

How to design and conduct a MOOC. The experience of the course in “Human Rights: Global and Local Protection”

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As many may already know, MOOC is an acronym that stands for Massive Open Online Course. Unlike traditional e-learning courses, the MOOC is a learning model based on the following features: an open learning environment (not a closed platform), free access (not based on the payment of a registration fee), a massive participation from any part of the world (not only aimed at delimited groups), the participation and support of the entire academic community (not meant mainly for teachers and tutors), the use of social networks (not only a private and closed forum). Additional characteristics can also help us to further understand how a MOOC can affect online educational processes. For example, in literature the model is made to stand (Downes, 2012) between xMOOC and cMOOC. This better emphasizes the differences between MOOCs that are set predominantly in a more traditional way and those that are more collaborative. Such a different approach leads to a rather different design. In the first case there is more focus on building materials and traditional assessment tools, considering the student as a consumer of well contrived resources, based on a knowledge duplication mode (Siemens, 2012a). In the second case, the MOOC is designed in a socio-constructivist and connectivist perspective, providing the widest possible range of activities in a collaborative way. Initially, in 2008, a MOOC was an attempt to broaden the audience and open up courses to the international context, but now it has become a pedagogical model (de Waard et al., 2011) that unbinds the frontiers of

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traditional e-learning. The hypothetical student of a MOOC may be a young man or woman studying at the same university which proposes the MOOC, or a person living, studying or working on the other side of the world, who recognizes that the circulation of knowledge has a global significance. Through MOOC, knowledge, therefore, enjoys this opening of borders which facilitates intercultural dialogue during the learning process. As a result both universities and host companies become a hallmark of quality of content and strategies in delivering education, whereas guidelines and regular supervision by the host ensure that the processes of design and production are excellent.

Considering the above mentioned circumstances, it is important to underline why the University of Padova decided to propose a MOOC.

A combination of different strategic and educational reasons explains why our University organized this first open course. Featuring amongst such reasons was the stimulus to join a huge online community of potential students and professionals, the fostering of a better intercultural exchange with the international community; the offer of an introductory, or a more specialized experience for those who are already competent in the subject area; the perspective of the possibility to integrate such MOOC as part of a learning pathway, dedicated to Italian or foreign students who attend standard courses at the University of Padova; the presentation of a more qualified Italian educational context in Human Rights to worldwide experts.

In relation to such objectives of internationalization, the MOOC can be considered both as a tool for communicating the quality of teaching and research at our university, as well as an opportunity to stimulate students to either enroll with us or spend part of the period foreseen by their university career (e.g., by Erasmus) in Padua. Moreover, the University of Padova pursues the goal of supporting lifelong learning (especially for professionals), in line with the key objectives set at both national and European levels.

Below is a description of how MOOC is produced and managed, highlighting the role of CMELA, the multimedia production staff of the University of Padova, the essential contribution of the Human Rights Centre of the University of Padova, the content provider, and the support of Iversity, the host.

Producing a MOOC. Decisions, processes and resources utilised by CMELA

As most online courses, a MOOC consists of several elements (Guàrdia, Maina & Sangrà, 2013). Apart from video lessons, an online course should, in fact, contain quizzes, assessed exercises, learning aids as well as social activities or discussion forums (Siemens, 2012b).

Due to the massive numbers of participants, however, social activities are more focused on a peer-to-peer “horizontal” interaction in which the intervention of the instructors is diluted. Moreover, in such scenario, it is considered almost inevitable that most students would drop out of the course, and the average completion rate of a MOOC is low below 10% (Jordan, 2013, 2014).

For all the above-mentioned reasons, the production of a MOOC can be seen as a complex and lengthy process that could be better illustrated by the following diagram.

