MOOCs Participants' Expectations and Recommendations for Improvement

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Abstract

Human beings' desire to learn and improve their life standards without any time and place dependence has resulted in the spread of MOOC applications. MOOCs have become one of the mainstream lifelong learning opportunities for students, adults and anyone who wish to improve herself. Increasing interest in MOOCs necessitates examining of their quality. So, this study intended to investigate the learners’ experiences in MOOCs and the future course recommendations. The learners’ experiences in MOOCs was grouped under three categories: content and design, course site and media, and instructor behavior. Some of the most satisfying experiences of the learners were variety of the course topics, interactive contents, easy access to the content and flexibility, personalized feedback from the real instructors and their expertise in the content areas. Meanwhile they like to see more courses on technology related topics, such as coding, information technologies, and some Adobe products.

Introduction

Advances in information technologies have effected the way we teach and learn, and consequently new learning environments and implementations have emerged. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is one those emerged learning environments. MOOCs, which can be considered as an implementation of connectivist learning theory (Siemens, 2013) and have a wide repercussion around the world, offer learners from all over the world the opportunity to learn through free, online and open courses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016). Today, we see that MOOC applications are becoming widespread in order to put more information into circulation and to make the courses at universities accessible and flexible for more people. Latest figures reveal that currently there are more than 8000 MOOC offerings from more than 800 institutions to around 60 million users globally. As a reflection of this global movement, several MOOCs platforms have launched in Turkey. For instance, AKADEMA, a MOOCs platform was launched by Anadolu University in June 2014 (Mutlu at al., 2014). Based-on long history of the open and distance learning experience, Anadolu has been designing and offering a number of online courses to anybody who wish to learn without any prerequisites and fees. The courses, unlike many other MOOC platforms, are facilitated by the real university instructors and the learners need to interact with them as well as other learners to be able to complete the course activities. So, a big majority
of the courses employed a guided-study approach except couple self-paced ones. Currently, 121 courses are being offered in AKADEMA, almost all are in Turkish expect two new ones in English. Anadolu University considers AKADEMA as a social responsibility project to share its knowledge to the society.

MOOCs are getting more interest due to the fact that traditional education systems are falling short on meeting the needs of the learners and institutions (Koutropoulos et al., 2012). This increasing interest of learners has also grasped the researchers’ attention. Since the beginning of 2010, we have seen more research studies examining the effects of MOOCs on learning processes (Gasevic, et al., 2014; Sa’don, Alias, & Ohshima, 2014; Sangra, et al., 2015; Loizzo & Ertmer, 2016). In those studies, self-regulation, social learning, learner-to-learner interaction, learner motivation, completion, learner characteristics, cultural differences, diversity, learning in social networks, MOOC design, learning design, and similar topics are the ones often investigated. However, as it was mentioned in the literature in order to understand a phenomenon, we need to examine it under different settings and circumstances. Therefore, this study proposes to learn more from the actual learners’ experiences in MOOCs offered in AKADEMA platform to be able to improve the learning processes in these courses.

**Purpose and Method**

This study intended to investigate the learners’ experiences in MOOCs offered in the AKADEMA platform of Anadolu University and their future course recommendations, or the topics they are interested in learning through MOOCs. So, the research questions were formulated as following:

1. What are the components and characteristics of MOOCs in AKADEMA that the learners satisfied the most?
2. What kinds of topics would the participants like to learn in AKADEMA MOOCs?

A descriptive content analysis approach was conducted in the study. Content analysis is to gather similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to interpret them in a way that the reader can understand (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). In other words, content analysis can be defined as a systematic, repeatable technique in which some words of a text such as book, book chapter, article, thesis, letter, historical documents, newspaper titles and articles are summarized with smaller content categories with coding based on certain rules. Content analysis can be used in both qualitative and quantitative research. The steps followed in the research process and the way the data are collected reveal whether the study is suitable for quantitative or qualitative method. In this study, the quantitative method was used because a series of descriptive statistics was used during the analysis.

An online survey with two major open-ended questions was used to collect data. One of the questions asked the learners indicate their perceptions regarding the most and the least satisfactory characteristics of the MOOCs. The second question allowed the participants to state the topics they are interested in learning. The data collected during May 2018 with voluntarily participation of learners in AKADEMA MOOCs. Total 719 participants responded these two questions and included into the analysis. After data collection, the data was transformed into a script and then two coders separately analyzed. Two coders, first, created a code schema and then with the participation of a third expert (one of the authors of this paper) compared and synthetized. Then themes were derived from the codes (Figure 1).
Findings

The reporting of the findings was organized according to the research questions. Figure 2, first of all, was related to the question about to what extent the courses met the learners’ expectations. As can be observed from the figure, quite a number of participants (66 percent) indicated that their expectations were met in the AKADEMA courses while still one fifth of them (20 percent) were not happy about the courses. A higher percent of the learners also stated that they did not have any problem or experience any issue during the learning processes.

Table 1, on the other hand, summarizes the most satisfied components or characteristics of the courses the participants took and completed.

