

The State of MOOC Camps in Philippine American Corners: Charting the Path to the Next Normal

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Abstract: With the unprecedented shift to online learning during the pandemic, the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in library services also emerged. This paper describes how MOOCs are being offered at the American Corners, a public diplomacy library of the U.S. Department of State in select universities in the Philippines. In addition, the paper will also attempt to identify the challenges and understand the barriers experienced by the librarians as they adapt to this trend. Looking through the lens of the program specialist and librarians, MOOCs offered an alternative avenue for digital engagement with library users and supported the growing learning needs of the online learning community. The study revealed inevitable challenges as well as rewarding experiences that they acquired in offering MOOC programs. The findings of the study are beneficial to program implementers in improving their programming strategies and overall decision-making.

Key Words: MOOCs; online learning; distance learning; e-learning; American spaces

1. INTRODUCTION

Constant improvements in a library's program and services is a continuous effort of every library and information professional. However, the Covid-19 pandemic made this endeavor more complex and has prompted libraries to carefully rethink their programs and services. This paper will discuss how a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) program was offered during the pandemic with the aim to continue this learning initiative in an abruptly remote environment.

As the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR) creates a world characterized by rapid changes to technology and increased interconnectivity, education and learning has transformed to accommodate individual styles and strategies. According to Reaves (2019), the 4th IR we are currently experiencing will continue to accelerate the disruption in jobs and careers. Online education will play a unique role in empowering individuals to take charge of their own education and career strategies.

With these inevitable shifts and transformations, online education paved the way for a

massive and accessible way of learning. MOOCs are not new in this day and age. In 2008, the term MOOC was coined by Dave Cormier at the University of Prince Edward Island and Bryan Alexander of the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education. (Cisse, 2020; Fasimpaur, 2013).

MOOCs were defined as–

“an online course with the option of free and open registration, a publicly shared curriculum, and open-ended outcomes.” (McAuley et al., 2010)

It is extensively open to anyone who would like to gain insights and new knowledge on a particular topic with no prerequisites other than a connection to the internet and their interest. Because of its immensely open and highly online characteristics, MOOCs reduce barriers to knowledge and create discussions permitting individuals and society to build skill and connections with others (McAuley et al., 2010).

Given this characteristic, various disciplines are also recognizing MOOCs' inevitable part in

education. In a recent study of Kumar et al. (2022), the library and information science (LIS) field was believed to have great potential in Northeast India as the researchers acknowledge that MOOCs can help LIS professionals be accustomed to the latest trend and technology with its accessibility and quality. Likewise, as revealed by Huang and Zhou (2016), this potential in MOOCs has been observed in Chinese universities where MOOC courses are being offered. Majority of the participants preferred taking MOOCs to traditional courses, primarily due to richer course content, media is better used, time is more flexible and learning is more independent. This distinctive characteristic of MOOCs is also supported by the study of Kaushik (2018) where it was noted that MOOCs provide great flexibility to the learners and provide a reliable platform to advance their knowledge in their area of interest.

MOOCs and Libraries

Libraries have always been a staunch partner of the academic community in supporting its teaching and research thrusts. With this, the library's key role remains the same—continuous discovery and innovation in its programs and services. As presented in the study of Jie (2019), the MOOC era has presented libraries an opportunity that requires ingenious efforts to provide “MOOC instruction assistance, MOOC resource support and MOOC information service for the learners, educators and researchers in the university.”

In the Philippines, most libraries have not fully explored offering MOOCs in their programs. One notable study, however, where an integration of Open Educational Resources (OERs) through MOOCs in select American Spaces located in U.S. embassies, consulates, and partner libraries and institutions was described. The study revealed that MOOCs become a value-added program of American Spaces in the East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region (Mariano, 2016).

However, due to limited studies there's still more to uncover to reveal the state of how MOOCs are maximized in Philippine libraries. It is assumed that with the recent shift to online modes of delivering instruction, more libraries are likely to use technology to teach information literacy and other essential topics would consider offering MOOCs.

Hence, this research aims to explore the lived experiences of MOOC camp implementers in American Corners (ACs) nationwide during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the researchers aim to seek answers to the following questions: (1) What are the

main motivations of ACs in implementing MOOC camps during pandemic times? and (2) What are the challenges identified and how did they deal with those?