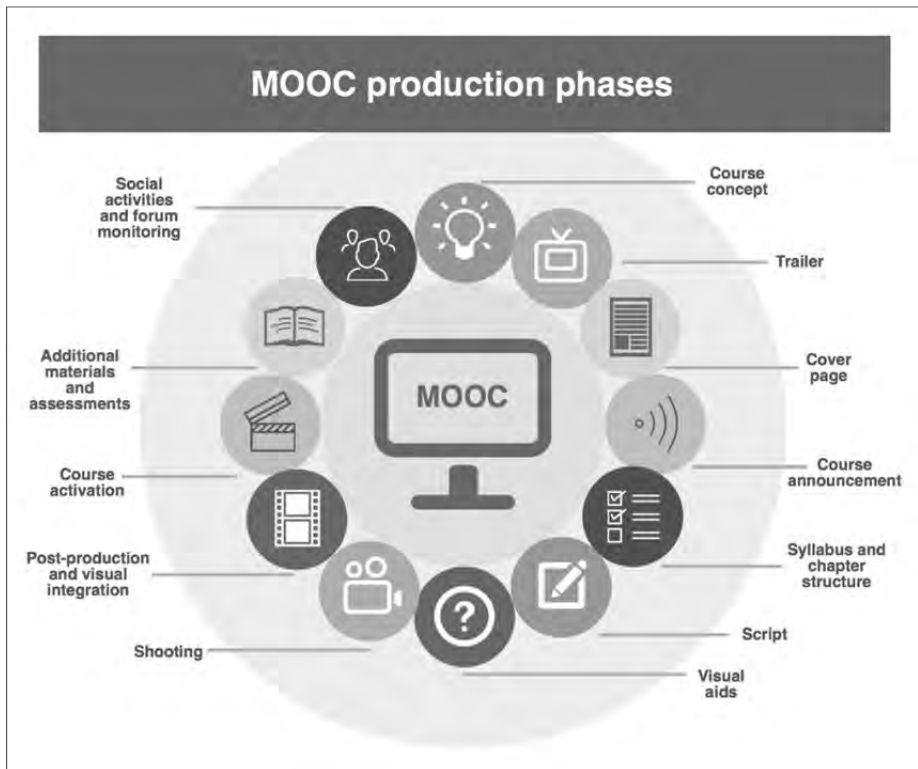


Figure 1 – MOOC production phases

All the production phases partially overlap with each other, necessarily requiring a fine orchestration of the activities, the meeting of strict deadlines and the provision of space for adaptation to any change of setting, both before and during the delivery.

Iversity best practice in the production of a MOOC recommends having lecture texts as accurately as possible, writing, de facto, a sort of script for the instructor.

This approach is aimed at avoiding errors during the shooting sessions, and checking the duration of lectures. Moreover, visual aids and graphic elements could be prepared beforehand, thus having them ready to be inserted in the videos.

Production in action

The first step to be taken is the initial analysis of aims and target audience, and the subsequent definition of the concept of the MOOC and the related syllabus. Once the overall content of the MOOC was defined and agreed upon, then started the production phase.

The overlapping sequence of the most important activities is represented by the following diagram:

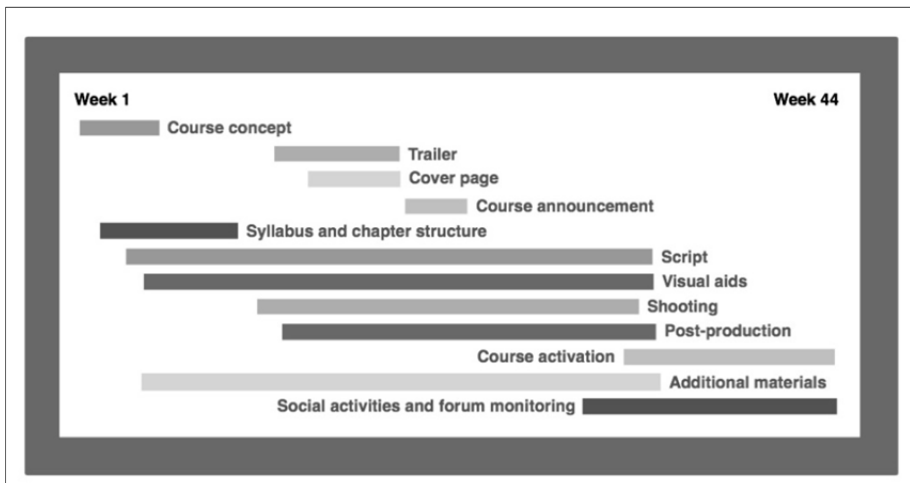


Figure 2 – MOOC production: sequence of different activities

The course page and the trailer were aimed to announce the availability of the course on the Iversity website¹, between 5 to 3 month before the actual course delivery. As for the social strategy, we decided to have a single Facebook and Twitter page for the whole project, rather than just for the specific course. This is easier to manage in the short and the long run since it foster cross-relations between courses.

