8 MOOCs for language learning – opportunities and challenges: the case of the Open University Italian Beginners' MOOCs

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Abstract

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are a fairly recent development in online education. Language MOOCs (LMOOCs) have recently been added to the ever-growing list of open courses offered by various providers, including FutureLearn. For learners, MOOCs offer an innovative and inexpensive alternative to formal and traditional learning. For course designers and developers, this emerging learning model raises important issues concerning the affordances of the new learning environment and the rationale for adopting a particular pedagogical approach to sustain the learning experience. The authors offer an insight into their own experiences in designing and delivering an Italian for Beginners MOOC on FutureLearn. This case study explores the opportunities and challenges we met and the link with existing research.

Keywords: massive open online courses, MOOC, formal learning, informal learning, online language learning.

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1.   Introduction and context

In recent years, the number of educational resources freely available online has increased exponentially thanks to the development of the Open Educational Resources (OERs) movement and the provision of MOOCs (McGreal, 2013). OERs display various characteristics; openness, free access, and use and re-purposing of the resources, all common principles which promote "the building of ubiquitous learning networks as well as reducing the knowledge divide that separates and partitions societies" (McGreal, 2013, p. xviii).

MOOCs represent the principle of supporting openness in education while at the same time embracing technological innovation. Run entirely online, MOOCs are a development of distance learning which followed on naturally from the rise of online education and the development of open access universities around the world (Siemens, 2013).

Arguably, the first MOOC was created and delivered by George Siemens and Stephen Downes in 2008 (mentioned in Parr, 2013) to test out connectivism, the learning theory they developed which posits that learners work together to co-construct and distribute knowledge through networks, as practitioners in a community. Since then, the interest in this new way of learning and teaching has constantly increased to the point that 2012 was described in the New York Times as "the year of the MOOC" (Pappano, 2012, cited in Siemens, 2013, p. 5).

The Open University UK (henceforth OU), launched in the late 1960's and as one of the major exponents of distance learning, started to engage with the MOOC landscape with the openED 2.0, a European MOOC on business and management. By 2012, the OU was running its own MOOCs, for example the Open Translation MOOC, while was also setting up the FutureLearn MOOC platform in partnership with 11 higher education institutions. Fully owned by the OU, FutureLearn was the first UK-led MOOC learning platform, its first MOOC running in September 2013. In terms of languages, the OU School of Languages and Applied Linguistics launched their first language MOOC (a

programme of six Spanish for Beginners courses) in August 2016, followed by a programme of six Italian for Beginners courses in September 2016.

2.   Current literature on MOOCs and LMOOCs

The main principles of MOOCs are autonomy, diversity, openness and interactivity (Downes, 2012); socio-constructivism, collaborative learning and connectivism are the theoretical principles that underpin the development of MOOCs, whereby self-directed learners support the learning community through social interaction and active engagement in the learning process. However, there are different approaches to MOOC design and delivery deriving from distinctive theoretical principles as well as from subject-specific considerations. Since the terms were first coined by Downes in 2012, the main dichotomy has been between cMOOCs and xMOOCs.

The former follows a connectivist approach, which posits that "knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and that accordingly learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (Downes, 2012, p. 9). In connectivist MOOCs, course content is not viewed and presented as the object of learning in itself but rather as an instrument that stimulates learning and that activates learner engagement within a 'community of practitioners'. In this model, which emphasises simultaneously open social learning and learner autonomy, learners help each other to aggregate and distribute knowledge through various networks, while educators demonstrate tactics and techniques and model the "approach, language and world view of a successful practitioner" (Downes, 2011, n.p.).

xMOOCs, on the other hand, offer a wider audience a taster for high-quality university courses. They are built in structured content and follow an instructivist approach whereby courses are designed with specific learning goals in mind and teaching is fundamentally embedded in the web course resources (Ferguson, Coughlan, & Heredotou, 2016). In xMOOCs, the team of educators is normally responsible for course delivery as well as for its design. As indicated

by Littlejohn (2013), such MOOCs do not normally require a high level of interaction amongst the learners. The majority of these types of MOOCs, rather than following a connectivist framework, use a more traditional and instructivist pedagogical approach (Kennedy, 2014; Staubitz et al., 2015) which focuses on theories of learner autonomy and self-regulation rather than on social learning.

LMOOCs are an emerging category. Bàrcena Read, Martín-Monje, and Castrillo (2014) is arguably the first major contribution to an analysis of theoretical as well as methodological issues related to LMOOCs, which the authors define as "dedicated web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation" (p .1). The authors also point out that one of the main challenges faced by LMOOCs is that learning a language is fundamentally skill-based rather than knowledge-based, and practising the skill requires learning with others, while the majority of existing LMOOCs follow an instructivist approach which does not necessarily promote collaboration. The challenge and also opportunity for LMOOC educators is therefore to foster an environment which enhances social learning by including a range of activities and tools which stimulate discussion and collaboration amongst participants.