This study will be beneficial to organizations which are planning or are currently implementing MOOC Camps, as they will be able to learn from the precedent scenarios cited in this paper. Findings of the study will help program implementers to improve their programming strategies and overall decision making. Learning from the previous players will help other organizations refrain from making the same mistakes and thus maximizing time for other purposes.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is exploratory in nature and employed a descriptive research design in a highly qualitative form using a virtual focus group discussion (FGD). The main instrument used is a structured FGD interview module composed of two sections—participants' profile and guide questions. Study participants were selected using purposive sampling and should fit to the two main criteria specified by the researchers: (1) currently an official staff of the American Corner based in the Philippines; and (2) preferably the project head or part of the MOOC Camp organizing team. The MOOC Camp should have been implemented by the study participants during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before any data gathering occurred, respondents were asked to read and accomplish the participant information profile and informed consent form. The FGD was held via Zoom Meeting and totaled to 2 hours and 37 minutes. A total of 12 American Corners nationwide took part in the study. American Corner Manila was excluded as one of the authors of this paper was affiliated to it. Seven of them were coordinators and five were directors. Majority are affiliated with private higher education institutions (HEIs) and have been implementing MOOC Camps for more than five years. Half of the participants came from Mindanao, followed by Visayas (4), and Luzon (2). In the interest of privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were supplied throughout the paper.

Supplementary to the FGD data, American Corners who were not able to implement any MOOC Camp during the Covid-19 pandemic were given a different set of guide questions via email in order to capture their side.

Data collected were organized and analyzed

using the thematic analysis model by Nowell et al. (2017) which consists of six phases: (1) data familiarization, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming of themes, and (6) producing the report. The researchers transcribed verbatimly the virtual discussion to facilitate data familiarization and formulation of initial codes that best represents each research question. Afterwards, these made it easier for the researchers to categorize and identify recurring themes for further analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first-hand data from the responses of the study participants revealed the subsequent answers to the research questions presented beforehand.

3.1 Motivations

Seven major themes emerged around the main motivations of ACs in implementing MOOC Camps. The top motive cited is the perceived significance of MOOC Camps in the upskilling and reskilling (30%) of both the participants and the organizers. Study participants believed that MOOC is a training ground and a learning opportunity to be in the know of the current trends, tools, and strategies. It is a form of academic advantage for student participants and professional development on the side of the professionals involved. These are apparent to their narratives:

“MOOC camp is an opportunity to help connect and be in.” – Denise

“MOOC Camps... it's another way of doing information as well as community service. Apart from the fact that it also enhance[s] academic learning.” – Nita

“Overall, MOOC camp is a learning opportunity for everyone regardless of gender, race, religion, and social status. [It] involves intellectual and social learnings. It engages with local, national, and global audiences or participants.” – Rose

Twenty-four percent of the study participants mentioned the social motives and community impact of MOOC Camps. For them, MOOCs help establish relationships, expand connections, and stimulate engagement. It drives progress to communities particularly those who are less privileged and have received no formal education training. MOOCs were viewed also as a productive activity to use time wisely

and a form of coping strategy from the Covid-19 pandemic-related stress:

“What made us implement the MOOC Camp despite the pandemic is that we want to provide opportunities for those staying at home especially those who lost their job during the pandemic and also, we want to communicate with our community. And also, one of the reasons is... we provide coping mechanisms for those suffering from depression, anxiety that the pandemic brought... MOOC can really help.” – Kathy

“... because of [the] pandemic, they (referring to the student participants) are somehow psychologically stressed, there's no exit for their loneliness. That is our second motivation.” – Jose

Course-related motives (15%) were also emphasized. This motivation touches upon the flexibility, perceived quality, and effectiveness of the course content as well as the role of MOOC Camps in supporting the curricular offerings of the university, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. More than this, 14% of the study participants were motivated to implement MOOCs because of the participants' positive feedback and reception on the MOOC program coupled with the surge of registrants who are signifying interest to join, which was also seen as a challenge:

“MOOC is one of the most requested program[s] of the university... There are so many who would like to join but we have limited slot[s].” – Anna

“I remember one time when a participant from that certain community really gave us feedback that it is really something for them to learn [the] skills from the Corner. It was like a big thing for them that they learned simple things because they never had it in the first place. It's like... we just gave them what they lack. It's also a personal growth for them.” – Nita

