in more rural areas or who faced other barriers in accessing a college campus were able to pursue higher education. Obvious limitations to this method of instructional delivery include the time students and faculty had to wait between correspondences, and the lack of interactivity between students.

As technology advanced, so did the ways in which it was utilized by institutions of higher education. The second generation of technology development utilized a social constructivist pedagogical approach. In this delivery system, student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication opportunities were expanded and emphasized. Through technology, such as email and the World Wide Web, the course environment became more interactive and dynamic. Unlike the first generation of technology use in higher education which primarily provided instructional information in an isolated situation, this generation attempts to provide students an online class environment in which they can build a virtual classroom community.

The third generation, utilizing a connectivist approach, is even more entrenched in social networks. This informal learning approach, relies on the interactions between students as they use technology tools such tweets, blogs, and social media. Unlike the first generation, this educational experience relies on students working

together to help each other as individuals, and as teams, to learn and use a personal learning network (PLN). The constructivist approach has been utilized in the design and delivery of xMOOCs and cMOOCs. The xMOOCs refer to instructor-guided lessons which include discussion forums, videos, and encourage discussion among learners. cMOOCs, on the other hand, are based on connectivism where learners engage in self-paced learning as they navigate the course, build a web of connections among fellow learners and create meaning by setting their own learning goals and choosing how to engage in the learning process. Through active engagement and active learning communities, the learners in cMOOCs learn and create knowledge together (Scholz, 2013).

Literature Review

As evident from the technology evolution in higher education, course delivery systems must adapt to society's needs and student preferences. Institutions of higher education have evolved from postal correspondence to providing an online learning experience that parallels the design of an on-campus class. However, as a result of the increasing possibilities of technology infusion in education, academia is now challenging the concept of the traditional online class design by offering courses in a very nontraditional manner. The development of Massive Open Online Courses is rooted within the ideals of openness in education, knowledge should be shared freely, and the desire to learn should be met without demographic, economic, and geographical constraints (Yuan & Powell, 2013). This idealized view of MOOCs posits that benefits of online learning can be offered on a massive scale. Leckart (2012) heralded [the advent of MOOCs] as a significant event

in shaping the future of higher education, envisioning a future where MOOCs offer full degrees as 'bricks and mortar' institutions decline. According to the Oxford Dictionary (2013), the term MOOC is defined as "a course of study made available over the Internet without charge to a very large number of people." The courses are typically free, but historically institutions have not allowed participants to receive actual course credit. However, as MOOCs have become more mainstream, universities are beginning to explore ways to reverse this trend. For example, Arizona State University (ASU), the largest public university in the United States, recently launched its Global Freshman Academy in partnership with MOOC provider edX, allowing anyone to take an entire first year of college online via MOOCs for free ASU transcript credit. MIT recently announced its intent to allow students to obtain one of its master's degrees by doing half of the coursework via MOOCs. A 2015 U.S. and World News Report lists similar MOOC-for-credit initiatives at institutions like Georgia Institute of Technology and The University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign.

The first cMOOC was offered in 2008, by the University of Manitoba in Canada. The course, *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge*, registered twenty-five paying students seeking course credit as well as 2,300 other students, from the public, who enrolled at no cost. Daniel (2012), a well-known scholar of MOOCs, observed that Stanford University offered a free MOOCs course on Artificial Intelligence, which enrolled 160,000 students. The success of this MOOC course motivated Sebastian Thrun, the professor at Stanford University who developed the course to establish a MOOC private start-up company called Udacity which has played an important role of promoting the development of MOOCs in other universities (Meyer, 2012). Yuan

and Powell (2013) stated that present-day MOOCs are generating considerable media attention and significant interest from higher education institutions as well as venture capitalists who see a lucrative business opportunity. MOOCs can be seen as an extension of existing online learning approaches, in terms of open access to courses and scalability, but also offer an opportunity to think afresh about new business learning models that include elements of open education. Since the first MOOC course was offered in 2008, over ten MOOC companies have been established in partnership with world-renowned universities including: Class 2 Go, Coursera, Cousesites, edX, Google Course Builder, Instructure Canvas, Khan Academy, NOVOEd, OpenMOOC, Udacity and Udemy, with many others in development.