Moreira Teixeira and Mota (2014) argue that in the current xMOOC model, the tools allowing full collaboration are limited (e.g. the discussion tool) and that the xMOOCs do not make the most of the tools (i.e. social networks) used by the cMOOC. They suggest a new pedagogical approach for LMOOCs which they call iMOOC, and which they introduced at the Open University of Portugal. The iMOOC is based on a synthesis of cMOOC and xMOOC, and draws on the potential of the networked approach as well as the structured Higher Education pedagogy. The 'i' represents individual responsibility, interaction, interpersonal relationships, innovation, and inclusion. Students use their own Personal Learning Environment (PLE) to manage their learning and engage in conversation with other learners.

Conversely, Ferguson et al. (2016), in their report on OU MOOCs, indicate that MOOCs hosted by the UK-based platform FutureLearn are underpinned by the pedagogy of conversational learning with a learning environment that

fosters social interaction and collaboration between learners mainly through the use of embedded tools such as discussions. It is argued that by shifting from an instructivist to a more socio-constructivist learning environment, more opportunities and challenges arise for the language course designer.

In this case study, we therefore discuss the challenges and opportunities we faced in designing and delivering our Italian for Beginners MOOCs on the FutureLearn platform and how they relate to these various existing approaches to MOOCs, and language MOOCs in particular.

3.   The OU Italian for Beginners' MOOCs

The Italian for Beginners MOOCs – as with the other MOOCs hosted by FutureLearn – are designed on socio-constructivist principles and follow the xMOOC model outlined above, where teaching is embedded in and constitutes an integral part of the course design to allow learners to progress autonomously and independently. Learning in this case is facilitated by a well-structured and organised presentation of the learning resources and activities designed to achieve specific outcomes. The MOOC is learner-centred, provides a high degree of flexibility, and in contrast to other xMOOCs that do not support collaborative learning (Staubitz et al., 2015), it seeks to encourage interaction through the discussion areas, where collaborative learning can take place using dialogue, peer exchange and feedback, as well as guidance from course organisers.

Each of the six MOOCs in the Italian for Beginners programme lasts for four weeks and each week has up to 23 activities called 'steps'. There are a variety of activities such as quizzes, articles and discussions. Activities are designed to encourage use of the target language. Discussions follow many of the activities, providing learners with an opportunity to consolidate or reflect on their learning. Discussions are embedded in the learning content and can be divided into two main types: those which require learners to write and post something in Italian, and those which ask learners to reflect or comment on an aspect of culture and society, perhaps making a comparison with the same aspect in their own country

of origin or of residence. Students have the opportunity to take a progress test at the end of each week where general feedback is provided and a score given.

In the OU language MOOCs, the content is semi-structured; while still allowing flexibility in the way learners engage with the material, it follows a clear progression from the simplest to the most complex steps. However, since learners navigate the site autonomously, they can complete the activities in any order, thereby organising their own learning according to their interests, abilities, needs, etc.

The interactive activities elicit the four skills. Reading and listening skills are developed and practised through comprehension activities, while learners can practise writing and speaking skills through productive activities. Learners can record their spoken contributions using any commercially available software and are encouraged to post their written or recorded contributions on the discussion page.

As already mentioned, the main collaborative feature offered by the FutureLearn platform is a Discussion tool. Through the discussion facility, learners can connect with each other, share knowledge and collaborate. In the Italian for Beginners course, the collaborative practices afforded by the discussion tool enhance peer learning and support and offer activities which foster the sharing of knowledge.

Collaborative practices are designed to help build a sense of community. Each discussion is triggered by an activity or article written by the academic team. These can be used to stimulate language practice using the target language or develop intercultural awareness through comparison and reflection. Examples of the two activities are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

In this first example (Figure 1), the participants use the target language to have simple meaningful conversations with – and to receive feedback from – both fellow participants and the academic team. In this way, learners practise their language working together with others and this constitutes the basis for the

formation of an online community. In practice, the number of comments tended to peak after topics which allowed learners to exchange information about their own lives, e.g. mealtimes, their family, their workplace, etc.