Another motivation gleaned is the evidence of innovation (9%) both for the implementers and participant's community. For the implementers, MOOCs provide their organization an opportunity to revolutionize traditional and/or basic activities beyond the usual. Most of the study participants shared that for them to determine if MOOC participants have gained new skills or knowledge is through their proposals, outputs, and impact. Relatively, MOOC camps were also

seen by the study participants as a tool for solving the pressing community issues and concerns:

“I remember that our first MOOC before was about entrepreneurship. So, after the discussion, the participants will identify a problem within the community and they should come up with a solution. For example, if there are insects in that area, how can they manage the insects... By producing something.” – Anna

“If not because of the MOOC, they (referring to teacher-participants) would have not known [that] this [particular] technology exist[s]. That they can use for their classroom. The impact of MOOC camps made me believe that they are very much needed in the library. It gives us diversity. As well as a shift away from the traditional activities just like you know... loaning and borrowing of books. MOOCs give fun to our libraries. Fun, additional knowledge, and most importantly, additional technology. So it is very much needed in our library.” – Denise

Other motivations of the study participants include programming-related matters (5%), citing that MOOCs were one of the required programs in the grant, thus the need to comply; and a few personal motives (2%) such as the unexpected chance to recollect prior knowledge and experience.

3.2 Challenges and Solutions

Just like any other activities, MOOC Camps were not spared by the Covid-19 pandemic. From the analyzed qualitative data, researchers were able to identify the following drawbacks faced by the study participants and strategies how they surpassed those.

Participant/Organizer-related concerns. This challenge is the topmost recurring concern (42%) of the study participants which touch upon the following sub-themes: (1) accommodating large number of MOOC participants; (2) sustaining the participants' attendance and interest to the coursework and meetup sessions; (3) high dropout rate, which according to the study participants, many of those who signified their interest did not push through with the program due to several reasons e.g. family-related concerns, sudden sickness, and pandemic-induced challenges; (4) conflict of schedules and scheduling of activities, which sometimes lead to the last-minute cancellation of attendance of either the participant or the facilitator; (5) lack of social interaction, for those programs implemented in a

fully-online mode; and (6) perceived unreadiness of students to MOOC camps vis-a-vis the culture of place.

To solve the stated challenges, the study participants implemented the following measures. First is they try to limit the number of participants using different approaches. One AC staff indicated that they capped a minimum and maximum number of participants. Another AC staff shared that they prioritized their student leaders, while some prioritized those who are vaccinated already. Aside from limiting the number of attendees, study participants noted that the facilitators' own skills and capabilities in connecting participants and motivating them to complete the course make a big difference. This point accentuated the pressing need to critically evaluate and select the best facilitator for the task. More so, they took advantage of the social media channels where they can connect and constantly follow-up with the participants. Private group chats and pages were enabled as an added communication channel.

When it comes to the issue of high dropout rate, ACs highlighted the importance of strategic profiling of MOOC participants. They made the most of partnerships with their universities' faculty members and student organizations. An AC staff emphasized the effectiveness of MOOC camps when partnered to a class:

“MOOCs here are better when paired with a structured classroom environment. We found that it is workable if we partnered with a particular class and the one who will handle the MOOC will be the teacher handling the class.” – Nita

This strategy relates to what Badali et al. (2022) called the “need-based academic motives.” Study participants also give a premium to their partnership outside the university, particularly the alumni network of the United States-funded programs and fellowships. In terms of scheduling, ACs try to find the common time of the majority. For unexpected cancellations of facilitation duties, an AC staff raised the importance for MOOC Camp implementers to familiarize and complete the course in advance so they can act as the facilitator in lieu of the unavailable one. Miscellaneous strategies include adding interactive and in-person activities to the meetup sessions and regular evaluation to get feedback from the MOOC participants.

Programming-related concerns. This issue is the second most recurring theme (31%) and covers aspects of the program planning and implementation. Specifically, this concerns the: (1) lack of exposure and

knowledge of some implementers on carrying out MOOC programs; (2) promotion and marketing; (3) selection of relatable MOOC topic and course; (4) unavailability of supplies in the local market; (5) bureaucracy on the workplace resulting to slow turnaround time of requests. Few strategies to resolve these problems include early information drive, promotion, and referral from partner individuals and organizations. The researchers noted the close tie-up of ACs on various university academic and non-academic departments e.g. Student Services, Press and Information Offices, and various student organizations. This greatly helped ACs in promoting the programs and expanding reach.

