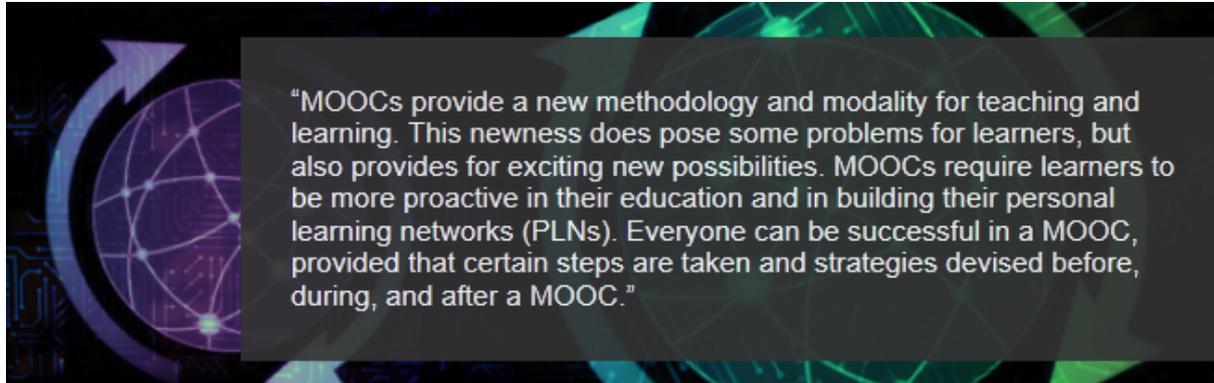


How to Succeed in a MOOC - Massive Online Open Course (Oct 12)

By Apostolos Koutropoulos & Rebecca J. Hogue

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In the past couple of years, massive online open courses (MOOCs) have become a trend among many members of the educational online community. This is particularly true of faculty who are interested in open educational resources.

The course Connectivism and Connective Knowledge (CCK), by Stephen Downes, has been offered at least three times since 2008, and additional MOOCs have been offered that cater to a variety of learning topics including digital storytelling, mobile learning (mLearning), learning analytics, the future of education, and instructional ideas for online success, just to name a few.

The structure and design of each MOOC varies. For example, the primary means of communication in a MOOC may be:

- A learning management system such as Moodle or Blackboard
- Online groups such as Yahoo or Google groups
- An aggregation of various distributed platforms, such as blogs and Twitter, or using gRSShopper (pronounced *grasshopper*)

A MOOC may provide specific content to learn; however, it is more common for MOOCs to provide learning objectives, or topics, and a list of resources to guide learners to those objectives rather than providing didactic content for learners to consume. MOOCs provide opportunities to engage in learning while connecting with others.

Learners who are new to MOOCs, and who are not familiar with self-directed learning, often struggle to find their place within a MOOC. The majority of MOOCs require that the learner be self-directed and proactive in the learning process. In this article, we offer a few recommendations that will help learners make the most of a MOOC experience. In addition to engaging in the course material, they provide learners with an opportunity to develop or expand their personal learning networks (PLN). Learner success is enhanced by learner actions before, during, and after the MOOC.

Before a MOOC starts

When someone is thinking about participating in a MOOC, the first question they should ask themselves is this: "Is this the right MOOC for me?" Similar to credit-bearing courses, MOOCs may have prerequisites, the content may be too basic, or it may not be of interest to the individual.

Review the website

Before a learner decides to join a MOOC, it is a good idea to review the MOOC's website. Usually, the course website contains the prerequisites, participation guidelines, information on the course structure, each week's topic, and course resources. Review these prior to starting the course in order to get a better idea of how the MOOC is structured and to figure out how much time to spend. If a learner doesn't meet the prerequisites, that shouldn't discourage them; there are usually subject matter experts participating who help foster conversations. At a very minimum, learners can read the conversations, learn from them, and join in the conversation when they feel ready.