Other lenses through which to view MOOCs include the political sector, where government leaders see the potential to address the problem of higher education budget constraints and lower the cost of degree courses by enabling inexpensive, low-risk experiments in different forms of higher education provision (Carey, 2013). The private business sector envisions MOOCs as a way to enter the higher education market by providing a MOOC platform and developing partnerships with existing institutions and to explore new delivery models in higher education (Yuan & Powell, 2013). Advocates see MOOCs as a disruptive innovation that will transform higher education. To these varied lenses, MOOCs provide a powerful tool to make fundamental changes in the organization and delivery of higher education over the next decade (Shirky, 2012). Most of the writings on MOOCs have been presented in mainstream newspapers and refereed academic journals. There exists a gap in the literature on faculty perspectives of MOOCs, hence the need to involve faculty

with regard to the design and successful delivery of MOOCs.

Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are faculty perceptions regarding the benefits of Massive Open Online Courses in higher education?
2. What are the challenges of offering MOOCs in your institution?
3. What accounts for the low completion rates of MOOCs?

In order to achieve the purpose of this study and answer the research questions, a cross-sectional survey was utilized to collect and analyze data from the study respondents. This being an exploratory descriptive study, a cross-sectional survey design was employed to enable the researchers to capture faculty perceptions regarding the benefits of MOOCs. Thus, a self-perception survey was selected as the instrument to collect data since self-reporting has been found to be the most direct and common way to establish study participant perceptions (Anderson & Kanuka, 1997). Dillman (2000) also observed that self-reports serve the interest of study participants who, in this case, were faculty who were typically teaching using face-to-face, online or blended methods. In their teaching role, faculty members serve as experts who direct the learning process, and are critical in encouraging students to learn for a lifetime through continuing professional education. Hence the need to determine their perception of MOOCs which are mainly taken by learners who already have first degrees and are interested in continuing professional education (Cull, Reed, & Kirk, 2010).

Target Population and Sample

The target population for the study was comprised of 7,000 faculty members employed by a major university system based in the southern portion of the United States. Of the 7,000 targeted population of faculty, 1,057 (15.1%) of system faculty completed the online survey, and of those who completed the survey 939 (88.8%) of the responses were complete and usable. The researchers of this study, however report the results pertaining to the open-ended responses which sought answers to the three research questions. Only 396 of the faculty respondents provided answers to the open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of the benefits of MOOCs, challenges facing MOOCs and why there were low completion rates in MOOCs. Overall, the researchers analyzed 396 faculty responses using the Atlas Ti qualitative program. The sample included 46% females and 54% males. Eighty-two percent of the respondents identified themselves as Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, 2% African American, 1% Asian, 1% American Indian, and 6% who identified as "other". Sixty-seven percent of the sample indicated they were tenured or tenure track faculty, while 33% said they were non-tenure track.

Open-ended coding was conducted to determine what key concepts faculty provided in their responses to describe the benefits and drawbacks of MOOCs, challenges of MOOCs and reasons for the low completion rates in MOOCs courses. Axial codes were developed to group primary codes into broader concepts which enabled the researchers to create themes based on the axial codes.

Instrumentation

The electronic survey was comprised of several validated instrument items which

have been used to measure perceptions regarding MOOCs. The researchers of this study obtained permission from the Babson Survey Research Group, a renowned research team in the area of online learning, to use some of the questionnaire items from what was originally known as the Sloan Online Survey, through a partnership with the Sloan Consortium and Pearson. The other items of the instrument were adapted from Anderson and Kanuka's (1997) work and were modified to meet the needs of this study. In addition, items were obtained from Ke's (2011) study. Only the results for the open-ended section of the instrument are reported in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection and to protect human subjects in the study, the approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of the three institutions where the researchers are employed. Once the IRB permissions were granted, the researchers worked with a main contact person in the university system of over ten institutions to coordinate the data collection process. Data delimiters were identified by the researchers to ensure confidentiality of data. From a list provided by the university contact, survey invitations were distributed via e-mail. In the invitation, a unique link was provided and directed the participants to the study. The electronic survey was created in such a way that participants could only complete the survey one time.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data collected through open-ended questions from the 396 faculty members who provided rich and detailed explanations

on the benefits of MOOCs, the researchers transcribed the survey responses into a readable format with the Atlas Ti qualitative program. The researchers conducted open coding to determine what key concepts faculty members discussed to describe their MOOCs experience or inexperience. Next, axial codes were developed to group primary codes into broader concepts. Themes emerged based on these axial codes. The researchers discussed findings and verified the coding and themes to develop a working knowledge of the study participants' experience or inexperience with MOOCs.