In terms of MOOC topics, study participants underscored the importance of selecting an online course that is free and that could spark the interest of the participants. Study participants also appreciated the pre-programmed list from the funding agency though they noted that a longer lead time will be conducive for them to facilitate processing of requests like procurement of materials and equipment, to name a few. Longer lead time was also seen as a solution for rigid bureaucracy as this gives MOOC Camp implementers added time to get approvals and fix contingencies.

Force majeure events. This issue is the least recurring (27%) but one of the most critical ones. This concern encompasses uncontrollable events in the form of (1) natural hazards such as heavy rains and typhoons; and (2) man-made and technological challenges like the effect of culture of place vis-a-vis the motivation to complete the program, internet connection issues, power failures and outages. These were further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic-induced challenges such as travel restrictions and access to transportation.

Given the unforeseen nature of this challenge, study participants still found ways to survive. A study participant reported that they have procured electric generators, emergency lights, and rechargeable microphones. Another one stated that they have been implementing MOOC camps in a blended format. Face-to-face meetup sessions were either recorded or live streamed on a private channel to accommodate those participants who failed to attend. More than this, a study participant said that they strengthened their mentoring thrust to create a more memorable and meaningful connection between the mentors and mentees.

Above all the challenges and solutions, it is noteworthy to mention the need for a comprehensive

training on MOOC Camp programming. This was evident to one of the study participant's narrative:

"They (referring to MOOC Camp implementers) need to learn skills, facilitator's training- in implementing or handling MOOC. Because I don't think everyone is trained for MOOC organizing. We need to apply a different strategy. So I think skills training is a good way of preparing for a MOOC program. Because when we say content, content is already there. But the skills on how to implement the program, is a different thing. Right? The skills on how to implement the program is a different story. So I guess, we need to equip ourselves first before we can cascade it to others." - Nita

Despite the identified challenges, all ACs still recommended the implementation of MOOC Camps to libraries and other learning organizations planning to implement one due to its long-lasting impact on the individual and communities. Alongside the positive recommendations are few lessons learned from the MOOC Camp implementers:

1. Bear in mind to match the mission and objectives of the organization with those of partner organizations. This primarily gives motivation to the organizers and partners as this reminds them why they are doing what they are doing.
2. Funds and budget are necessary. They are fuel to any programming activities.
3. Try to explore and apply the appreciative inquiry approach- or any other applicable strategy, into the actual MOOC Camp programming. This will help organizers to establish meaningful connections with the MOOC Camp participants and inspire them to boost innovations.
4. Be mindful of the community's needs and interest, clearly set the expectations for the course and match its suitability to your community of learners to be able to motivate them to eagerly finish the course.
5. Evaluation and follow-up engagement continues the conversation even after the MOOC Camp has been completed. Feedbacks from the MOOC participants can help in identifying gaps and areas for improvement.

3.3. Future Directions

Setting up MOOC camps for libraries expands the reach and accessibility of its service but it is also an

elaborate undertaking. However, as seen in the findings, they see this as another opportunity to keep on innovating and deliver socially-adaptive programs for their community. As libraries and spaces for learning continue to explore integrating MOOCs in their programs, the prospect of creating their own module content for relevant topics such as information literacy, digital literacy and other significant subject themes could be another area to explore. Key partnerships and collaborations must be actively sought for to gain support from the academic community to ensure tapping a larger set of potential learners.

4. CONCLUSIONS

MOOCs present opportunities and challenges for the advancement of academic institutions and libraries. It is important to emphasize that MOOCs are primarily used for informal learning which in itself caters to learners who are most likely to join if they are truly interested in the offered themes. Hence, it is imperative to provide high-quality content, appropriate levels of difficulty, accessibility and other related factors that must be based on the community's needs and interests.

Creating an option for another form of learning, even during the pandemic, attests to these institutions' ability to stay relevant and adaptive in any social circumstance. While there are concerns about sustaining the interest and the program itself, another important area that can be explored is the learners' feedback to help address the dropout rates of the program. For as long as there are institutions who support this program, MOOCs are still the next viable option to ensure that knowledge will prosper when there are many learning opportunities available.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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