¹ <https://iversity.org>.

Instructional design

The instructional designer was the liaison between the instructor and the video production team. In the first phase, an analysis of the aims of the course – both for the instructor and for students – was carried out. The content of the MOOC was divided into short units and some visual aids – consisting mainly of keywords, conceptual maps, timelines, maps, charts and tables – were designed to convey the main concepts of the lessons.

When the need to convey complex mechanisms and concepts arose, we adopted some more advanced graphic tools that helped us in developing such specific graphic solutions: the requests and the ideas developed during the meeting with the instructors were verified with the video team supervisor in order to find the most communicative video tool to convey the concept correctly.

Another important part of the work of the instructional designer was focused on finding the correct form of assessment. Again, a potentially huge audience, with a diverse cultural background was a crucial aspect to take into consideration: short self-evaluation unit quizzes aimed to help students retain the information conveyed in the videos, as well as two peer-to-peer evaluated assignments and some discussion exercises were prepared. The objective was to make participants apply the theoretical concept they were learning in an ordinary daily context (Guàrdia et al., 2013).

Focus on video production

Considering the video production, we focused on keywords as the main visual aid. To stress the importance of concepts during the speech, we decided to use a lettering effect which would appear near the instructor image filling the frame.

After a first test shooting session, we realized that the instructor did not feel comfortable in a shooting studio: the environment was markedly unnatural and too dissimilar to a classroom or his desk. Besides, he also felt that following a script was depriving the lesson of its natural methodology, and would have preferred to use the same approach he normally adopted in a regular lesson.

At this point we switched approach: we changed the camera, created a fake “professor’s study” as a the new setting, in order to simulate a more natural environment for the instructor, and positioned a “blue-board” just behind the instructor to be used as a chroma-key frame for animated keywords that would be added in the post-production stage.

The result was better: a less than 10 minutes video product in which the fluid speech of the instructor resulted more appealing. Furthermore, even the post-production stage was able to benefit from this change and markedly reduced the time consumed. After defining the templates of the video features (i.e., graphics, music theme for headlines and credits) we broke down the text used by the instructor into segments, with each piece of text corresponding to a shooting take. As the comparison between the time spent in shooting and the usable footage is 3:1 (three hours of shooting results in 1 hour of good footage), while the ratio between footage and post-production is 1:9 (1 hour of footage requires 9 hours of work in post-production), having two operators working on the project was crucial to the success of the project. It optimised the instructor's time for shooting and allowed the operator to work on separate parts of the work simultaneously, without being overloaded.

We also found that the use of a teleprompter was helpful in giving confidence to the instructors, reducing the number of otherwise inevitable mistakes, and speeding the shooting process: hints and presenter notes were projected on the teleprompter to help the instructor in his speech.

Technological and working resources

From a technical point of view, CMELA already possessed most of the equipment and skills necessary for the production of the MOOC. However, as an experimental activity, the development of the MOOC required additional means, especially in relation to human resources.

During the final phases of the MOOC production, seven people were employed on a full-time basis to carry out the foreseen activities.

Cameras, microphones, a television set equipped with a chroma key, props for the fake teacher study, and most of the software tools for production and post-production were provided by CMELA and were already available. Apart from the expenditure for hiring two more operators, a relatively consistent sum of money was employed to buy software and online tools to create animated visual aids.

As mentioned previously, creating a MOOC is a complex activity, and requires a whole team of experts in several fields (Bonnett, 2012). It is, therefore, important to underline that during the entire process, the Iversity didactics team was present and supported us with suggestions, requirements, and the quality evaluation of all the material we developed. In the final month before the starting date of the course, meetings with the Iversity team were scheduled on a weekly basis.

Aims, criteria and expectations in the perspective of the “contents provider” – the Human Rights Centre

The teaching experience in higher education of the Human Rights Centre dates back to the 1980s. Over the years, it has further grown internationally due to the promotion and visibility offered by the establishment of the European Master’s Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation based in Venice (1997), the creation of a 2-year Master Degree in Human Rights that is taught in English (2013), and the launching, in 2015, of a joint Ph.D. Programme with universities in Croatia, Australia and Greece.

