ISSN 2433-5444

Relay Journal

<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal>

A Nested MOOC Elective Course: MOOCs for Learner Development, and Learner Development for MOOCs

Curtis Edlin, Kanda University of International Studies,
Chiba, Japan

To cite this article

Edlin, C. (2018). A nested MOOC elective course: MOOCs for learner development, and learner development for MOOCs. *Relay Journal*, 1(1), 133-141.

To link to this article

<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal/issues/jan18/edlin/>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Please contact the authors for permission to re-print elsewhere.

Scroll down for article.

A Nested MOOC Elective Course: MOOCs for Learner Development, and Learner Development for MOOCs

Curtis Edlin, Kanda University of International Studies (Chiba, Japan)

Abstract

This paper details an elective course at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) and illustrates some ways that its structure can support learner development in regard to language learning, content learning, and self-regulation. This elective course allows for students' individual content choices through massive open online courses (MOOCs) and uses student experiences on them as an opportunity for reflecting on learning processes and self-regulation in learning. This paper details how qualities of language courses, self-access language learning (SALL), and MOOCs can work synergistically to support several levels of learning and help prepare students with the skills and knowhow they need to become lifelong learners.

Keywords: Self-access, MOOCs, learner development, lifelong learning

The Course

The MOOC course at KUIS, by various names, has been offered as an on-campus elective by learning advisors for several semesters to both English majors and International Communication (IC) majors. The students are in their junior or senior years, and there is a minimum level for entry that ensures they have enough English to be able to work reasonably with their content. The course is conducted in English, and the students choose English-based MOOCs to study (meaning they select some content-based MOOC of their own interest that they will use nested within our course to focus on learner development as applicable to language, content, and self-regulation). Specifically, we ask that they do not take language MOOCs (or LMOOCs) so that they have some other content choice that is driving the language that they use and encounter in the course, ensuring also that they encounter authentic language in the field or interest they choose to study. We want them to study language not for only for its own sake (they already have ample opportunity to take language courses at our institution), but to develop as a

tool for interacting more deeply with content interesting to them. At the beginning of our course, students learn about MOOCs and various platforms, and they develop personal inner criteria about what sorts of course would be desirable to them, which varies by learner. Partway into the semester, they submit a report on their short-list of courses and assess them according to their criteria, finally resulting in selecting a course to take on a MOOC platform.

In the second half of our course, in addition to the weekly class time, students work on their individual MOOCs weekly for a minimum of two hours (It is common for them to log five hours or more to reach their goals, though not required). They then fill out learning journals, detailing their MOOC experiences for the week, summarizing their content and reflecting on their learning processes. These reflections include what is working for them and what is not in terms of both their general, content learning strategies and their language learning strategies, or how they deal with the language in their courses. The class is graded not upon students' completion of their MOOCs, but on the completeness of the reflective process through journaling, class discussions, and other class activities, as well as by evidence of learning through documentation, reports, and presentations (Rather than their individual MOOC content itself, we are concerned with learner development). The students must produce evidence of their study and learning for their time on the MOOCs as per requirements for the credit hours.

The learning advisors teaching our course respond to students' individual journals weekly, as they would in our other SALC curricula, to support deeper reflection and better planning and self-regulation by the students. The advisors give students feedback and look for patterns of difficulties trending among students to plan workshops during the course as just-in-time interventions. In these workshops, the students can share their difficulties, experiences, and ideas or solutions, and thus they can develop better ideas of how to move forward. They include language learning strategies, content learning strategies, and self-regulation strategies. In the most recent semester, this included note-taking and vocabulary study, time management, managing motivation, and finding the best physical and temporal considerations to find focus (Students seem to find they are individually varied in that they do their best work in different blocks of time, times of day, specific locations, or locations with certain qualities suited to certain types of work).

What this Course Has to Offer

While the field of self-access has hitherto been largely concerned with language learning, we have much to contribute to and benefit from other content/subject areas and modes of learning as well. While MOOCs do not explicitly exist in self-access centers (SACs), they are a form of self-access. We are seeing patterns in data about MOOC students and their difficulties that mirror the difficulties we see learners face in self-access language learning (SALL) and self-regulated learning (SRL). The parallels suggest we in the field of self-access can apply our expertise in design and advising to help facilitate successful learning outcomes in these in MOOC environments too.

