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Is there an educator present?

- Perspectives on curriculum as MOOC and new conditions for student-educator relations in a MOOC milieu

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Introduction and aim

In recent years, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have become a player within the field of education. MOOC research is a fairly new field but within the last 2-3 years, it has developed rapidly (Liyanagunawardena et al. 2013, Bayne & Ross 2014). Much of this research has had an emphasis on learners and outcome as well as suitable business models. Research has shown that online learners are normally older students (Doyle 2009, Galy et al. 2011), and because most of them have jobs and family that take up a lot of their time, they are less likely to prioritize social activities (Kahu et al. 2013). Moreover, they see that the flexibility in online learning is vital (Park & Choi 2009), and they find it important that their former experiences are accepted and integrated in the new knowledge (Henderson, Noble & George-Walker 2009, Kahu et al. 2014, Toynton 2005).

In the physical classroom the identity and visual appearance of the teacher plays a crucial role for the interactions between the participants (Kannen 2012) but although the human body in a MOOC is not always as visible the identity and the role of the teacher is as multifaceted and – maybe even more – complex than in the physical classroom (Ross et al. 2014). However, pedagogical and didactical discussions about MOOCs often tend to adapt a more technical approach about a certain MOOC platform and its affordances and constraints (Knox 2013) rather than focusing on content, production and learning. In 2015, there is only a limited amount of research occupied with a focus on what happens when academic staff finds themselves in a situation where are asked to reconstruct themselves as MOOC educators (MOOC-utvalget 2013). Thus, the focus on MOOC educators (We use this term for teachers working in teacher education designing curriculum in a MOOC milieu) has yet to be further established as a field of interest in educational research (Bayne & Ross 2014).

By 2020, all primary school teachers in Denmark must have certifications in all the subjects they teach, and this means that special in-service training has become urgent. This demand requires that over 10,000 primary school teachers attend formal education, and MOOCs could seem to be one of the design answers to this demand. In the study presented here, the educators were asked to construct an adaptive MOOC design for a special group of participants: all of the participants are primary school teachers and they are experienced (but not certified) in teaching the specific subject area they were to study in the MOOC. In this extended abstract our aim is to present in short form the educators’ preliminary perspectives on the MOOC curriculum and the new conditions for student-educator relations that a MOOC milieu establishes.

Methods

The empirics in the study stem from observations in workshops of 17 MOOC educators’ collaboration and negotiations on how to construct their subject in the MOOC milieu before the students got access to the course. These discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed and followed up by interviews with 3 educators.
Empirical Findings 1: Different educator perspectives on curriculum as MOOC

The MOOC construction is seen very differently among the educators. Some find MOOC construction interesting, challenging and developing and others see MOOC creation only as a production task - and something that has little to do with teaching and learning in formal education. The differences also emerge in the educators’ narrations and understandings of curriculum as MOOCs. In one of the first workshops, an educator radically stated that with his curriculum conception it would be “impossible to construct a MOOC where the students reach the goals”. Without the teacher physically present, crucial teaching elements such as interactions, collaboration and correction disappear.

Although this point of view was not commonly found in our observations, many discussions about what a MOOC actually is occurred. We located statements like: “MOOCs are not teaching. MOOCs are preparation. It equals working on textbook material. In a MOOC the education is more or less the video introduction. What the educator does in a flipped classroom setting is in a MOOC left more to the participants”. Also positive perspectives on MOOC unfolded through the educators work and particularly the possibilities for the students emerged: The freedom one has as a MOOC-participant can be beneficial when it comes to choosing a certain content in the learning process: “A variety of resources is found in MOOCs, and they have to give the participants the possibility to have the content explained to them in various forms”.

Empirical Findings 2: New conditions for student-educator relations in a MOOC milieu

In this MOOC project the educators planned and produced the MOOC content without knowing and meeting the future students. In our observations, we found that the educators were concerned with making sure that interactions, engagements and relations were part of the MOOC teaching. An educator said: “In a video lecture, it’s difficult to capture the involvement and interaction known from conventional teaching”. More educators also emphasize the ongoing professional modification and discussions in class as concerning in MOOC education: “it’s possible to establish dialogue but the more fundamental discussion about the relevance and the policy relating to a subject is difficult to come about. It’s easy to read about what scholars might think, but what about the educational discussions about this in class?” Hereby educators as well as students in this MOOC project focus on teacher response and correction as very important in conventional teaching but absent in the MOOC and they find it difficult to know when a student “gets it right”.

This focus on correction also relates to the educator’s own professional presence in the MOOC as some are concerned about being evaluated by other professional educators: “It’s not the technical stuff but the subject matter that I’m nervous about: all my colleagues can see... a mistake can be replayed over and over again”.

Perspectives and discussions

Although these are preliminary findings, we can locate a variety of perspectives from educators regarding curriculum content as MOOC. This is at the same time both a design challenge: “How do we construct MOOCs so that educators construe themselves as constructors of learning environments such as a MOOC?” and it is a curriculum challenge: “How can a certain curriculum be re-designed as a MOOC without the specificities and the tradition of the subject are damaged”. Furthermore, the educators as a whole was very focused on how student-educator relations and interaction can be carried out in a MOOC. That, also, is a crucial design challenge when curriculum is simulated, re-mediated or transformed from ordinary teaching programs to MOOCs.
References


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