Nevertheless, before the opportunity offered to develop this MOOC the Centre had not yet had any experience with entirely online curricula. With the technical expertise provided by the CMELA, the MOOC represented, therefore, a stimulating challenge and opportunity to link a long-standing experience in delivering human rights knowledge and critical skills in physical classes to the peculiarities of a much wider and diverse learning audience offered by new education virtual platforms.

The choice of the curriculum was based on the already existing subject of “International Protection of Human Rights” (Shelton, 2014), applied to a multi-level context; i.e., from global to local (Bekemans, 2012). The MOOC, in particular, has addressed how and why human rights are promoted and protected in a variety of contexts spanning from the international institutional level (international and regional organisations) to national and sub-national authorities, but also including the dimension of non-state actors such as NGOs, academia, civil society networks (Simmons, 2009).

There are several reasons at the basis of this choice, not least amongst which the combined expertise and joint efforts, made by the principal instructor and his assistants, with a view to replicate the distinctive multi-disciplinary and multi-level approach to human rights research and education developed over the years by the University of Padova through the MOOC experience.

Another contextual motivation has been the prospective of replicability of the same subject. Indeed, in case of a positive experience, the choice of adopting a geographical focus on human rights institutions and mechanisms would allow the creation of renewed editions, with slight changes on the substantial part (in case of updates), focused primarily on new case-studies and additional contents (interviews, attachments, videos).

More significantly, however, choosing to explain why and how mechanisms and processes allow the protection or improvement of human rights standards, from the urban contexts right up to the United Nations, was deemed both attractive for prospective human rights students, and helpful in improving their skills as “human rights experts” and “human rights defenders”.

From this point of view, the MOOC has been primarily developed to target people who already have a background in Political Science, International Relations and/or Law. Its introductory chapter was, nevertheless, conceived to provide a basic explanation of the main issues, concepts and scenarios at stake, thus allowing accessibility to contents also to people engaged on the ground, and who do not necessarily have a specific academic or educational background. Moreover, while developing the structure and contents of the MOOC, the teaching staff chose to elaborate at least one chapter for each area of the world where institutionalised systems for the protection of human rights are already in place (Africa, Europe, the Americas), while, in the chapters with a general scope, it concentrated on interviews, case-studies, and additional contents according to a cultural awareness criterion.

Periodic assignments and exercises were as well developed according to the same pattern, in particular, the assignments that are included (such as writing a complaint to an international human rights organisation), are meant to be related to students' experiences and understanding of human rights violations, and intended to help the latter connect facts and events from daily life to the specific knowledge acquired during the course.

Students' participation: an empirical analysis²

Who were the 5,775 students who enrolled in the MOOC? What were their motivations? How did they judge the MOOC platform, content and instructors, as well as their overall experience in the course?

This section seeks to answer these above questions, using the course website analytics and the outcomes of four surveys delivered both during the course and at the end of it, namely: 1) a demographic survey delivered 15 days after the beginning of the course (839 respondents); 2) a motivational survey delivered 15 days after the beginning of the course (624 respondents); 3) a post-course survey among students who completed the course (152 respondents); 4) a post-course survey among enrolled students who, however, failed to participate in the course (225 respondents).

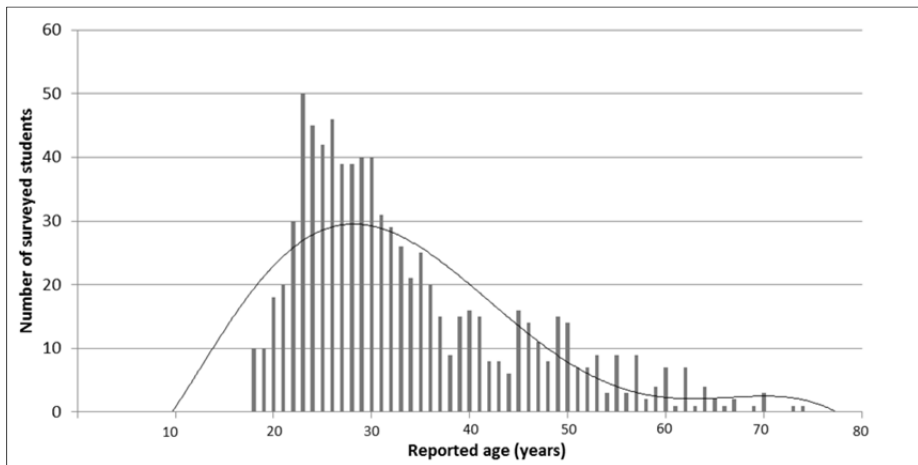
The course was first publicised in November. Students began registering immediately, with two evident peak periods: the first one between November 25th and December 2nd (when almost 1.000 students enrolled); the second one at the end of January 2015, and consistent with the advertising campaigns