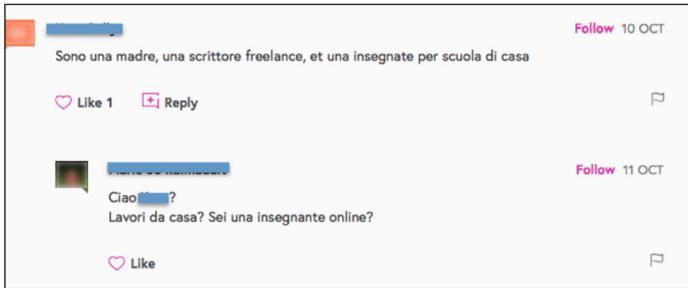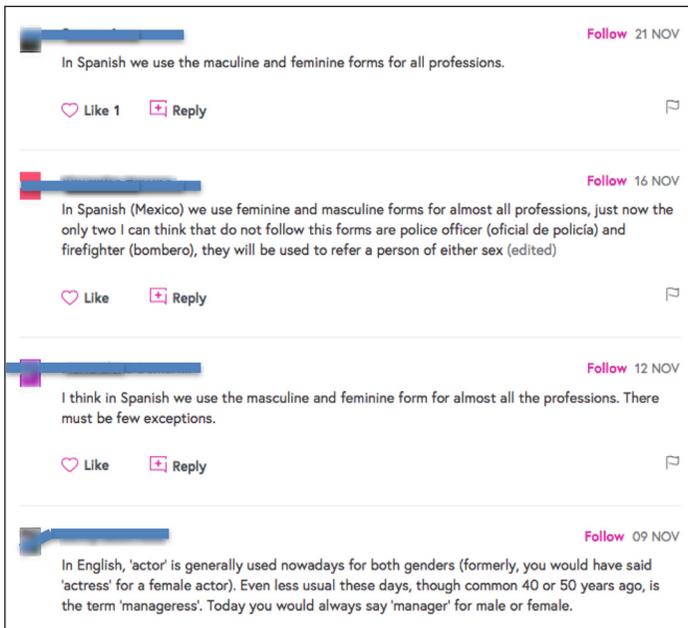Figure 1.   Example of language exchange in Italian

Figure 2.   Sample of a discussion on a linguistic-cultural issue: 'Nouns denoting professions traditionally dominated by men'

The discussion tool is also used to stimulate conversation around topics concerning Italian culture, language and society, which provide participants with the opportunity to exchange knowledge and discuss the differences with their own language and culture. As evidenced in Figure 2, this use of discussion allows participants to interact with each other openly and expand their learning beyond the subject matter (Italian). The discussion also encourages intercultural awareness.

As shown in Figure 3, threads where learners could exchange information about their own life (such as where they worked or describing a friend) attracted a high number of comments. The thread on 'Nouns denoting professions traditionally dominated by men', in line with other similar threads on linguistic-cultural issues, also attracted a relatively high number of responses (571), in comparison to threads focusing on purely linguistic aspects, such as pronunciation or verbs. This suggests that both relevant topical threads and linguistic-cultural threads lend themselves more naturally to social learning practices such as knowledge sharing. The role played by the discussion tool, therefore, echoes some of the elements outlined by Downes (2012) in his connectivist theory in that learners support each other, perceive the benefits of learning together and feel part of a community. However, it is also interesting to note that during these interactions learners only rarely address each other directly. We argue that this might be related to the sense of anonymity felt by learners in such a massive learning environment.

The role played by the community of learners is crucial in a massive course where moderation, support and feedback represent a big challenge for the lead educators. At the same time, learners come with diverse expertise and knowledge which may be extremely valuable within the community. Therefore, in order to encourage collaborative practice and maximise peer learning support, we used a number of features such as 'rating' and 'following' participants. We used the system of 'likes' to reward learners who either provided feedback to others, commenting on their written contributions to discussions, or were simply quite active participants. This included native

speakers of Italian who voluntarily provided corrections and feedback to their peers. The reinforcement and approval of active participants proved to be a fairly successful way to maintain their engagement. Furthermore, since the massive number of participants made it practically impossible to read all comments and postings, we also relied on identifying and consequently 'following' the more active learners. Obviously, learners too can autonomously use this facility to connect with other learners, and in such a way are a variety of networks formed within the community.