Results

Survey participants were asked the open ended question, "What are the benefits of offering MOOCs?" The qualitative data from this section of the survey was unitized and then coded, thus revealing five major categories along with some subcategories on who benefits from institutions offering MOOCs. In addition to discussing the benefits, participants also discussed some of the drawbacks of offering MOOCs although they were not asked to provide information on drawbacks. This was an unexpected finding as participants were specifically asked about the benefits. This section of the paper discusses the student benefits, institution or program benefits, and the reported drawbacks of offering MOOCs.

Student Benefits

According to Newman (2013), individuals may be motivated to enroll in adult education courses to gain control of their lives, learn to reason freely, nurture their consciousness, participate in a civil society, or learn how to better assert themselves in their world. While the motive to enroll in

a MOOC is unique to the individual, the benefits offered by MOOCs are extended to all students.

Access to education. Among these benefits are a large number of individuals having access to education, one participant stated that by offering MOOCs institutions provide "accessibility to [educational courses] to a diverse and wide-ranging student body". While another participant noted, MOOCs provide "accessibility to students who could benefit from foundational courses without incurring an additional financial burden." One respondent also reported that traditional education is available to "only the "elite" or upper middle class or students willing to "mortgage their future with financial aid" can afford higher education with the traditional four years of face-to-face campus attendance".

Flexibility in education. MOOCs offer students convenience and flexibility in attending college courses. One participant noted students are able to enroll in courses which are "better fitting in their schedules because they render time of day for coursework irrelevant". Meaning, students are able to attend classes and complete course work without feeling the constraints of working, family obligations, or having to travel long distances.

Self-paced learning with no grade pressure. Participants stated students benefit greatly from the self-paced learning environment offered by MOOCs. This environment, as noted by one participant, offers "bite-sized, self-paced instruction with experts". While another participant stated, MOOCs are "self-paced, capitalize on developing and sharing knowledge, skills, and abilities to many [students] by leveraging the expertise of the few".

Students are able to learn from the experts at their own pace without feeling the pressure to make good grades. One

participant noted MOOCs as “giving a safe environment for testing technical skills without a grade being on the line”. Thus, students are able to learn without the added stress of making a good grade which may affect their ability to learn. The benefits MOOCs offer students are enhanced by the many benefits institutions and programs gain from offering MOOCs.

Institution and Program Benefits

Institutions and programs benefit greatly from the marketing aspect related to offering MOOCs. One participant stated “if well-designed and conducted, a MOOC can raise the visibility of the institution and of the instructor”. Thus, having well-designed and conducted courses generates publicity and increases the visibility of the institution or program on the national level. Participants also noted if institutions are highly visible, they then have the ability to broaden their recruiting to reach a wide diversity of students.

Reaching a wide audience. MOOCs provide institutions and programs the opportunity to reach students who may be dispersed across the country by offering flexibility in location. One participant stated institutions are “reaching geographically remote and economically disadvantaged curious learners”. Students are not required to be geographically housed in the same location as the institution or program they attend. Meaning, institutions and programs are able to electronically reach new, larger student populations without being limited by physical space and by removing the barrier that distance can create. The ability to reach a wider audience challenges institutions or programs to improve course quality and provide professional development.

Improving course quality. Participants noted that the quality of courses can be

improved through the use of MOOCs. By offering a course online, instructors are challenged to be creative in designing and delivering instruction. As one participant noted, “when creatively and thoughtfully produced, the MOOC provides greater attention to the visual presentation needed to capture interest and enhance learning” for the students. The ability of instructors to create interactive, engaging online MOOCs also “promulgates best practices” as noted by one participant.

Professional development for professors and teachers. As instructors seek to provide the highest quality of content for their courses to students, MOOCs also provide opportunities for faculty professional development. Participants noted MOOCs are a means to offer professional development to faculty teaching at smaller institutions who may experience limitations on travel or availability of funding. One participant stated “professional continuing education MOOCs provide opportunities to people in smaller communities who may not have access to F2F CE opportunities”. Thus, faculty members gain access to professional development opportunities that are flexible in location and scheduling.

