The Impact of MOOCs on Human Resource Training and Development

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As many universities and companies are rushing to a new pedagogical phenomenon known as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) many questions remain as to their value, relevance and ability to deliver quality and useful educational and learning experiences. Since their recent introduction in academic circles, corporate leaders and Human Resource training professionals have become aware of MOOCs and have considered their applications to supplement and support corporate training. This paper is an attempt to discuss MOOCs in terms of what they are, how they are being used and their future in higher education and corporate training and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Whether we realize it or not, we are in a new era of education and learning that may be the next significant wave of how corporate training and development takes place. Since its entry into the learning environment several years ago, MOOCs or Massive Open Online Courses have taken many prominent universities across the globe by storm. After Stanford and Professor Sebastian Thrun offered a course on Artificial Intelligence which enrolled about 160,000 students from 190 countries, The New York Times declared 2012 as "The Year of the MOOC" (Boyd and Kasraie, 2013). Besides Stanford, MOOCs have become popular at such universities as Princeton, MIT and Harvard prompting some to ask if MOOCs could also work in corporate training and development (Weiss, 2013). While MOOCs are in their early stage of development and implementation some believe that they will be more likely to be transformative rather than a fad and will be a major part of our learning environment into the future (Wood, 2013). Because of this they are prompting institutions of higher learning and business organizations to consider how best to facilitate a learning process that uses multiple methods and means to enhance student and employee learning and understanding.

WHAT ARE MOOCS?

The term MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) itself helps to define the idea of this learning concept and process. The term MOOC was first used by Professor Dave Cormier (2008) of the University of Prince Edward Island. MOOCs are massive open enrollment courses to students in remote locations that are free in terms of fees and participation and usually do not provide students any credit (Green, 2013). Even though several universities use and endorse MOOCs to some extent, the actual delivery of MOOCs comes through third-party providers such as Udacity, Coursera and edX (Weiss, 2013). While initial patronage is usually significant, the number of students who actually complete the courses is quite low. According to Friedman (2013), MOOCs have the potential to revolutionize higher education and

thus corporate training because they provide what is suddenly possible with what is desperately necessary. MOOCs provide opportunities for learning to those comfortable with the technology that provides the platform to interact with professors and trainers through lower cost alternatives.

MOOCs are not part of a predetermined or highly defined program of learning but rather a short course of study that is part of the merged and fuzzy world of education (Davidson, 2012). The increased attention to MOOCs and their usage seems to be fueled by a combination of factors. The various drivers that have come together to make MOOCs such a phenomenon are technology, demographics, pedagogy and economics (Boyd and Kasraie, 2013). These elements are even a more significant combined force when considered in the global and international context. In addition, the demands and pressures of corporations to effectively and efficiently deliver meaningful and relevant training to its employees are another driving force to be acknowledged at this time.

MOOC creation requires great attention to detail and long periods of preparation and instruction. The instructors and trainers are challenged with the task of designing courses that are short, livelier, easily understood on a computer screen, asynchronous and available to many at one time via the web and through various technologies (Kellogg, 2013). MOOCs allow learners to become part of a community with a unique identity and dynamics that thrive on ubiquitous learning (Waard et al., 2011).

MOOCS AND HUMAN RESOURCE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The intense attention being paid to MOOCs in university settings suggests that it is inevitable that they will also play a larger role in corporate learning and development. While there is a great deal of excitement in higher education areas, MOOCs seem less appreciated in how they can change employee skill development in corporations. At this point in time most Human Resource professionals who oversee training and development for their companies are taking a very close look at MOOCs and investigating how they could positively support employee skill development and lifelong learning efforts at a transformational level (Farrell, 2012). According to Farrell (2012) earlier corporate efforts involving online learning in the 1990s were dry and boring and lacked what the advances in technology have now provided learners in terms of excitement and appeal. A recent study done in 2011 indicated that companies were not devoting the resources needed to support employee training especially during the most recent recession. The 2011 study of 1,083 employed and unemployed found that only 21 percent reported developing any kind of skills through company-provided training during the previous five years (Weiss, 2013). Therefore, there seems to be a skills gap developing that MOOCs may be able to fill.

According to Meister (2013), there are three elements of MOOCs that are particularly well suited to corporate learning and development;
- Semi-synchronicity: Most MOOCs allow students to be a semi-synchronous cohort of learners. While the same assignments are given to all in the course at the same time, each member can progress at their own pace and comfort level.
- Course design: MOOCs "flip the classroom." Learning takes place not through lectures, but through student investigations and analysis of course materials and challenges that result in discussions, role plays and case analysis.
- Credentials: Many MOOCs such Coursera offer certifications and credit which may motivate employee to acquire these certifications and in turn the knowledge that goes with them. In addition, the possibility exists that company-sponsored certificate programs may become recognized by other companies.

A 2012 survey of the chief learning officers of business firms by CORP/U reported that 75% of the 243 surveyed reported that they are actively exploring MOOCS for professional development (Grossman, 2013). One significant challenge is identifying MOOCs that mesh well with what corporate trainers are looking for in employee training and development. Many in training and development have the usual war

stories of intense day-long and week-long training programs that promise a lot and were sometimes lacking.

According to Meister (2013) Intel giant McAfee once had an 80 hour long new-hire orientation for sales associates that had 40 hours of pre-work, 5 days of on-site training and a robust post-training agenda to be completed at home after the training sessions. However, it became clear that once the trainees left the instructor-led sessions nothing was done and they were lost forever. To fix this problem McAfee turned to MOOCs and through "flipping the classroom" they turned their training into a time saving and efficient process that produced more lucrative sales results whereby sales associates attribute an $500,000 per year in sales to the skills acquired through the new MOOC training model (Meister, 2013).