If we think of four kinds of learning paradigms—Traditional language courses, self-access language learning, MOOCs (content MOOCs, specifically), and the KUIS MOOC elective, we can see several different groupings in regard to various aspects of learning and language learning, which each mode having its own strengths and weaknesses, and the MOOC elective course design to try and harness positives from each. Let us consider the following chart depicted in Figure 1. (This chart is not meant to be representative of all courses or trajectories in each mode of learning, and certainly there are expected to be exceptions. The chart, rather, describes what we might expect to see commonly, with color representation where green= always included; yellow = sometimes included; orange = uncommon or untreated; and red = largely neglected):

Table 1. Features of Four Modes of Learning

	Language Course	SALL	Content MOOC	KUIS MOOC Elective Course
Language Development	Inherent	Inherent	Usually not considered	Inherent
Learner Development Focus	Possible (to varying degrees)	Inherent (usual, at least)	Uncommon	Inherent
Social Support	Inherent	Possible	Possible	Inherent
Diverse Language Progressions	Possible (but not always usual)	Inherent	Inherent (but sans-treatment for learning)	Inherent
Diverse Range of Content Choices	Possible (but perhaps unusual)	Possible (but often not content-driven)	Inherent	Inherent
Learning Advising	Possible (not always logistically feasible)	Inherent (or at least available)	Unusual (sometimes tutors/content TAs).	Inherent

As we can see, the MOOC elective course at KUIS provides a synergistic overlap that brings together language learning, learner development, social interaction, diverse ranges of both content and its language, and advising support.

Language development

Language development is an inherent part of language courses and SALL, but not an inherent concern in content MOOCs (non-LMOOCs). The MOOC elective course builds off of the English students have developed in their first couple/few years at KUIS. The learning strategies students develop help them to identify, learn, and practice further individually relevant and interesting language encountered in their courses.

Learner development

Perhaps my biggest concern, as a learning advisor, is to help learners develop into capable autonomous learners who have the tools and knowhow to become lifelong learners. Students use their experiences in regard to both content and language learning in their reflections, and the advisors teaching the course use both written and spoken advising to help students go deeper. They develop language learning strategies, general learning strategies, self-regulation strategies, and more fully understand how to manage both themselves and the technology should they want to continue taking other open courses in the future. Self-regulated learning strategies predict goal attainment in MOOCs (Kizilcec, Perez-Sanagus & Maldonado, 2017), which, when juxtaposed with knowledge that the short recommendations of the sort one might encounter in many MOOCs near the start with SRL suggestions are not majorly effective (Kizilcec, Perez-Sanagus & Maldonado, 2017), underscores the importance of successful structures like advising that have been shown to work in helping students develop their SRL skills and strategies.

Social support

Classes have a natural community to them. We know from theories of learning, such as sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that the social/community aspect of learning can be a great boon to learners. MOOCs are often criticized for their high drop-out rates and low completion rates, which prove that access alone is not always a great measure of some course's success. While there are certainly many non-traditional students who are not trying to complete a course for a certificate (see Kizilcec, Piech & Schneider, 2013), one study found that those students whose motivation to take a course includes to take it with someone else show a greater chance of finishing a course (Schneider & Kizilcec, 2015). The other group with a high level of attainment are heavy forum users, who are actively engaged both in the course and with others. This speaks to the effects of social interaction and community as learning support in MOOCs. Our MOOC elective course, by merit of being a class physically located on campus, provides a natural community of learners. While they are not all studying the same things, they can and do share their experiences, successes, and difficulties with language on their course, learning strategies, self-regulation, etc., and get ideas of new approaches to try from this community of peers each week.

Diverse language progressions

Language learning is a non-linear process, and the overall trajectory will be different for every learner depending on a variety of variables. Traditional curricula may sometimes have a narrow view of the building blocks students need to move forward, prescribing particular structures (but not always—depends on curricula). These basic structures and vocabulary are easier to predict, reasonably, at beginning levels. As students continue to develop their language though, the language they need becomes more diverse, as it is for students in our course who are interested in some particular content area. As a relatively small, private university, our course catalog is not exhaustive, and as we cannot account for all student interests, nor can we account for all the language they need in order to learn about their wide-ranging interests or interact in a particular field. The diversity of courses in various content areas inherently creates a diversity of language learning progressions. However, most content MOOCs do not give the language much specific treatment, so this is where the university's expertise in languages and language learning can be harnessed in a way to support student success in their MOOCs.