Multiple Benefits from Offering MOOCs

MOOCs help students and instructors overcome the barriers of distance and high costs as well as the time constraints associated with the traditional college and professional development courses. By providing a flexible learning and teaching alternative, institutions and programs are better able to market themselves, serve geographically remote and financially disadvantaged populations, and promote best teaching practices without having to increase the physical size of their campuses.

Overall, the participants stated MOOCs offer a wide variety of benefits. However, even without prompting on the survey, some participants noted drawbacks of MOOCs.

The Drawbacks of offering MOOCs

One of the major of concerns for any institution offering courses, face-to-face or online, are completion rates. Participants in this study noted that for MOOCs, specifically, the completion rate is roughly 5% due to many students enrolling in a course and then dropping out. This low completion rate may seemingly reflect that MOOCs, as noted by participants, offer a very low level of educational benefits or may be seen as a supplement to teaching and not the primary means of delivering course content.

Faculty who participated in this study suggested that MOOCs “online offering effectiveness is limited to teaching definitions and for reinforcement practice” as there are some courses that simply and logically cannot be taught online. Reflecting this sentiment, one participant stated, “A simple example is swimming. Few people will learn how to swim by taking an online course” and suggested that this example can be extrapolated to many other fields of study.

According to participants, these drawbacks and limitations also impact how students perceive MOOCs. Because of the lack of pressure to achieve high grades (a cited benefit by some participants), students may view MOOCs as optional entertainment rather than an academically rigorous course. However, another participant suggested that the limitations of MOOCs may relate to the student’s motivation. This participant noted “if the user [student] is not motivated (i.e., use of the MOOC format is coerced), then the benefits of MOOCs are zilch”. The lack of

motivation by students may provide insight into the mixed results universities may receive on student success. As one faculty participant explained, “universities across the country are having mixed results. They will not necessarily be “better” or “worse”, but like any course, it will depend on the structure of the course and learning styles of the participants”.

Yet, the lack of motivation on the instructor’s behalf to create an engaging MOOC course design may be explained by an instructor’s previous experience with and preference for another online course program. One participant explained preference for another online program in the following response:

I teach many online courses and have since 2001 and I have been closely following the professional development issue. MOOCs are useful if offered entirely freely online, but as a replacement for actual courses (online, with regular caps of 25-30, or face-to-face) they are worse than useless as current studies are showing. However, I strongly support [online program].

Instructors who have spent several years teaching may have experience with other online course programs and find those may yield more success for students than MOOCs.

Whether the drawbacks of MOOCs are related to the lack of motivation from the student, instructor, or the university which provides little or no support, MOOCs present real challenges for teaching students online. As institutions and instructors work to overcome the challenges of offering MOOCs, one participant reminds the researchers in this study that first, everyone must be able to define and understand MOOCs. While question branching logic

was used in the survey to ascertain whether participants were aware of MOOCs, this participant stated,

You have a flaw in your survey. In the introduction, you discuss MOOCs under the assumption that the people you desire to respond to this survey will understand the meaning. Unfortunately, at [university], we do not use this term; therefore, we do not understand the meaning (definition) of the term. You need to ensure you provide all appropriate information to ensure respondent understanding... do not assume they will know. In summary, if institutions, instructors or students are unaware of MOOCs; they will never be able to fully obtain the benefits which come from offering MOOCs.

The Challenges of Offering MOOCs

When asked specifically about the challenges of offering MOOCs at their institutions, participants discussed the issues or concerns pertaining to faculty, institutional leadership and resources, academics, and students. This section of the findings will focus on the perceived challenges of offering MOOCs.

Faculty Issues and Concerns

Participants expressed concerns with faculty's acceptance of, skill in developing, and time management of MOOCs. Participants also discussed the class size and teaching load associated with facilitating MOOCs. However, the majority of participants discussed the loss of traditional class face-to-face interaction as their biggest concern. One participant expressed the following, "the real-life

interaction between instructor and student and the relationships/networks built in traditional face-to-face classrooms provide educational benefits and life-skills that cannot be obtained in an online classroom".