MOOCs are allowing corporate e-leaning content to become more responsive to evolving learning preferences and platforms. A recent Future Workplace survey of 195 HR and learning professionals indicated that 72 percent of them see an the value of integrating MOOCs into their learning programs along with six specific recommendations as reported in Table 1 below.
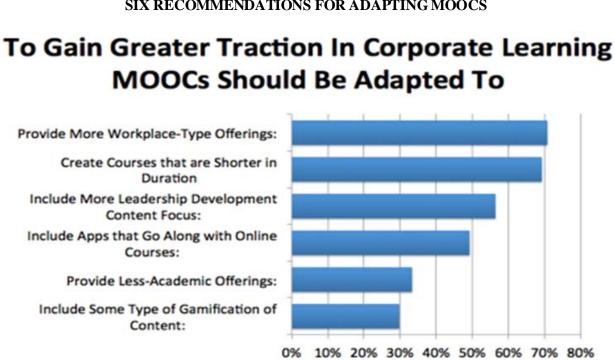
TABLE 1
SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADAPTING MOOCS

To Gain Greater Traction In Corporate Learning MOOCs Should Be Adapted To

Taken from Forbes, August 13, 2013, Jeanne Meister

Using MOOCs for training and development does require investment in terms of technical and instructional capabilities, possible LMS-like platforms and providing technical support (Weiss, 2013). The nature of corporate training makes it more vocational than academic by emphasizing topics such as finance, entrepreneurship, computer programming and specific job training (Degree of Freedom, 2013). While it is projected that many MOOCs will become cooperative partnerships between the providers and the companies, it is not inconceivable that many companies will develop their own custom designed courses for their employees who want this type of training. Millennial employees, who are projected to be about 50% of the global workforce by 2020, are demanding learning opportunities such as MOOCs to enhance their personal skills and recognized credentials (Meister, 2013).

ARE MOOCS A GOOD THING?

Despite the fact that dozens of top universities and a great number of business organizations are scrambling to get in on the next craze in higher education, there still seems to be a great deal of apprehension and lack of confidence in the value of developing MOOCs for academic and corporate learning. The biggest concern of many is the question of whether anyone really learns anything in MOOCs and their overall effectiveness (Marcus, 2013). The idea that a "flipped classroom" using video lectures is really better than a traditional course is in dispute (Oremus, 2013). MOOCs seem to be lacking as compared to traditional classroom offerings that are generally small, where true community feelings reign and where face-to-face meetings support Socratic questioning and learning (Segal, 2013). Some believe that staring at a computer screen creates feelings of isolation and disengagement which may lead to poor performance or dropping out of the course altogether (Fowler, 2013). In addition, early research indicates that the MOOC model may not work well as shown by a partnership between San Jose State and Udacity where over half of the students failed the course leading some critics to warn of something called the MOOC delusion (Oremus, 2013). In general most current MOOC providers acknowledge that 90 percent of those who register for the courses fail to complete them (Marcus, 2013). In addition, there is mounting evidence that MOOCs may not work well for everyone, whether it be because of motivation, learning style or the ability to handle distractions (Fowler, 2013). Therefore, assessment of student work combined with problems of unprepared and unmotivated students are major concerns (Segal, 2013). According to Ferriman (2013) educators and corporate leaders are getting too excited about a phenomenon that needs to mature a little more. Many of the concerns that have been voiced are found below;

- Is free is good or not?
- The fear that no one really understands MOOCs yet.
- Grades and/or feedback have no weight.
- Digital badge qualifications will never replace diplomas.
- Support LMS infrastructure is not mature enough at this point.

Despite the dire warning and concern none of the early evidence of potential problems has seemed to slow the MOOC craze. In fact, Harvard is planning to launch its own version of MOOCs in the spring or summer of 2014 under the name of HarvardX (Lavelle and Zlomek, 2013). The hope is to shake up the online education market and thereby giving Harvard a strong position in the world of MOOCs. Large majorities (seventy-five percent) of academic leaders see real value in online education and see it as essential to their long term strategies as well as others who seem to be rushing to the newest pedagogical fad (Marcus, 2013). Regardless, many universities, and most likely many business organizations, are hoping to develop MOOCs that occupy a specialized niche that caters to a specific kind of learner (DiMeglio, 2013).

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF MOOCS IN CORPORATE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Research suggests that MOOCs will play a larger role in corporate learning programs provided that they relevant to the workplace and can be effectively integrated into current training systems and methods (McGraw, 2013). The appeal of MOOCs in the corporate setting is that the courses and the material can be broken down into smaller pieces or modules that are video-based (McGraw, 2013). A majority of those participants (about 60 percent) in the Future Workplace survey mentioned previously have an interest in their employees earning certificates in MOOCs which may range from about three to eight weeks in duration (McGraw, 2013). Many MOOCs that are being used in the corporate world deal with courses on leadership, project management, collaboration, fundamentals of innovation, product and service

knowledge delivered through webcasts, discussion forums, micro-blogging, video recordings and other social media features (Weiss, 2013; McGraw, 2013). To many corporate leaders and Human Resource trainers MOOCs seem to offer what employers want which is an easy way to provide workplace-type gamification content. Ultimately it seems more than likely that larger organizations and HR trainers may get their wish as MOOCs are further developed and refined (McGraw, 2013). The challenge remains that many MOOC platform providers haven't yet created a great many corporate training versions similar to vast number of current college course offerings. Except for an up-and-coming MOOC provider such as Udemy, there a few who are specifically working with companies to convert expert business knowledge into user-friendly courses that promote professional development and leadership skills (Essex, 2013).

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