



Online capacity enhancement for sustainable development

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The scope

A small team of independent entrepreneurs, led by Michel Denis (Net Learning team) and Jean-Roger Mercier (CyberOustal) developed two Six-Week Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), in French:

- Foundations of and practices on sustainable development October-November 2013 – 270+ part's.
- Environmental and Social Assessment (ESA) in international development: February-March 2014 - 150+ participants.

In a nutshell

- With little publicity, the courses revealed strong buy-in by the participants and resulted in both a high percentage of completion and degree of satisfaction. The course on ESA was particularly well attended, with a completion rate of 20%, 3 to 4 times more than the average MOOC. African participation, overall (60% of “students”) and in final completion, was very high and extremely dynamic.

Follow-up

- Following these two courses, the authors have been actively looking for a business model that would give the courses more sustainability.
- A commercial course on Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (SESA) using blended learning (conventional “in room” training with electronic exchanges and team building in between) ran from June to September 2014 with, like the two MOOCs, very highly satisfactory participants’ evaluations.

Marketing a freebie

- The MOOCs were publicised, as free and with no string attached, using the major social networks, starting about 1 month before start;
- Catalogues of MOOCs rapidly followed suit and announced pro bono with high effectiveness;
- The effect of the initial announcements is still visible (we still get the « when is the next MOOC? » query, to which we have no positive response);

The detailed facts

This first ever MOOC/Sustainable Development attracted more than 250 participants (Africa 50% ; France 45% ; Others (Quebec, Haiti, etc) 5%) allowed them as well as moderators to explore twelve domains of sustainable development listed here in no particular order:

- Renewable energy
- More inclusive forms of development
- Agenda 21
- Circular economy
- Governance
- Education
- Water
- Communication and Sustainable development
- Alternatives to growth-« décroissance »
- Food
- Sustainable development in 3D
- Demography

The MOOC on ESA

- Announced as « Managing operational social and environmental risks », not exactly a Bruce Springsteen hit;
- Originally hoping for 50 participants;
- Same marketing pattern and a limited spillover effect from the SD-MOOC;
- Eventually turned out to have 150+ participants, with strong and committed African input (60+ % as sheer percentage, but lots more in terms of energy)

The lessons learned

- The two MOOCs recorded completion rates of about 20%, a much higher percentage than the average MOOC (less than 7% according to <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/mooc-completion-rates-below-7/2003710.article>). This high rate, combined with the positive feedback, may show that the balance between MOOCs' flexible and interactive approach and the complexity of the subject, was appropriate for the audience.

Lessons learned (cont.)

- The Internet, indeed, may make capacity enhancement close to being financially competitive with “in room” learning. Germany.info, for instance, mentions an average vocational training cost of 15,300 € (20,065 US\$) per trainee per year, which translates into about 10-20 €/student-hour (13.5-27.0 US\$).
- The author’s own estimate is that, under commercial conditions and during the coming years, the corresponding cost could be around 25 €/student-hour with much lower values when audiences exceed 1,000 participants.
- MOOCs can be a powerful capacity developer in a network environment owing to a more personal approach, increased/improved learners’ commitment, and instant access to global expertise.

Lessons learned (cont.)

- Learners had access, with a simple password, to a Moodle platform where they had the option of toggling between written text (usually PDF files), Internet links, and videos.
- Home recorded videos produced with consumer-grade equipment and used as lectures or as graphic illustrations of points developed in the written resources were watched, even on slow connections and participants understood their messages, as demonstrated by the high proportion of appropriate responses in the quiz.
- This is consistent with results reported by previous and other MOOCs.

Welcome improvements

Third-party certification will add to the credibility of the MOOCs in terms of an ability to check that the knowledge and skills have indeed been acquired above and beyond a rather anonymous quiz. Third party certification (TPC) would entail an independent, respected institution making direct contact with all or a significant sample of participants, quizzing them independently from the organizers, assessing the responses and providing a seal of virtue and authenticity to the certificate delivered by the MOOC's organizers.

Why this may be a good idea..

The High Level Panel, working from the perspective of Post-2015 international consensus, recommends five main directions, all synergetic with the MOOC approach:

- Leave no one behind
- Put sustainable development at the core
- Transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth
- Build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all
- Forge a new global partnership

The key questions

“Who will spearhead this huge effort?” and
“Who will pay for it and will the financial resources be on par with the challenge?”

Indeed, the present business model dominating the exploding online training domain are universities using their existing resources, free faculty time, and cheap student labour to offer a wide variety of free-to-the-user MOOCs. Can private groups compete fairly?

Grazie Milione

- More at <http://www.cyberoustal.eu>
- A full peer-reviewed article at <http://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/article/view/63>
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