² All images courtesy Iversity GmbH.

done through both the Iversity and the University of Padova websites and social networks.

Between November 2014 and August 2015, 5,775 students from more than 110 countries had enrolled for the course. The top five countries involved are Italy (15.4%), Germany (7.5%), India (6.8%), Pakistan (5%) and the United States (3.8%).

Out of the 835 students who answered about their age in the demographic survey, most reported they were in their 20s and 30s (with a peak between 23 and 26 year olds), although the entire population of students who responded to that question ranged from adolescents to people in their seventies (figure 1). 58% of those who reported their gender (N = 829) were female.



N = 835

Figure 1 – Age distribution

Approximately three-quarters of the students who answered the question about highest degree attained reported holding at least a bachelor's degree. A quarter of those who answered the question concerning the subject area of their degree (N=558) reported they had studied Law, a fifth came from studies in Social Sciences and History, and another 15% had studied Foreign Languages, Literature and Linguistics. Two-thirds reported having no or little familiarity with Human Rights.

As to students' motivation for taking the course, the answers provided can be grouped in the following three broad areas (and as displayed in figure 2)³:

- a. to gain a general understanding of human rights and pursue enjoyment or personal educational enrichment, with no particular expectations regarding an academic or a professional career advantage (category 1 in figure 4);
- b. to gain skills to improve employment or job/academic advancement opportunities (categories 2-4);
- c. as a social experience (category 5).

It is also worth emphasizing that the majority of students considered the fact that the course was proposed by the University of Padova – Human Rights Centre – as an important (although not the main) reason for enrolling.

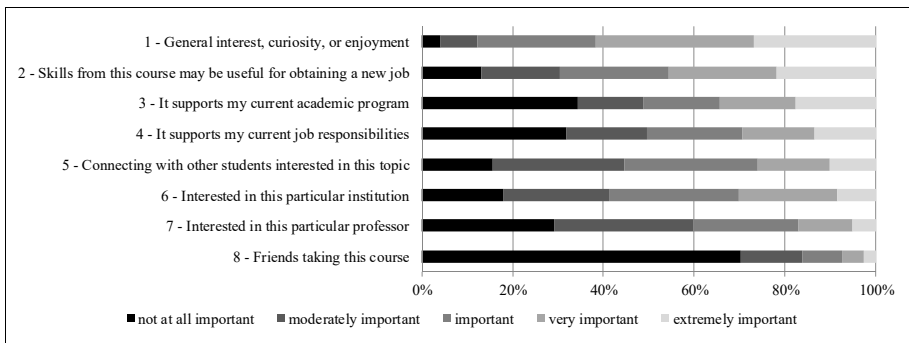
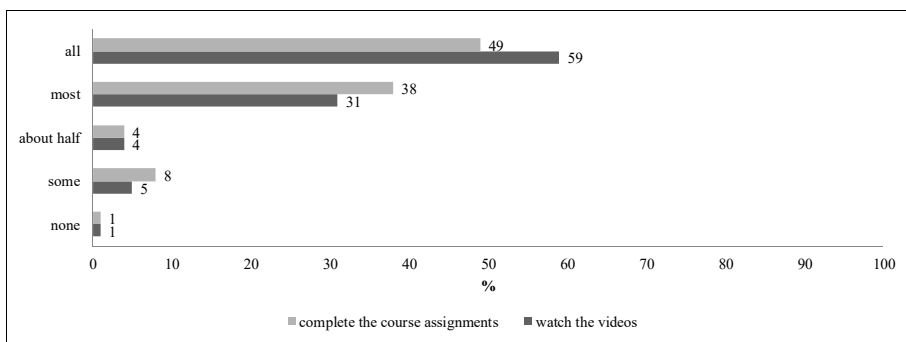


