

Review of: "The Design of a MOOC on Health Behaviors: A Practical Blueprint for the Instructional Design of MOOCs"

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Summary

The authors discuss why MOOCs are often not well-received by their target audience. Educational approaches are cited and discussed to show some of the shortcomings. The authors conclude that guiding principles are needed to guide MOOC creators.

They then focus on a specific sub-class of MOOCs, addressing health behavior. They present a Table of defining characteristics, with short conclusions as guiding principles. They discuss for each of those principles what it means and how they implemented it. In the discussion, they seem to derive the abstract principle from the considerations about implementations.

Detailed comments

Poor quality of a MOOC can be a reason for its rejection or for being ignored. There may be other reasons, though.

The authors claim tertiary-level education is challenged by the MOOCs concept. They propose a systematic development technique for MOOCs.

In the section entitled Literature Review, the authors do not report on a Systematic Literature Review, but they provide related work in a good content-oriented style. In particular, they point out to exceed the traditional view of learning and teaching - and include involvement and participation. Kasch is cited frequently, and the coverage of related publications is good.

The authors argue that guidelines for MOOCs are missing, despite the growing number of guidelines, etc., in learning environments. Why is that the case?

Surprisingly, they jump to adopting guidelines from the area of health behavior. At first glance, it is not obvious why the profile of that area of work should be particularly similar or relevant to MOOCs. At second glance, the gamification elements like badges and competitions may be an inspiration that is commonly used in MOOCs, too. Since the MOOCs are supposed to be on Health Behavior, there is a much stronger link.

It is interesting and relevant for the guidelines that the authors expect "ordinary users of the MOOC" as well as interested professionals from the field. These two different subgroups could pose quite different sets of challenges for the MOOC –

and, thus, for the guidelines. The authors should expand on their decision to attract these different groups with their varying motivations: Why not focus on one group and do things well for them? Of course, one cannot prevent having visitors from outside the target group, but then it is their problem.

Table 1 provides four rather fundamental challenges and derived requirements on MOOCs. Each of the four topics is discussed in some more detail and with references to related work. This is very well done; however, I was initially disappointed about the abstract and high-level selection of four guiding principles. In particular, the two-target-group principle is rather debatable and by no means generalizable, see above. Although the authors mention several more concrete actions to implement each guiding principle, I had initially expected a set of recommendations that would be one step more concrete. Is it possible to extract at least some of the concrete examples and add them to Table 1? Or provide a second table summarizing them in the end?

One example is: “For example, we posted a light-hearted introductory video in which we spoke about our hobbies and what we like to eat. Such an approach resembles human-to-human interaction that learners are familiar with.” This could work, of course, but is this style of pseudo-human communication worth a recommendation? Due to the multitude of implementation approaches, it is difficult to extract the more meaningful and generalizable “detailed guidelines” from the plausible but not effective ones. It is easier, of course, to present only high-level generic guidelines. For MOOC authors, the next level of concreteness (with evaluation by the authors) would be highly welcome. Did the guidelines work? How did you measure it?

Conclusions and recommendations for improvement

This is a very well-written and considerate paper about developing useful MOOCs. The use of existing literature is great, and the example of health-behavior related MOOCs is highly relevant. There are two issues that deserve some clarification:

1. How generalizable are the guidelines and the findings that led to them? What is specific to health behavior? The transition from general MOOC development to the case of health behavior comes a little unexpectedly and may be explained better.
2. Table 1 is a great summary of the abstract guidelines for this particular type of MOOC. A lot of details are briefly mentioned about implementation variants. Unfortunately, there is no report on what worked well and what did not work so well. This also limits the value of the abstract guidelines since they can only be evaluated through concrete implementations.