While, other participants expressed the concern that colleagues may be unwilling to learn or mistrust new technology. The unwillingness to learn or the mistrust of this "new" technology, as one participant stated is "the challenge [of] determining the content that can be delivered successfully..." or may be related the time management required to successfully teach a MOOCs course. One participant stated MOOCs are time-consuming and faculty are not trained to be web designers. Finally, participants discussed concerns about many faculty "are simply overloaded and will not have time to dedicate to a MOOC." or with the large number of students who may enroll in these courses.

Lack of Resources and Institutional Leadership Support

Participants are also concerned with the perceived lack or limited number of resources available to offer MOOCs in the forms of technology, IT support, and the possible lack of funding due to the high cost of MOOCs. The perceived limitation of technology at their institutions was also discussed in relation to the lack of institutional leadership support. A participant noted the "leadership of all levels seems stuck in the past regarding teaching and learning with technology". However the lack of leadership support for one participant was not the issue, the participant stated "the Provost is pushing for more online education, but the quality is poor and the interest from faculty is very low".

Academic Concerns

The lack of support from institutional leaders may be attributed to the same concerns faculty have with accreditation issues. Participants expressed that MOOCs may be better suited for professional development and not courses that require students to receive course credit or must meet the requirements for institutions to maintain their accreditation status. One participant summed up the concerns of the major challenges by stating “almost everything – accreditation, acceptance by disciplines, assessment, institutional support, [and] instructional support”.

Lastly when discussing the challenges, participants expressed concerns related to the student who may enroll in MOOCs. Participants frequently mentioned the high dropout rates and most often the low completion rates. The concerns over students are repeated findings discussed on the benefits and are also found in the responses to the question about the reasons for low completion rates.

Reasons for Low Completion Rates

Overwhelming participants considered the reason for the low completion rates in MOOCs as the lack of motivation, accountability, dedication, and self-discipline of students. A student’s lack of motivation to complete MOOCs, as one participant stated, “...may be explained by the fact that people receive no tangible consequences (i.e., rewards, punishment, etc.) for dropping out of a MOOC”. Thus, one participant drew the conclusion that the lack of motivation may be linked to accountability as some students know when [they] walk away there is little accountability to finish, saying “the student is anonymous in a MOOC. Those who have

a greater likelihood to start and complete a fitness class do so when they have to be accountable to someone. If you can drop out and no one knows; well no shame in that. There is peer pressure in a class not in a MOOC”. Some participants also discussed the perceived lack of dedication and self-discipline students possess to complete these time intensive courses. However, one participant noted, “I don’t see the completion rate as a problem for MOOCs...students sign up on a whim and change their mind before the class starts, the course sounds interesting but after the first few minutes/days, they find it boring or too difficult or sloppily designed or they don’t “connect” with someone via the class and are less motivated to come back, etc. There are things an instructor/institution can do to retain some of those students, but unless the low retention rate leads to excess costs, I can’t see how it matters”.

No matter whether or not the low completion rates are due to individual student characteristics, some participants felt MOOCs themselves are the reason. Participants noted that the overall structure of MOOCs may contribute to low completion rates. The MOOC being offered could have a large class size, boring format, and no real educational value. The course may also be too demanding or difficult, time consuming, or lack the personal attention a student desires from the instructor. One participant noted “I think completion rates of MOOCs will remain low because many of the courses are difficult and don’t count toward a degree”. By examining faculty perspectives on MOOCs, the findings revealed the need to involve faculty in the design, delivery of, and decisions to offer MOOCs. In doing so, institutions may be able to increase the benefits for all, remove some of the challenges, and increase completion rates.

Discussion

The researchers of this study examined the responses of over 390 current faculty members in a well-known university system regarding their perceptions of the benefits of MOOCs. Some respondents also included unsolicited drawbacks associated with MOOCs. The study's results were not only consistent with the growing literature base, but also offered insight as to areas of needed professional development for faculty members and future research especially by human resource development scholars and practitioners engaged in virtual learning research and training. Through systematic data analysis, two over-arching perceptions of MOOC benefits emerged: benefits to students and benefits to the sponsoring institution and programs within the institutions.

A rich base of literature exists outlining the benefits of MOOCs for students (Rodriguez, 2012; Becker, 2013; Mallon, 2013). In this study, faculty members noted students value the accessibility to high quality resources and education, otherwise unavailable at the local university or perhaps in their entire country. This powerful benefit was also noted in a study by Tamburri (2014). The pedagogical application of synchronous and asynchronous digital tools creates a rich personal learning community for students in institutions of higher learning. In the case of industry where HRD practitioners provide training and continuing professional education, MOOCs should be of great benefit to both trainees and trainers. In the case of cMOOCs, as students connect with other learners, and engage in learning together, they become vested in the knowledge creation process. They work to sustain the established learning network and gain new

perspectives from their peers. Kahu (2014) noted that when students become vested in this manner, they exponentially improve their understanding of the content being learned.

