



To MOOC or not to MOOC:

An IPA study of the perceptions of MOOC dropouts

Eleanor Dewar

Research proposal outlining a potential IPA study into the MOOC phenomenon and why people decided to dropout of MOOCs. Complete research materials can be found in the appendix.

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Abstract

As education becomes increasingly in demand and increasingly more expensive a potential solution is the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course). However one issue that is repeatedly raised with MOOCs is high attrition rates. This study will, using IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis), compare and contrast the perceptions of four MOOC dropouts. Data will be collected in the form of semi-structured Skype interviews. Once the data has been analysed main themes will be drawn upon to assess questions as to why people drop out of MOOCs and what the participants perceive as barriers and issues with learning via the MOOC format.

Introduction

As the demand and cost of Higher Education grows and grows, people are looking for a way to gain an education without the financial implications. One method that has been heralded as the solution to this problem is the MOOC (West & Bleiberg, 2012). These courses, which for the most part are free to use and autonomous (Mackness, Mak & Williams, 2010) to fit around the working day, have the potential to educate many for whom traditional university is not an option. However one area which has led critics to suggest MOOCs may not be the solution is their high attrition rate (Marcus, 2013). The purpose of this study is to review potential reasons why some people do not complete MOOCs.

In addressing the question of dropout rates it is useful to understand the various types of MOOCs. There is a split in the way those running MOOCs design their courses, these two types fall under the heading of cMOOC or xMOOC. The former comes from the pedagogical route of connectivism (hence the c of cMOOC) and focuses on the collaborative networks formed through many people working together to obtain a common goal (Dewar, 2013). The xMOOC follows far more traditional teaching methods, Dewar (2013) suggest that the x signifies the extension of an offline course which does not of necessity require interaction with other participants. This raises points as to the effect each of these learning styles has on the participant; it could possibly be argued that due to the polar opposite nature of the course designs dropouts from xMOOCs may not find the same reasons to drop out of cMOOCs and vice versa.

The next step then is to address the current information known about student dropout rates for both types of MOOCs. Both can see very high attrition rates; the now famous Stanford “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence” course had an 85% attrition rate (Rodriguez, 2012).

Rodriguez shows evidence that it is not just xMOOCs that show high dropout rates and that the original “Connectivism and Connected Knowledge” MOOC also saw many students fail to complete the course. It is important at this point to note that whilst both these courses had high levels of student dropout, many people still completed the course, with around 26000 completing the Stanford Artificial Intelligence MOOC. Currently however there are only water-cooler theories as to what makes MOOC participants stay or leave a MOOC. There is to the author’s best knowledge little if anything written at an academic level on the causes of the high attrition rates.

One area that has been written about is the difference between the two types of MOOC in relation to dropouts. This difference comes in the form of the course format allowing the MOOC student to lurk. The term lurker or more colloquially MOOC Spook (Dewar, Uhomoi-bhi, Ross & Hutty, 2014) refers to those participants of a MOOC who follow the course but do not engage in any externally measurable way. Rodriguez (2012) suggests this is a key difference in dropouts of cMOOCs to dropouts of xMOOCs, stating that whilst CCK08 saw a high attrition rate, some 50% of those participants became lurkers and followed the course. This raises the question, if lurkers do not gain and recognisable credit (in the sense of merit) for partaking in a MOOC what drives them to stay, and what made them stop engaging with coursework or fora.

In order to research the phenomenon of MOOC dropout one possible method is IPA. The method is qualitative and based on Edmund Husserl’s work taking an interpretative form of analysis (Langdrige, 2007). Due to the high levels of data that can be obtained from just one participant the sample sizes in IPA studies are usually small, often formed of less than six participants. Within the area of education IPA studies have been used to look at a range of different perceptions (often hypothetical constructs that are difficult to quantify); such studies include those on stress and coping in undergraduates (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013) and the learning experiences of qualitative research students (Cooper, Fleischer & Cotton, 2012).

There are additional methods that could have been applied to this study, however IPA was selected over Template Analysis as this latter method requires predetermined themes drawn up before the data is collected. IPA, by allowing themes to be led by the data rather than pre-determined, offers a wider range of possibilities for analysis.

A key feature of an IPA study is that they do not have a hypothesis to support or refute, but a list of potential research questions. These questions may or may not be answered by the data and subsequent analysis. The questions for this study are:

Research Questions

1. What factors do participants perceive to be the reasons they do not complete MOOCs?

2. What factors do participants perceive to be the reasons they do complete MOOCs?

3. Is there a perceived difference in completion of xMOOCs and cMOOCs?

4. Do participants become lurkers?

Methodology

Participants

For this study between three to five participants will be selected. The criteria for selection will be that the participant must have unsuccessfully attempted to complete at least one MOOC (although they may or may not have successfully completed others). Participants will be self-selecting for this process and will be approached through advertising on social media.

Materials

In order to complete this study the following materials will be required; a computer with Skype and a program capable of recording Skype conversations (exact program to be confirmed). In addition to this, electronic versions of individual consent forms and briefing and debriefing sheets will be created for the study.

Design

The design for this study will be governed by the IPA method. Data will be collected through the form of individual semi-structured Skype interviews. While these interviews will have a pre-prepared set of questions, due to the IPA method these are somewhat freeform and additional questions may be added depending on the participants' responses.

Procedure

At the start of this study the interviewer will contact the participant over Skype and ensure they are ready to partake in the study. The interviewer will send the participant copies of the briefing sheet and the consent forms for them to read and electronically sign. The participant will be informed of the right to withdraw at any point during the interview and then be asked if they have any questions with the interviewer responding to any queries that arise at this time.