Figure 2 – Motivations for enrolling

In the motivational survey, students were asked about their initial intentions. Most reported that they began the course intending to watch most, or all, of the lecture videos provided (90%), and to complete the course assignments, including homework, quizzes or exams (87%: see figure 3). Moreover, out of 592 surveyed students, 72% declared the intention to participate in discussion exercises posted by the instructor, and 60% in general discussion forums, but only 36% in peer to peer grading.

³ Analysis of “Other” responses found that they largely fit within existing categories.



N = 631

Figure 3 – *Student's intentions*

Similarly, student engagement and persistence are recorded to have gradually declined over time, and only 7% of enrolled students qualified for their “certificate of participation”. This aspect, however, is common to all MOOCs.

Indeed, the average overall lecture progress sharply declined over the first two weeks (from 41% for unit 1.1 to 15% for the last unit of chapter two), and finally levelled off at an average trend approximately ranging between 6% and 10% (figure 4). In a similar way, most course activities were at their peak only at the beginning of the MOOC. Thus 9% of enrolled students took the first quiz at the end of the second week; 3% submitted the mid-term exercise and only 2% submitted the final exercise (figure 5).

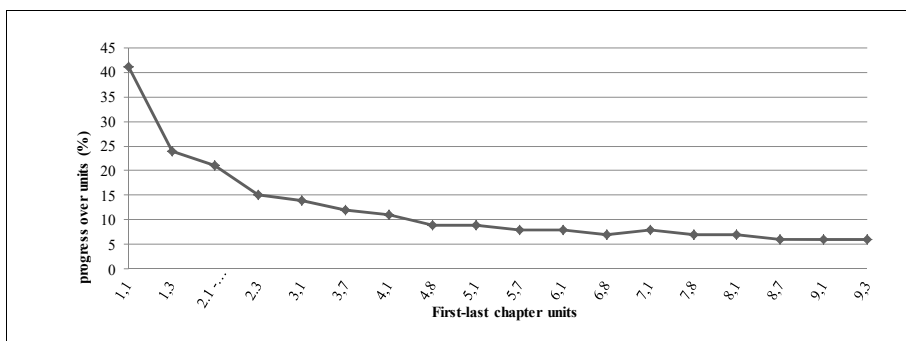


Figure 4 – *Average overall lecture progress*

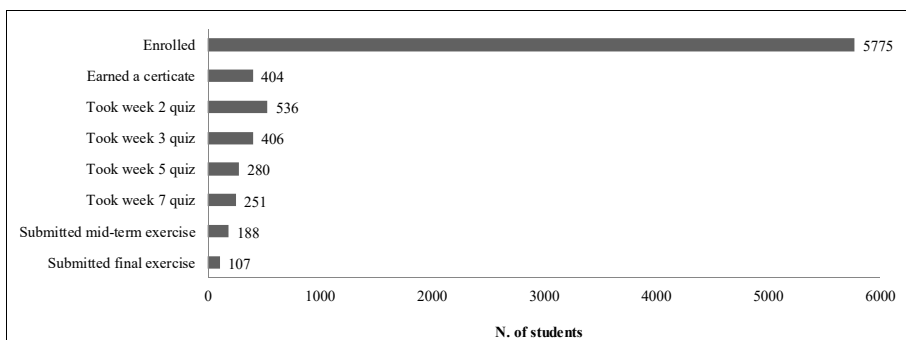


Figure 5 – Student persistence in MOOC activities

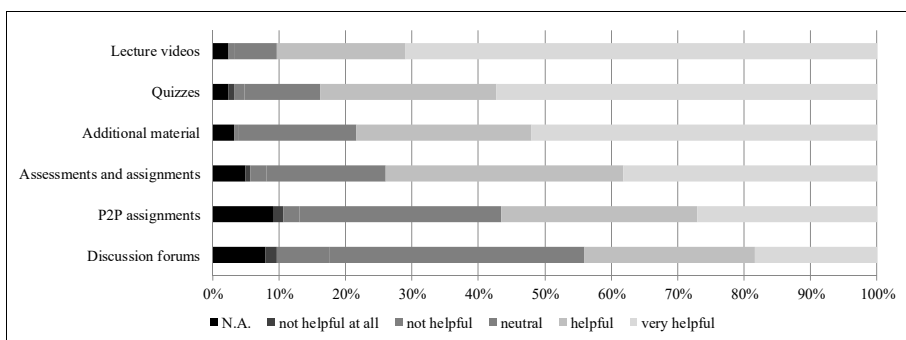


Figure 6 – Rating of course components

Out of the 224 students who answered about their motivation for not participating in the course, almost half referred to the lack of time due to work (26%), study (13%) or family (5%) commitments; another 14% reported internet connection or other technical problems, while only less than 1% cited the lack of prior knowledge or wrong expectations.

The post-course survey also queried students about their satisfaction concerning the various components of their MOOC experience. In general, the vast majority of the 152 students who responded in the survey reported a positive learning experience and rated the course highly. In particular, lecture videos, quizzes and additional material were rated as very helpful by the absolute majority of respondents (respectively, by 71%, 57% and 52% of the students). On the contrary, the course component with the lowest appreciation rate is the “discussion forum”, which, however, was contemporarily rated as either helpful or very helpful by 44% of respondents (figure 6). Besides this, about 74% of the respondents were very satisfied with both the instructor’s performance and the Iversity platform.