Flexibility of class time was another benefit faculty members emphasized. MOOCs allow the students to participate in learning experiences at the time of day they learn best, therefore they begin the course automatically self-regulating their learning experiences. As with other online course environments, time management and organizational abilities are required for successful participation in a MOOC. As students determine when they participate in the MOOC, these skills will continually improve the students' optimal learning threshold. Jensen's (2005) work supports these noted benefits of class time flexibility.

The self-paced, no grade-pressure nature of a MOOC may be especially appealing for many students, as noted by faculty members in this study. Unlike a traditional online course, these courses may be offered at no financial expense to the student. Another unique feature of the MOOC, its 'openness,' allows students different types of learning opportunities. Students can participate in the full course for credit, audit the course with no intention of completing assignments for credit (Kizilcec, Piech, & Schneider, 2013), or engage in only a targeted area to gain knowledge about a particular topic (Mallon, 2013; Wang & Baker, 2014). These options of enrolling in a MOOC with no intention of completing the full course for credit may contribute to the concern of low MOOC completion rates. The novel student participation features associated with MOOCs challenge the traditional view of course persistence rates, resulting in completion rate data that may not be an accurate measure of a course's effectiveness.

As noted by Clow (2013) MOOCs have higher dropout rates when compared to traditional face-to-face courses. Thus, only about 10% of the learners who enroll in MOOCs successfully complete the course (Daniel, 2012; Sandeen, 2013).

The study's other noted broad benefit of MOOCs can be defined as the advantage to the institution or program offering the MOOC. Due to the nature of a MOOC, it can reach audiences worldwide. The MOOC, dependent on its effectiveness, can popularize both the institution, as well as the instructor, which may serve as a recruitment tool for perspective students as it was the case with San Jose State University in California (Young, 2013).

In addition to reaching a broad audience, other institutional benefits include the direct impact on course quality as well as professional development opportunities. As MOOCs are unique in their structure and purpose, instructors need to determine which courses should be offered in a MOOC format, the related pedagogical issues, and the cognitive accessibility and instructional design of the course (Clara & Barbera, 2013).

Within this study, one of the most poignant comments from faculty members regarded the lack of familiarity with MOOCs. Although MOOCs are well established in many sectors of higher education (McCully, 2012), it cannot be presumed that all institutions or faculty members have experience or knowledge regarding MOOCs. This leads to questions of institution adoption and support. Faculty members clearly need professional development opportunities to explore the potential application of MOOCs in their specific field of study.

Although many of the study's findings are corroborated by the literature, this study raised questions regarding

faculty members' perceptions of the overall purpose, design, adoption, pedagogy, and implementation of MOOCs. It is anticipated this paper will be one of a series exploring the issues of incorporating and offering MOOCs within an established university system in a well-known and respected university in southern United States.

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Definition of Terms

Massively Open Online Course (MOOC) – a course of study made freely available online to a large number of people.

Cognitive/behavioral learning theory – describes the role of cognition in determining and predicting the behavioral pattern of an individual. In other words, the way individuals think of themselves, their environment, and the future all impact the behavior they display.

Social constructivist learning theory – focuses on an individual's learning that takes place because of their interactions in a group.

Connectivist learning theory – the view that learning can reside outside of ourselves, is focused on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing.

Personal Learning Network (PLN) – an informal learning network that consists of people a learner interacts with and derives knowledge from.
(video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=11&v=hLLpWqp-owo>)

xMOOC -- xMOOC -- A more traditionally organized post-secondary online course utilizing more familiar higher education teaching methods such as pre-recorded lectures, texts and quizzes, usually sponsored by universities or commercial entities and which may offer certificates and/or course credits.

cMOOC -- In a cMOOC environment the participants in the course act as both teachers and students, sharing information and engaging in a joint teaching and learning experience through intense interaction facilitated by technology.

Question branching logic – a survey research technique that displays only questions that are relevant to the participant based on previous answers.