LOCALISING CONTENT FOR AN XMOOC IN THE UAE

Jenny Eppard and Preeya Reddy
Zayed University, UAE

ABSTRACT

Universities in the UAE are entering the age of virtual and open access education. This paper describes the evolution of a MOOC at a state-funded university in Dubai. We will describe the challenges as well as a reflection of our experiences as creating virtual learning spaces in this culture differs somewhat from Western models.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the Fall semester 2016, a team of teachers at Zayed University were asked to create two virtual learning modules. The first provided units of instruction of basic English skills (24 grammar units) and the second facilitated professional development for educators (37 units on teaching practice) in the United Arab Emirates. The following reflection paper will aim to provide an academic justification for the creation process finally reflecting on the evolution of the project.

2. BACKGROUND

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are created to support university curricula, community outreach professional development, and corporate training applications. They can be either cMOOCs, xMOOCS or a combination of both.

Bates (2014) argued that xMOOCs are characterized by the following: software design for large numbers of students, video lectures (under 15 minutes), computer marked assignments, peer assessment, supporting materials, shared comment discussion space, no or very light discussion moderation, badges or certificates learning analytics. Bates describes the other forms of cMOOCs as autonomy of the learner, diversity of tools used, cooperative learning, open access, use of social media, participant driven, distributed communication and lack of formal assessments. The only true characteristic of a cMOOC that we incorporated was that our materials were open access.

Wright (2003) provided several levels of criteria when designing MOOCs. Due to cultural constraints, we could not include all his recommendations. An important specification we did consider was the learners' backgrounds, ability levels and expectations. The UAE educational context historically had, and continues to have, a strong connection with Islamic education (Dailo, 2014). This was a key consideration for us. Also, we wanted to ensure that learners were given feedback about their progression which made learning analytics and assessment results available (Yousef, Chatti, Schroeder and Wosnitza 2014).

3. REFLECTION

The projects provided challenges for numerous reasons. At this point, we can only reflect on the instructional design phase as students have not started using the materials in a systematic way.Creating a resource for virtual online learning in this region was still relatively new. The materials created were trailed in the classroom by teachers with a knowledge of the local cultureto ensure their usability reliability and validity.

Even though experiences we had with developing the modules were overwhelming positive, there were a few issues. For one, there was little release time from a teaching workload to develop the project. Also, finding images that were copyright free and culturally appropriate was time-consuming and expensive. The final obstacle was designing materials to work in an online environment.

There is a need for ongoing research on how culturally acceptable student collaboration would be on a shared discussion platform. Furthermore, one must consider how much teacher interaction is needed for students who use English as a second languageto benefit from the courses.Noting these changes may provide some general recommendations for creating similar courses in future.

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