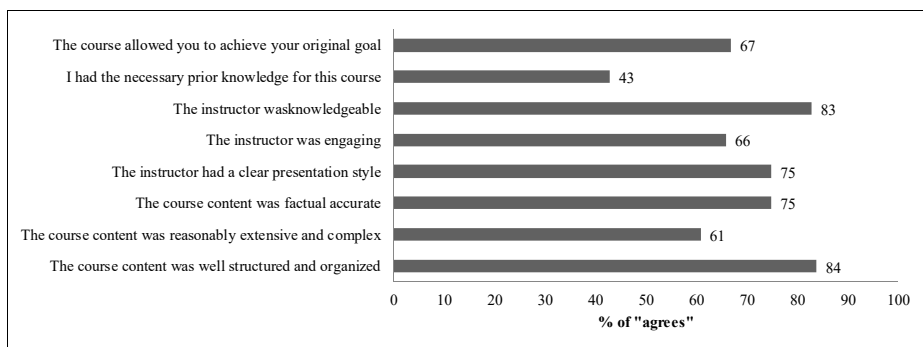


Figure 7– Student attitudes about the course

Students were also asked about the extent to which they agreed with various statements about their experience with the course: a large majority of respondents agreed with all statements, the only exception being the holding of prior knowledge (figure 7). In addition to the satisfaction level for specific course components, students ultimately reported that they were satisfied with the course workload (68%), duration (74%), pacing (75%) and difficulty (71%).

An evaluation of interactions during the delivery of the MOOC

An aspect that the teaching staff was especially keen to test in the framework of the MOOC, was the interaction through the online platform with such a huge and diversified audience. The forum, in particular, was intended, on the one side, as a means for students to communicate with the instructor and his assistants and have some feedback on specific topics and, on the other, as a tool to encourage the exchange of knowledge, experience and points of view among students regarding the issues at stake in the global debate on human rights. Eventually, the forum was mostly used for its first intended application, that is, for interacting with the teaching staff. Besides questions of technical nature, students asked to obtain clarifications about the topics dealt with during the lessons, presented some specific cases, and shared additional information or different views.

The interaction among students did not develop as expected. This was probably due to the complexity of the issues raised and to the extra effort required to start and keep alive an on-line discussion. Moreover, the forum facility provided by the platform was structured in a way that made it quite challenging to launch and moderate discussions, for instance by sorting threads by

subject. As mentioned above, this set of practical difficulties may explain why the “discussion forum” received the lowest appreciation rate in the post-course survey although it was, at the same time, rated as either helpful or very helpful by 44% of respondents.

In general, as detailed previously, the highest rate of student participation in the MOOC was achieved during the delivery of the first chapters. Similarly, if one looks at the comments posted in the platform’s forum, it can be noted that the first chapter received the highest number of comments (34). Chapters 2 to 4 maintained an average of 18 comments. The comments related to Chapter 5 and 6 had slightly fallen in number, while Chapters 8 and 9 had only a few posts.