At this point the interviewer will, in addition to the written explanation, inform the participant that the Skype call they are about to enter into will be recorded for research purposes only. If the participant consents to the recording then the interviewer will phone the participant via Skype and the interview will begin when the recording starts.

Following the interview (which will end when the interviewer has collected the necessary data and finished the recording process) the participant will be sent a copy of the debrief sheet. The participant will be reminded, both in writing on the debrief sheet and verbally by the interviewer, that they have the right to withdraw their data from this study at any point. They will be asked if they have any questions and the interviewer will answer those that arise. The interviewer will then thank the participant and inform them that they are free to leave the conversation.

Ethics

The ethics for this study are based on the British Psychology Society's (BPS) (2009) guidelines. Whilst this study does not use deceit or require a vulnerable participant group, such as children, it does still have a number of ethical issues that need to be addressed. These areas are:

- Consent - Participants will be fully informed as to the nature of the study and their rights. In addition they will be required to sign a consent form which will state that they have understood and consent to what they are about to do and for their (anonymised) data to be used for research purposes.
- Withdrawal - Participants will be told at the start and end of the interview that they have the right to withdraw at any point before, during or after the study. They will be informed that should they wish to withdraw after the interview is completed then they must contact the interviewer in writing and their data will be removed.
- Debriefing - Each participant will be debriefed both verbally and in writing at the end of the interview.
- Confidentiality - For this study all participants will be assigned codenames which will only be known to them and the researcher. These names will not be traceable back to the participants in any published works. In addition to this the documentation and recorded data will be kept in accordance with the United Kingdom's Data Protection Act (1998).

Analysis

As has been previously stated this study follows an IPA method which has a specific form of analysis. The method used for this study will be based on that which is described in Shaw (2010). Following individual semi-structured Skype interviews, the recordings will be transcribed verbatim. When this raw data has been transcribed the researcher will read and reread the transcripts, as they do this they will create notes that form a descriptive summary. At the same time the researcher will take note of any ideas or connections, pertinent to the study, which make themselves apparent at this stage through the use of a reflective diary. Once this has been completed the researcher moves on to the next stage of analysis by identifying themes through initial interpretation. These initial interpretations will then be grouped to create principal master themes; it will be these themes that will form the basis of the write up.

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Appendix

Consent Form Participant Copy

Title of research: To MOOC or not to MOOC: An IPA study of the perceptions of MOOC dropouts

Name of Researcher: Eleanor Dewar

1. I Confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.
3. I agree to take part in the above study

Name of the Participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please retain this copy for your records

**Consent Form
Researcher Copy**

Title of research: To MOOC or not to MOOC: An IPA study of the perceptions of MOOC dropouts

Name of Researcher: Eleanor Dewar

1. I Confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.

3. I agree to take part in the above study

Name of the Participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please retain this copy for your records

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Debrief Form

Thank you very much for your participation in this research. We would like to provide some further information about the purpose of the study and what we could potentially find. This study aims to investigate the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) phenomenon and the reasons why some people do not complete these courses. Due to the nature of the study there are no hypotheses as to the outcome of the data, however there are research questions which are:

- What factors do participants perceive to be the reasons they do not complete MOOCs?
- What factors do participants perceive to be the reasons they do complete MOOCs?
- Is there a perceived difference in completion of xMOOCs and cMOOCs?
- Do participants become lurkers?

The researcher will be looking to see if participants share common perceptions as to the reason they do not complete courses, and if there is a difference in these perceptions depending on the course structures. They will also be looking at the phenomenon of lurking to review if participants continue to follow courses as non-active students.

Thank you once again for your participation in the study. Should you wish to find any further details about the study, or have any questions whatsoever please contact either the researcher. Please include your research identity code in correspondence. Your unique research identity code is: _____ (Last two letters of surname + year of birth)

If you have any queries about this research or would like to ask any further questions, please contact the researcher or research supervisor using the contact details below. If you would like to withdraw your data at any point, please contact the researcher at leanor.dewar@gmail.com. If you have been given a participant code you need to cite this. You do not have to give a reason for your withdrawal.

Once again, we would like to thank you for your valuable contribution to this research. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,
Eleanor Dewar

Information Sheet

Research title: To MOOC or not to MOOC: An IPA study of the perceptions of MOOC dropouts

Who is Organising This Study?

This research is organised by the HEAD Foundation, Singapore, and is being conducted by Eleanor Dewar, research assistant.

What Are the Aims of the Study?

This study aims to look at the perceptions of MOOC dropouts.

Who Can Take Part?

Participants for this study must have signed up for at least one MOOC and not completed it.

Who Can Not Take Part?

Participants cannot take part in this study if they have never taken a MOOC or successfully completed all courses they have undertaken.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Participants in this study will be anonymous. Once data has been collected it will be stored in accordance with the British 1998 Data Protection Act. Should a participant wish to withdraw their data pre-publication then they should contact the researcher who will remove all their data and destroy it.

Contact for Further Information

If you require any further information or have any queries about this study please contact the researcher:

Eleanor Dewar

email: eleanor.dewar@gmail.com



Research Questions

1. How many MOOCs have you participated in?
2. What type of MOOCs were they? (At this point explain c and xMOOCs if required)
3. How many of those did you complete?
4. Why did you join that/those MOOC(s)?
5. At what point did you dropout of a MOOC?
6. What about that point in the course made you decide that you did not want to continue?
7. Did you completely stop following the course or did you watch videos, read documents or follow social media connected to the course?
8. Would you say you lurked during the course? (explain lurking if required)
9. Why did you lurk/not lurk?
10. What aspects of the MOOC made you continue to stay if you lurked?