Consider time

In addition to prerequisites, it is important to consider the time requirements. If someone doesn't have the time, perhaps attending every week of the MOOC isn't what that learner should focus on. In MOOCs, like in other experiences in life, what someone learns is based on how much effort they put into it. Individuals will have a richer experience if they can contribute throughout the course and if they interact with other participants; however, if even if someone is too busy, then they can still have a worthwhile MOOC experience by selecting the specific weeks where the topics are of most interest to them. Those who try to do everything, and who don't have enough time, are apt to only engage with the content and fellow participants in a peripheral way. If you wish to have a deeper learning experience, then choose the weeks of greatest interest to you and set aside the time to investigate and contribute.

Format and technology concerns

Finally, one thing that characterizes MOOCs is the variability of the format. Some MOOCs have a structure like a traditional course, with specific readings each week, with specific learning outcomes and specific, official tools for communication. This variability is what makes MOOCs both interesting and potentially problematic. Before the MOOC starts, the interested person should take some time to become familiar with the technology they will use. This will allow the participant to focus his or her MOOC time on the content and on interacting with other participants, rather than fiddling with the delivery technologies the course uses.

During a MOOC

Once a participant has registered for the MOOC, it's time to learn. On Week 1, what to do first?

Introduction (it's more than just common courtesy)

The first task should be self-introduction. Even if the learner has not yet decided how much he or she wishes to participate in the MOOC, and even if the plan is only to lurk (that is, read the various conversations but not actively contribute to them), introducing oneself is still important.

This helps the other MOOC participants know who is participating and helps the organizers better judge the amount of participation and the demographic of the participants. This way the organizers can potentially tailor content for the various groups that are part of the MOOC. A personal introduction is, in a sense, an initiation into the MOOC's community of inquiry. An introduction might include the participant's name, occupation, areas of expertise, and the reason for interest in the particular MOOC. Some MOOCs even encourage participants to include a picture or add themselves to a crowd-source map of participants. Making the introduction, and reading other participants' introductions, is the first step towards building or augmenting a PLN.

Participation

To get the most out of a MOOC, a person needs to participate. The more someone participates, the more that person is likely to make meaningful connections with other participants, which in turn helps deepen the learning experience.

There is a benefit in reading the materials for all weeks and participating as much as possible each week. Remember, it's not *just* about the materials, but rather it's about the materials *and* the learning community—and every participant is part of that learning community. By participating each week, learners can gain both a better understanding and an expanded understanding through the contributions of their peers.

How does one participate in a MOOC? The first step is to read what the facilitators have posted as resources for the week. This material acts as an initiation into the week's topic, and quite often it functions to seed discussion. After reading the material, a participant can choose to investigate the topic further by finding their own readings (Google Scholar is a good way to search for readings), or they can post their reflections on the resources.

When creating a post about the readings, participants should try to link the course content to their life experiences, as these reflections are valuable to them and to others who read the posts. It is important to take some time to read other participant's reflections, as they are likely to share insights and help deepen understanding of the topic. If a participant finds a particularly useful additional resource, they should share it with the larger community. When participants find that a post was particularly meaningful to them, they often take a moment or two to reply to it, and perhaps share their own insight. This dialogue encourages participation and helps to foster deeper meaning through connections and conversations.

Formal and informal facilitation

MOOCs are facilitated, they are not taught. MOOC facilitators are individuals passionate about the topic they are facilitating, and they have come to share their passion with the participants. Facilitators also, quite frequently, are participants in the MOOC as well, so they are, in essence, the peers of the others in the course. This means that MOOCs don't have the unequal power relationships one might find in traditional lecture-listed classroom models. There is no single person that checks to see that people are participating or to encourage further participation. Each participant shares the responsibility for keeping the community alive and active. The facilitators are not likely to answer everyone's questions, as they rely heavily on the community to support the conversations. In the end it's through peer learning and peer-to-peer connections that learning occurs in MOOCs, so it's critical for each participant to reach out and connect with someone.

Questions

If a participant has questions, they should feel free to ask them! Like most educational ventures, there are bound to be questions. Asking questions means not only closing open gaps in knowledge, it also gives everyone an opportunity to discover other potential gaps—things that they didn't know that they don't know—and thus gives them an opportunity to fill those gaps as well. In the same vein, if a participant knows the answer to a question that someone else has posted (or has an opinion about the answer), they should feel free to post a reply. It is through these conversations that meaningful learning occurs.