In order to encourage the debate among students, from Chapter 5 onwards some “discussion exercises” were proposed in connection with news or current events involving human rights issues. This tool resulted more effective than the forum in capturing the students’ attention, as it allowed them to engage in a more focused discussion with their peers. The discussion on real cases spurred students to formulate personal opinions and make use of the knowledge they had just acquired. The participation in these exercises constantly remained quite high, except in Chapter 8.

Ultimately, a peer review technique was proposed to evaluate mid-term and final assignments, also with the aim to encourage the students’ involvement and mutual exchange. Each student submitting the exercise was requested to evaluate the work of seven peers, applying the assessment criteria set by the teaching staff, namely: relevance, consistency, focus and outcomes, and rating each criterion from 1-5. A few students raised some doubts about this mechanism, but eventually only 4 out of 295 people submitting their work (107 in the mid-term exercise and 188 in the final one) did raise a complaint to the instructor and his assistants to contest their score and require a double check. In all cases though the teaching staff found that the peer evaluation received was fair.

Lessons learned

From the viewpoint of the teaching staff that planned the curriculum, prepared the materials, and delivered the course focusing on the contents to be conveyed to students, the MOOC experience has highlighted some points for consideration, and principally related to three dimensions: curriculum development, outreach, and student engagement strategies.

As regards the development of the curriculum, the MOOC has proved to be an effective catalyser in the process of collecting, selecting and elaborating original resources (texts, video-interviews, multimedia materials, etc.) for ed-

educational purposes, and eventually take stock of an array of valuable assets. A lot of materials on human rights related topics have been assembled that would otherwise have gone wasted or just lost. Moreover, the reckoning that the work on a MOOC can ideally complement the most traditional activity of lecturing in a physical class has grown. Although some specific skills that are not strictly needed in a physical class may be required to run a MOOC, the model in question has helped emphasise some aspects that should always be associated with academic work: team working, self-criticism, creativity, innovation, etc. (Bonk, Lee, Reeves, & Reynolds, 2015). For this reason, it seems advisable not to detach the staff working on MOOC projects from the ordinary academic environment, for example by giving in to the temptation of creating a task-force only dedicated to producing MOOC. “Traditional” and “non-traditional” methodologies and expertise should rather be integrated and constitute a shared asset.

As for the second aspect, it seems obvious that a MOOC reaches out, and engages in an education setting, a much bigger and diverse audience than any physical class can do. This characteristic of online education should be valued and used with intelligence, namely as a tool to improve the overall capacity of the academia to engage in interculturalism, and take on the challenge of science and education as a truly global undertaking.

Finally, the MOOC has been able to confirm, once again, that the new media and the social media are indeed powerful learning/teaching tools. They have a unique capacity of engaging students and transferring complex and articulated notions to a large audience with a significant impact. In spite of this, it seems however that they have not yet been able to exercise a comparably strong appeal upon the academic community, which still hesitates to fully embrace such methods. The MOOC experience subject to this analysis has demonstrated that a meaningful integration of new media and social media into higher education praxis is not only possible, but also likely to stimulate and build up the demand and supply of knowledge.

Conclusions

In conclusion, “making” a MOOC required the orchestration of different centres of production, and of different roles and skills. The instructional designer worked closely with a content provider who had to choose and represent the content in a new way, using a more data-based visualisation method. The production of the MOOC emerged as an adaptive process: it was the first attempt to develop an entirely online course, with strictly set deadlines, new to both the production team and the instructors. In such a scenario, the theoretic-

cal method had to be modified to meet the real context and characteristics of major actors of MOOCs, specifically during the shooting session. The production team consisted of a considerably large group of experts, technicians, operators and video editors; pedagogical aspects were dealt with by two instructional designers: one focused on the visualization process and the other on evaluation tools.

The delivery of the course was a new experience as it changed practices linked to curriculum development and students' engagement. MOOC as a "new" international learning context with the joint use of social media tools, showed how important the intercultural approach can be. It led us to seek new strategies for keeping the motivation of students high, while proposing smart and challenging activities during the entire course.

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