Diverse content

As mentioned above, as a small, private university, our institution's catalog is not exhaustive. Students may often choose electives according to what seems most interesting among a limited set of choices. Classes, even if offered, are generally not held, though, if fewer than a particular threshold of students sign up for them. Certainly, there are more diverse student interests than we are able to account for. Using MOOCs to drive content allows for more options for students, who can choose to learn about their most personally interesting and relevant topics, all the while meeting our goals for language learning and practice, and learner development. Essentially, using MOOCs as content acts as a content and catalog multiplier, without heavily increasing the burden, on the university either financially or logistically. Another effect of being able to select individually relevant and interesting content is that students mentioned it was helpful in maintaining motivation for their language learning and ongoing study.

Learning advising

One of the strengths of the course, currently, is that it is team taught by learning advisors. Also, by being able to focus our assessment on individual learner development and assess

designed knowledge artefacts of learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2017) instead of some particular language progression or lexis, we are able to focus more of our out-of-class preparation time on written advising, responding to students' reflections to help them to dig deeper, go further, feel supported, and continue to develop more as highly competent autonomous learners in regards to language learning, content learning, and self-regulation. As the in-class period is highly focused on sharing and discussions, team teaching also allows for groups of students to have an advisor listening in or also participating in their groups' discussions for about half of their discussion time.

Learner Outcomes

The MOOC elective course has been well-received by students over this past academic year. They regularly do much more work than we technically require, even when we remind them we do not require them to do, for example, four or five hours or more work on their MOOC in a week. Their intrinsic motivation most often seems strong, particularly when some exercise their agency and diverge from traditional patterns of a course, searching for and using what is relevant to them rather than following a predetermined progression. Many students highlighted their most personally meaningful developments in their final presentations, which were most often related to metacognition and self-regulation—how to learn more effectively and how to manage themselves. Through experience and reflection, they learned more about themselves as learners, including when, where, and for how long they work best, and on what tasks. Time management was one of the most cited improvements, and some reported that it was more than making a plan and sticking to it, but rather finding the right time that personally fit them working effectively through experience, via trial and error. Many students said they had not considered these spatial and temporal considerations before taking the course. That majority of students noted that continuing to work on their MOOCs week by week was a lot of work and hard work, but that they developed a lot of confidence by taking college-level content courses in English and being able to fully learn the content, even if it took some extra time to do so due to language considerations. They universally expressed sentiments of learning a lot about themselves as learners, and both their reflective journals and final presentations showed there was a wide variety of optimal learning conditions and self-regulation conditions among the students.

Conclusion

There are various strengths and weaknesses to different modes of learning that take place currently at KUIS, as well as in MOOCs, concerning language development, content learning, and learner development. The KUIS elective MOOC course creates a space for students to build upon the language skills they developed in their earlier years at the university and use their English as a tool to access a world where they can explore and learn about personally relevant and interesting content through MOOCs. All the while, they are refining their skills and strategies for developing their language, learning content, and improving self-regulation. As the MOOC content itself is not the medium for assessment, using MOOCs in this elective course acts also as a content multiplier, allowing students access to pursuing intellectual interests ranging far further than what is in our institution's course catalog, while minimizing financial and logistical overhead. This shows that in a world with widespread and open courses, there is still very much a place at the table for universities such as ours, in Japan, where the language that students learn becomes a tool that can be used to access open educational resources (aside from only language), and where they are supported in their early experiences of becoming successful autonomous language and MOOC learners, developing a deep capacity for lifelong learning.

Notes on the Contributor

Curtis Edlin is a learning advisor and co-resource coordinator in the Self-Access Learning Center at Kanda University of International Studies. He holds an MATESOL from SIT Graduate Institute and has been working in language education for over 10 years. His research interests include learning environments, grounded pedagogy, and MOOCs and open courseware.

References

Kizilcec, R. F., Perez-Sanagustin, M., & Maldonado, J. J. (2016). Recommending Self-Regulated Learning Strategies Does Not Improve Performance in a MOOC. In *Proceedings of the Third ACM Conference on Learning at Scale, L@S 2016*. Edinburgh, UK.

- Kizilcec, R. F., Perez-Sanagustin, M., & Maldonado, J. J. (2017). Self-Regulated Learning Strategies Predict Learner Behavior and Goal Attainment in Massive Open Online Courses. *Computers & Education*, 104, 19-33.
- Kizilcec, R. F., Piech, C., & Schneider, E. (2013). Deconstructing Disengagement: Analyzing Learner Subpopulations in Massive Open Online Courses. In *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Learning Analytics and Knowledge, LAK 2013*. Leuven, Belgium.
- Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (2017). Conceptualizing e-learning. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis, (Eds.), *e-Learning ecologies*. (1-45). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schneider, E., & Kizilcec, R. (2015). Motivation as a lens to understand online learners. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)*, 22(2).
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.