Table 1. The most satisfied components and characteristics of MOOCs in AKADEMA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Content and Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety and up-to-dateness of the contents</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity in the contents</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appealing of the contents</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruitfulness of the content for learning</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun in courses</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation of the personalized development</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Course Site and Media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility to reach the course site and resources</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be observed in Table 1, the participants’ responses to this question was classified under three major themes: content and design, course site and media, instructor behaviors. According to the results, a majority of the participants satisfied with the variety and up-to-dateness of the content in the courses (f=52). Interactive design of the courses (f=38) and attention-grabbing characteristic of the content (f=31) were also other satisfying features of the MOOCs. In terms of course site and instructional media or materials provided to the learners, the most satisfying characteristics of the courses listed as accessibility (f=32), flexibility to reach the course site and resources (f=26), interactive videos provided (f=22), promoting small group interaction (f=20), and sense of classroom community (f=12), and finally discussion opportunities provided throughout the course (f=10). The final theme was about the instructors’ actions or behaviors during the courses. Under this theme, four characteristics stepped forward in the learners’ answers. A number of learners (f=18) indicated their satisfaction with the instructors’ personalized feedback for their learning progresses. Similarly, the learners also pointed out their satisfaction with the instructors’ expertise in their fields (f=12). They also felt high level of sense of teaching presence in the courses and satisfied with this feeling.

The following table (Table 2) presents the topics and courses the participants would like to learn or take as MOOCs in the AKADEMA platform.

### Table 2. Topics and courses the participants would like to learn in AKADEMA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adobe Products</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Computing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Social Sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Languages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Personal Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charming</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Answers of the question regarding the topics and courses of interest were also classified under five categories: technology, social sciences, languages, personal development and health. The table revealed that technology related topics and some of the fields in social sciences were pointed out by the participants more often than others. Adobe Products, coding and basic technology skills were the ones came to the fore than others in the technology category, while psychology and law were in social sciences. Unremarkably, learning English was another topic the participants were interested in learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

MOOCs have been one of the hot topics over the last decade. Learners’ satisfaction and needs are very important to provide quality learning experience in MOOCs. This study focused on these two variables in the scope of Anadolu University’s MOOCs platform, AKADEMA. More precisely, the study intended to explore the learners’ satisfaction with different characteristics and components of the MOOCs and also their preferences of the topics they would like to learn in MOOCs.

The study also investigated to what extent the courses met the learners’ expectations. The results have revealed that the courses in AKADEMA have met significant percent of the learners’ expectations, and a larger percent did not come across any problem during their study. From the data, it can be inferred that the participants had positive attitudes toward learning in MOOCs.

The learners’ experiences in MOOCs was grouped under three categories: content and design, course site and media, and instructor behavior. The prominent characteristics or components of the AKADEMA MOOCs in terms of content and design were identified as the variety and up-to-dateness of the content in the courses, interactive learning design, as well as attention-grabbing characteristic of the content. Conole (2015) stated that one of the major motives for participating MOOCs is about personal development for self-fulfillment. The variety of courses may help them improve their skills or acquire new skills. This professional development opportunity as well as the certificate of completion they receive at the end might support for career development or switching to a new career. On the other hand, Vrasidas (2000) expressed the importance of content-to-learner interaction in any learning setting, while Tsang et al. (2014) and Zimmerman (2012) noted that this type of interaction may boost the motivation of the learners, reduce the drop-out rates and increase the chance of achieving the learning objectives in online learning. The current study uncovered a similar result that the participants indicated the interactive content of the courses as one of the satisfying components of the MOOCs. Another often indicated characteristics of the courses the participants liked was about appeal of the course contents. There were a number of studies in the literature (Aybek, 2017; Jacobs, 2013; Kirschner, 2012; Martin, 2012; Zutshi, O’Hare & Rodafinos, 2013) emphasized the appealing of the course content among learners as one of the factors effecting the learners’ engagement and persistence. So, this study also supported the literature; namely the more appealing content we provide, the more learners engage with it and persist to complete the courses.
In terms of the course site and design theme, flexibility to reach the course site and resources, and the interactive videos provided to the learners were stepped forward as the most cited characteristics that the learners liked in the AKADEMA MOOCs. Since the learners were in general lifelong learners whose major goals are related to personal development, it was important to access the course site and resources with different means, especially through mobile devices, and ways, including no login requirement. Flexibility, anyway, was considered as the key term for open education (Aydin, 2019; Cooke, 2018; Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019). Veletsinaos and Houlden (2019) analyzed the articles in the Journal of Distance Education and came up with six themes about flexibility in open and distance learning: the qualities of flexibility as affording “anytime, anyplace” learning; flexibility as pedagogy; liberatory or service-oriented aspects of flexibility; limitations of flexibility, especially in terms of technology, the constraints of time and space, as well as cultural differences; flexibility as a quality needed by instructors and instructional designers themselves; and critiques of flexibility as a concept. The current study considered the flexibility in terms of the first three themes of the Veletsinaos and Houlden’s study, namely the qualities of flexibility as affording “anytime, anyplace” learning; liberatory or service-oriented aspects of flexibility. The analyses have shown that the participants enjoyed the flexibility of learning anytime and anyplace accessing the learning environment and learning activities.

