

Chapter 31

Self-Directed Learning in Cooperative Online Networks: Faux Learning or Genuine Education?

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ABSTRACT

The past decade has seen an exponential rise in online courses, platforms, modules, as well as general online networks that contribute in a general way to learning and education. The more formal structures promise certification and accreditation for short modules or extended courses. Research shows that in terms of learner engagement of those enrolled in MOOCs, either drop out, or else passively lurk without any active participation. On the other hand, other figures show that with certain thematic online forum and discussion boards, users participate more enthusiastically, often at times contributing to content which may or may not be trustworthy. The characteristics and traits of the online learner can affect the outcome of the learning trajectories and this has to be taken into consideration when designing self-directed courses. In this chapter, the authors aim to provoke some thoughts on designing self-directed learning using cooperative online networks. In the discussion, they explore possibilities of setting up alternative pathways for a more genuine approach to education.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, there has been an exponential growth in the rate of adult learners taking online courses (2018 Online Education Trends Report, 2018). The reasons can be multiple and the rationale can also be quite complex. We have seen online participants taking courses either out of interest, or because of the ease of access (Allen & Seaman, 2017). MOOCs have facilitated the way for people choosing to further their knowledge for either one or both of the above reasons (Veletsianos & Shepherdson, 2016). But MOOCs offer many more possibilities, including the dramatic decrease in costs, on top of the improved quality of content being delivered nowadays. The growing trend amongst the more formal structures of MOOCs promise certification and accreditation, and whereas the first MOOCs were delivered in a spirit

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of the freedom of just-in-time modular learning, we have now shifted to another way of getting free or at least subsidised, certified education (Reich, 2015).

However, we are also being faced with another phenomenon that is mostly perceptible in the online learning environment. This concerns the online learner herself and her actions in the virtual learning environment. Several reports indicate that online environments may feature a high rate of dropouts and this may depend on a number of factors (Online Education Trends Report, 2018). Learners may argue that flexibility in learning may be traded for a more structured approach to learning leading to accreditation. Whereas the more experienced universities running online learning courses, would argue in favour of freedom and flexibility, other universities, especially those that use a more rigorous approach towards assessment of learning, are biased towards certifying participant knowledge by a more formalised and structured accreditation system. The latter is additionally constrained by rigid bureaucratic procedures which can be as challenging to those who design and deliver courses, as much as to those who are participating in these courses.

Accrediting learning in itself may also be quite debatable. Although we may set requirements for learners to attend (either physically or virtually) lectures and seminars, and we may additionally set assessment criteria that would give a measure of the level of acquired knowledge of the content covered within the course, we can still argue that we still don't know the depth of learning reached by whoever followed our course. Has the learner actually learned what she needed to learn and has she equipped herself with the tools necessary to help her achieve the expected outcomes from attending the specific course or learning program? The roots of this question is quite a conundrum in itself which has over the years kept a number of scholars in active discussion; what is learning? how can learning be assessed and how can we as academics validate what has happened during and after the learning process?

These questions will be coming up in the rest of this chapter, followed by a proposition into what can help us identify what could be guidelines when designing courses targeted towards self-directed learning.

WHAT IS LEARNING?

This question may be rhetoric and also rather subjective according to context. As we mentioned above, for some, learning is a matter of assessment – a way of maintaining control over what the learner gets out of the teachers' delivery. The assessment can take many forms including performance assessment, cognitive assessment, and also skills assessment. Performance assessment requires a demonstration of the mastery of skills from learners by the creation of an artefact or a performance within a specific field or domain. In this context, we can see the assessment of creative writings or productions, the design and development of models, mastery in the use of specific techniques, and executions within the performance arts amongst others. In addition to this type of assessment there are the more traditional formative and summative assessment practices which include examination practices. There are many debates going on in the areas of assessment which we will not delve into at this stage, but we choose to touch upon it to highlight the argument we want to raise – within all these modes of assessment which one can be said to authenticate and validate true learning?

Illeris (2007) has defined learning broadly as the change process occurring in living organisms as they evolve and grow. This in itself leads us to presume, that learning is not as much about someone's assessment of one's growth process as it is about that individual's own assessment of how much she has learnt from any one experience that may have led to her growth in some form or another.

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