Figure 3.　Visual representation of learners' participation in each discussion thread
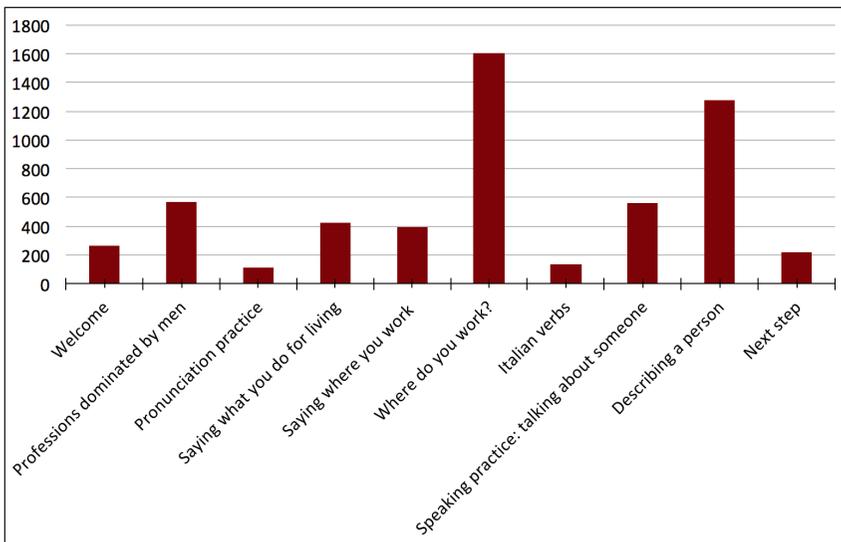
4.　Discussion

Developing an LMOOC presents a number of opportunities and challenges. Here we attempt to address just a few.

4.1.   Approach and principles

Although there are various examples of OU MOOCs designed using a connectivist approach – one example is the Open Translation MOOC (Beaven et al., 2013) – the FutureLearn language MOOCs follow a broadly xMOOC model. For most universities developing and delivering MOOCs, in fact, the xMOOC model is generally preferred, since it gives them the opportunity to repurpose course content. It allows universities to innovate, while not changing their culture or pedagogical approach (Moreira Teixeira & Mota, 2014). This is in fact the strategy followed in the development of the OU's Italian for Beginners courses on FutureLearn, which were based on the first six units of the OU's Italian for Beginners module.

By using the affordances offered by the FutureLearn platform, however, we were able to encourage collaborative practice, for example through the use of the discussion tool, thus replicating elements of the collaborative learning of the cMOOCs. From a preliminary evaluation of the first run of the programme, we feel that the level of participation in these discussions was good (see Figure 3 above) but could be further improved, possibly by rethinking task design to give more weight to contributing. This could be achieved by embedding in the discussion activities and fostering collaboration amongst the learners, who could perhaps organise themselves in small online working groups in order to complete specific tasks.

4.2.   Moderation

For the course team, a significant challenge is that of moderating discussions and responding to queries, as the number of participants is exceedingly high: in Week 1 of MOOC1 alone, for instance, there were in total 30,956 comments. The FutureLearn platform does not allow advanced sorting by keyword, making it difficult to filter comments, even within a discussion page, but does allow users to sort by contributor, for example selecting only comments by the educator(s) or by those contributors they are 'following'. It also allows sorting by 'Likes' so that the highest rated comments can be located easily.

4.3.   Cultural issues

The heterogeneous composition of the participants – who can come from countries as far apart as Mexico and Kazakhstan – can present both opportunities and challenges in terms of their different backgrounds and past learning experiences. Working across boundaries, whether geographical, political, religious or cultural, requires a certain level of intercultural awareness in learners and moderators and increased sensitivity relating to socio-cultural issues. An article about the family in Italy which included references to civil partnerships led to some polemical comments in the Discussion area.

4.4.   Retention

Common to all MOOCs is the low number of learners who complete or who participate fully. Jordan (2015) found median completion rates of around 12%. There may be multiple reasons why this occurs. Firstly, there is a high percentage of leisure learners, who neither need nor want a Certificate of Completion or similar document. Secondly, the courses are free, so there is no financial commitment involved. More research would need to be done to establish whether completion rates are lower on xMOOCs than on cMOOCs where learners establish learning communities from the outset. If this is the case, then incorporating more of the elements or characteristics of cMOOCs might provide a solution. For instance, in LMOOCs, learners could be encouraged to use social networks and to set up small groups for speaking practice on Skype or Facetime. By adopting a learning management system which would allow us to embed other media and resources as part of students' PLE, as suggested by Moreira Teixeira and Mota (2014), the learning experience could be enriched.

5.   Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the opportunities and challenges for course teams presented by this emerging learning environment, using as a case study the OU's Italian for Beginners MOOC hosted by FutureLearn.

MOOCs can potentially play an important role in bridging the gap between formal and informal learning and in widening participation. They fulfil the brief of making educational resources freely available to a wider audience, and they foster innovation in pedagogic approaches, allowing universities to test new ways of delivering courses. However, for course designers and leaders, they also present challenges in managing the learning process, mainly due to their massive scale. This is particularly true for language MOOCs which are built around skills, not content, and where interaction between learners is perhaps more important.

The limitations of the xMOOC model have been discussed above and solutions suggested. Further research is needed to gain an insight into the learner experience and to gather data about participation and completion. As MOOCs evolve further, and platforms become more sophisticated, the nature of the learning experience will inevitably change and universities and other providers need to change with it.

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