Building the right MOOC

mooc court

ONLINE LEARNING

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I have been a university professor for over 25 years. I have taught in five different countries and presented seminars to audiences in 22 countries. Nothing, however, prepared me for the scale and reach of a massive open online course (MOOC) that I have offered on edx.org, called Innovation and IT Management. On the first day of the launch of the course I had about 8,000 students who had registered from 158 different countries.

When we, my teaching assistant and I, started working on this MOOC last December, we were faced with several challenges. Our first challenge was to come up with content that would be relevant for a diverse audience, possibly very different from the students at IIM Bangalore, where I teach principles of information systems, which are basically a key set of ideas and concepts to manage IT and systems within organisations. Over the years I have tailored my course for IIMB students who have good technical knowledge and some experience in organisations. But would this course design work on a MOOC?

Then there was the challenge of interaction. Typically, management education requires in-class student interaction in the form of comments, questions and expositions on cases being discussed. How could such an interaction be possible through a video streamed over the web?

The third challenge was that of reading materials. In our campus we simply buy the books or papers or cases needed for a course and give them to students. How could we do this for students in different countries, without running into severe copyright and intellectual property conflicts?

To address the first challenge we defined a target audience and stated clearly the pre-requisite knowledge we would expect. This helped clarify our objectives for the course and we were able to focus on a set of concepts that formed the course outline.

We tackled the second challenge by creating a character, Guru, who would intervene during the videos and ask questions. Guru is rendered as an octopus, an animation character who speaks in call-out blurbs. Guru has some knowledge of IT and a lot of attitude. We could now embody Guru as the curious, alert, sometimes bored, but always sharp student. Though his questions and comments do not replace a discussion, they do provoke comments from me.

We solved the third challenge in two ways. We sought out freely available documents and articles on the internet that could be useful in the course, and we crowd-sourced content.

We asked students in IIMB to help write cases. These would have to be cases related to the concepts covered in the course, and would have to be based on real-world problems. I used these cases in live classes at IIMB, in order to see how our students analysed them. These three cases now form a core learning component of the MOOC course. We believe this method of introducing case analysis in a MOOC course is an innovation!

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