

“What Would Experts Say About This?”

An Analysis of Student Interactions outside MOOC Platform

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Abstract: In MOOC research, many studies examine student learning by analyzing their behaviors on the platform, whereas only few pay attention to their activities *outside* it. In this study, we examined students’ off-platform interactions during course implementation with a combination of survey and interview procedures. We found that not many but some students interacted with others outside platform and find some value in it, whereas they were not fully satisfied with their experience. Our analysis identifies three major challenges of *object matching or coordination, task structure, and expert feedback*, followed by a discussion on potential solutions.

Keywords: MOOC, learning across settings and time, CHAT, script

Introduction and motivation

Research on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has been active lately given significant criticism by the skeptic for its traditional pedagogical approach (Eisenberg & Fischer, 2014). Grover, Franz, Schneider, and Pea (2013) proposed a conceptual framework for MOOC design and research with four dimensions in which they pointed out the need of design and research for *interactive learning environments* to promote collaborative learning and communities of learners including “offline” learning.

In line with it, we are currently exploring new pedagogical approaches to promote interactive learning and designed two history courses—one with online learning only like regular MOOCs and the other combined with face-to-face collaborative learning on the same course content—on a Japanese MOOC platform “gacco” (<http://gacco.org/>). During the implementation, we noticed that not many but some students appeared to organize their own study groups and online communities on social media, and these observations interested us to investigate student interactions *outside* the platform. Accordingly, this study examined the ways and nature of student off-platform interactions during the course period.

Analytical framework

In this study, we examined student interactions in the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) perspective (Roth & Lee, 2007). In this perspective, student interactions are framed as the unit of analysis focusing on their cultural backgrounds, objects and motivation, and means and artifacts, and we analyzed student interactions as the intersection of multiple activity systems of diverse learners. In analysis, any contradiction or specific challenges for their practicing study groups and online communities were focused to discuss potential solutions for enhancing the quality of off-platform learning.

Methods

Post-survey procedure

First, a post survey was conducted in which we asked students to describe whether and how they interacted with other students outside the MOOC platform in an open-ended item. Total 58 valid responses were obtained out of 2214 survey respondents (total about 20,000 people signed up for the courses), and 36 students indicated they interacted with others outside the platform. From their descriptions, we identified four major “story stems” (student background, group and community, object and topic, and communication mode and tool).

Post-interview procedure

Next, a post semi-structured interview (15-30 minutes) was conducted with 13 volunteers (all Japanese) from the students above to learn more details about their experience along with the story stems. Specifically, we first asked participants their background including their prior experience with MOOCs and how they came to take our course. After these questions, we asked those who interacted with others outside platform the details of their experience in their group/community, objects/content, communication modes/tools, and the frequency and

continuity of their interaction. On the other hand, we asked other students who did not whether they wished to interact with others and the reasons.

Results and discussion

From the post interview, we confirmed that 12 students (eight students in the MOOC-only group and four in the with-face-to-face-class group) interacted with others outside the platform. In the following, we report the two issues that are most salient from their stories to discuss major challenges and potential solutions.

Diverse learner backgrounds and difficulty in coordinating mutual objectives

First, student attitudes to interacting with others differ among students by age. Three students in senior ages mentioned they have some concerns in contact with others or strangers in different generations, whereas two students in younger ages mentioned some positive value in it for “learning different viewpoints.” In addition, five students mentioned their realization of diverse interests and commitments through interaction with others. One student told us that she interacted with a student on the course content through his blog for a while, but one day he stopped updating and she felt disappointed by it. Another student told us that he joined a “meetup” event with others to discuss the course content and felt it was fun but not so productive, since each appeared to have different interests. We coincidentally had the interviewee who organized the event, and he told us his struggle to facilitate discussion given participants’ diverse backgrounds and interests.

Difficulty in facilitating productive discussions and reaching legitimate conclusions

Related to above, three out of four students who participated in the meetup event told us their experience in the difficulty in reaching legitimate conclusions without the presence of experts. One student told us that he felt hard in discussion when different ideas and positions emerged and that it ended up with participants saying their own thoughts and opinions. The event organizer had a similar impression and told us that it was hard for him to facilitate their discussion in such situation. Both mentioned that they wished to have some comments and feedback from the instructor or experts to reach some legitimate conclusions, even though there would be no single answer. In addition, all the four students told us that they also participated in some online group through Facebook, but their interactions were neither active nor continued. One student told us that there was no specific agenda or topic to discuss even though he was physically connected to others in the online community.

Conclusions and implications

In this study, we found that not many but some students interacted with others outside the MOOC platform, but their experience was not fully satisfying. From our analysis, three major themes emerged to enhance the quality of students’ off-platform learning and cultivate learning communities. First, *object matching or coordination* seems a key to match or coordinate mutual interests in study groups. Second, some *task structure* might benefit for students to facilitate their discussion. Last, some *feedback from experts* would be mostly valuable for students to reach legitimate conclusions or implications. To the first challenge, some online app to match or search members by specific interests or questions might help students find others in similar interests or questions. Second, providing some task resources (e.g., forms and rules of discussion) could serve to facilitate students’ off-platform learning. Last, although it is unrealistic to provide each study group with continuous access to experts, it would be feasible to provide some FAQ pages by aggregating frequent questions or host some “ask-me-anything” event (e.g., Reddit) where experts answer student questions at some arranged time. Note that all the interview participants were Japanese, and therefore students’ reactions and requests could differ in other Asian and Western countries.

References

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