Dealing with mass

MOOCs are *massive*; after all, that is what the "M" in MOOC stands for. They are massive in terms of the number of participants, and are generally massive in the number of conversations that occur. To avoid the feeling of information overload, or the feeling of being overwhelmed, participants must give themselves permission to not read everything. As Clay Shirky said, "it's not information overload, it's filter failure." In a regular course, the instructor filters information to avoid this overload. In a MOOC, this is each participant's job. Because it is often not possible to read everything, individuals must filter for topics that they want to read, and then read and respond to only those. If a blog post and discussions are interesting but it's not possible to read the details right away, participants can bookmark them or add them to a tool like Instapaper, Pocket, or Evernote. This way, when there is a spare moment—for example, on the train going home—a learner can return to those readings. The nice thing about MOOCs is that even though the MOOC itself is time-bound, the content is not.

Everyone can always go back to MOOC content (and participant blogs and discussions) long after the MOOC is over—it's not necessary to process all the information immediately.

Etiquette

Before we finish this section, we'd like to discuss MOOC etiquette. To help reduce information overload, before sharing resources or posting a question, participants should learn to search to see if someone has already posted about it. If someone has, the best approach is to reply within that thread rather than create a new one. For example, if there is an introductions thread, participants should post their introductions within that thread. In addition, when replying to a message, it's not necessary to quote the entire message within the reply. The best practice is to edit the quoted text to only include the portions that are relevant to the reply. Finally, spelling does matter. Proofreading posts and checking them for spelling mistakes and typos makes it easier for others to read. This is especially important when MOOC participants come from a variety of countries, as many may not speak English well and may rely on some automated translation tools (like Google Translate) for language assistance.

Post-MOOC: stay connected!

Even when the MOOC is over, the learning doesn't have to stop! Remember the introductions at the beginning of the course? The people who introduced themselves probably shared with the group their blog, Twitter, and LinkedIn addresses. Chances are that they are still thinking about the topics and materials discussed in the MOOC. They may even be posting their reflections on the completion of the MOOC. Others may have already connected with these individuals on Twitter, LinkedIn, and their blogs while the MOOC was in session, so keeping up with what they write, and commenting back on those posts, isn't going to be much of an issue. It is good to connect while everyone's contributions to the MOOC are still familiar. By connecting to people who were fellow MOOC participants, learners are augmenting their PLNs. Thus, any new developments and news on the topic of the MOOC will be available to everyone in their network through the magic that is RSS. Since participants commonly blog for some time about the MOOC discussion topics, and chances are high that other participants are following their blogs, they are also contributing to the knowledge creation of a large group as well!

Finally, now that the MOOC is over, participants likely have a little more free time for collaboration. They can reach out to some fellow MOOC participants who have similar ideas to theirs. An ad-hoc working group would be simple to organize to explore topics of mutual interest. These topics may be research-based or practice-based. The point is that there are probably professionals out there who are thinking of things to work on based on their MOOC experiences, but it would be easier to accomplish with a small group of like-minded individuals than working on solving the problem on their own. Through extended practice and collaboration come greater opportunities.

Conclusion

MOOCs provide a new methodology and modality for teaching and learning. This newness does pose some problems for learners, but also provides for exciting new possibilities. Some of the learning skills acquired by learners through face-to-face coursework and traditional online programs are transferable to MOOC learning; however, the distributed nature of the MOOC and the massive number of participants doesn't allow for the traditional method of disambiguation: going to the teacher for an explanation. MOOCs require learners to be more proactive in their education and in building their PLNs. Everyone can be successful in a MOOC if they take certain steps and devise strategies before, during, and after a MOOC. If you are interested in trying out a MOOC, and you're interested in mobile learning, the good news is that the opportunities will only increase from one month to the next.

*(Editor's Note: You can subscribe at mooc.ca to Stephen Downes' daily *MOOC Newsletter* to watch for new MOOC announcements. Stephen also provides a list of open online course [sources](#).)*

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Links to MOOCs & Software mentioned

MobiMOOC: <http://mobimooc.wikispaces.com/>

gRSShopper: <http://grsshopper.downes.ca/>

CCK: <http://cck12.mooc.ca>

DS106: <http://www.ds106.us>

LAK12: <http://lak12.mooc.ca/>

Google Scholar: <http://scholar.google.com>

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