Another important component of the AKADEMA MOOCs related to the course site and design theme was the interactivity required while watching the videos prepared by the instructors in-house to help learners acquire the competencies targeted. By looking at popular MOOCs in different platforms, one can easily infer that videos have come back big especially with the xMOOCs. Along with the practice, we have come across more and more studies on effective use of video as instructional material. So, literature provided beneficial insight about role of video in online learning and effective ways of producing as well as integrating them. For instance, studies (Bezerra & Silva, 2017; Clow, 2013; Wilkowski et al., 2014) shown that quality videos increased the learners’ motivation, and the exact opposite, poor quality videos caused loss of interest and motivation. Moreover, the studies in Turkey (Aybek, 2017; Horzum, 2016) revealed that only text-based content, which does not include videos, negatively affects participants' MOOC experiences and is even shown as a reason for dropping a course. The AKADEMA courses have been providing interactive videos and also requiring some extra activities to turn the learners active watchers rather than passive receivers, such as asking questions and requiring the learners find their answers in the videos, or demanding the learners generate examples similar to those given in the videos, etc. It sounded like that the promotion of interactivity motivated the learners and supported their learning.

Under the theme related to the ‘instructors’, the learners expressed their satisfaction with the instructors’ willingness and efforts to provide personalized feedback about their progress and their high level of subject-matter expertise. Previous studies, such as Horzum et al., (2016), have uncovered that insufficient feedback was listed as one of the reasons of dropping the MOOCs. Similarly, Bocchi et al., (2004), and Ivankova and Stic (2007) pointed out the significance of providing timely and sufficient feedback in open and distance learning, and how feedback help boosting the retention. In another study, Li et al. (2016) have also shown that instructors’ feedback supported the learners’ active engagement to the learning process and keep their focus on the learning activities. The MOOCs in AKADEMA platform required the instructors provide timely feedback. An automated messaging system was also built into the platform that informs the instructors about new and unanswered postings as well as some statistics about their actions in the course site via email. The instructors found it very beneficial for them to keep track of learners’ progress and their tasks in the courses. Furthermore, getting sufficient and timely feedback from
real instructors (not computer-generated interaction) possibly helped the learners develop a positive attitude about the instructors’ subject-matter expertise. A previous research finding indicated that instructor credibility has a significant positive effect on content area knowledge (Carr, Zube, & Dickens, 2013). In another study the researcher also found a significant relationship between learners’ perception of instructor credibility and the degree of their acquisition of learning outcomes in online learning (Vallade & Kaufmann, 2020). Our study also supported the literature about the relationship between learners’ perceptions with the credibility of instructors and their satisfaction from the courses. In the light of these, one can easily infer that personalized feedback and learners’ perception of instructors’ subject-matter expertise might be effective on the learners’ satisfaction and their retention in MOOCs.

Another findings of the study supported the literature was about the learners’ preferences of the course topics for further learning: a big majority indicated technology related topics including some of the well-known productivity, such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Premier, and coding software. Since some of the learners attended the MOOCs for professional development and for new career opportunities, and technology skills definitely help individuals more forward in their career or get better jobs, this preference can be considered as acceptable and understandable. Meanwhile, one might find the finding related to the participants’ interest in psychology as extraordinary, but the field of psychology has recently been one of the top fields of study by the undergraduate candidates in Turkey (YOK, 2020) too. So, this finding also reflected the demand for psychology and related fields. Moreover, learning English language has always been one of the hot topics for decades in Turkey and most probably all around the world. So that, it was not a surprise to see this kind of a preference for AKADEMA.

Overall, it was very remarkable to observe that the learners in MOOCs expressed their interest in different types of interactions, including peer, instructor and content. Literature on online learning (e.g.; Anderson, 2003; Moore, 2013; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011; Rodriguez & Armellini 2015) is full of studies express the importance and role of interaction on learning, retention, motivation, and etc. Similar relationship between interaction and learning is also documented for MOOCs too (e.g.; Cisel, 2018; Kasch, Van Rosmalen, & Kalz, 2020; Stracke, et al., 2018). However, one can easily claim that we need more studies on the different types and contexts of interaction especially in MOOCs to understand the phenomenon and provide better learning opportunities to all who wish to; and as Kasch et al (2020) stated in MOOCs we see thought-provoking examples of interaction but at the same time literature needs to elaborate interactions in MOOCs in order to improve their educational value and quality. This study provided a perspective in this sense about AKADEMA MOOCs and the participants’ preferences and satisfaction. On the other hand, the study should be conducted with the participation of more learners and also diverse data (qualitative and qualitative) on each components of the MOOCs should be collected to understand the interaction preferences as well as the most beneficial interaction types and activities.

References


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