Exploring New Approaches towards Open Online Courses

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Summary

Designing Learning for the 21st Century[1] (DL21C) is an online course developed by collaboration between a UK and Chinese University to explore new approaches for open learning courses, and the key attributes of Massive Open Online Courses.

Keywords: MOOCs, Open Online Course, Business Model

1. Introduction

A primary motivation for this project included the exploration of business models, this is essential if long-term viability of new approaches and courses are to be assured. From a pedagogical design perspective, the motivation was to create interactive, responsive and pedagogically effective on-line and blended learning, freely available as an open educational resource (OER). A particular challenge was how to make the course developed culturally, linguistically and pedagogically useful in different languages, cultural contexts and educational settings. The rapid expansion of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has sparked great interests about their potential to disrupt the higher education system and the provision of open online courses as strategic choices for the future in institutions. The course developed by the team fulfills the criteria of a MOOC in that it was online and free to access, although in practice the only students registered with the Chinese university participated and were awarded credit.

2. Case study: Designing Learning for the 21st Century

The course developed is primarily designed for Masters students who are studying educational technology in China. It is openly available for anyone who is interested in this topic and can support an indefinite number of participants. All of the course content, including learning materials and learning activities, are under Creative Common license that

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[1] The course of "Designing Learning for the 21st Century" is available at http://elearning.snnu.edu.cn/course/view.php?id=2

can be used and reused by others without restrictions.

The Chinese partner institution integrated the course as one of the modules into the existing postgraduate degree programme in educational technology at the Chinese University to enrich their curriculum offering and give their students the experience of learning using the English language.   Working on collaboration between the UK and Chinese university required the development of new working practices and pedagogical approaches.   This enabled a business model to be developed that allowed for differential pricing for support and accreditation options for students.

2.1 An Open Learning Model

DL21C approach was based on a design that required students to become active learners and engage in constructing their own knowledge through group activities and course forums, blogs and a group wiki.   The model in figure 1 illustrates the online interaction between the Chinese and British course creators and the students on the course.   Content in the form of video material and learning activities and resources were developed by the British academics, the face-to-face support and facilitation of the course was undertaken by the local Chines facilitator.   In addition, British academics hosted asynchronous hotseat expert discussions where they responded to questions, and a limited number of synchronous discussions on Skype.
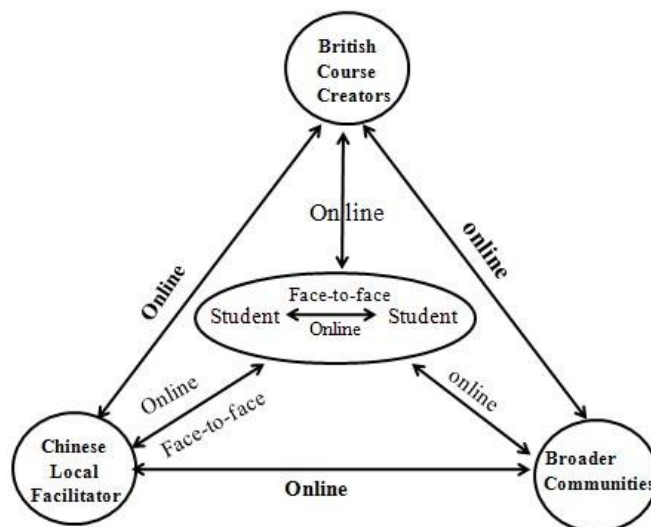

Figure 1. The New Open Learning Model

2.2 Assessment and Credit

DL21C is integrated into the postgraduate program and has become one of the optional courses for Chinese postgraduate students. The students can gain two credits (equivalent to 20 UK credits) if they finish all the learning activities and pass the Patchwork Assessment (Winter, at el., 2003) at the end of semester carried out by local facilitators.   Although the course was designed with the aim of disaggregated content, facilitation and accreditation, in practice this wasn't an option taken up by students.

2.3 Localisation

There are concerns about adopting MOOCs in different languages and cultural contexts. Most MOOCs provided by elite institutions in English speaking countries are designed specifically for their own students on campus. It poses difficulties to learners whose English is second language in other countries.   In this course, staff in the IEC worked closely with Chinese institutions to find out what resources were needed most. The courses was subject to ongoing revision of reading materials and learning activities based on the feedback from the Chinese students and the local facilitators in order to make this course linguistically, culturally and pedagogically integrated into their context.

2.4 Business model

The business model developed for this course depended upon the division of labour between the partner institutions. The design of work undertaken by UK academic activities were readily scalable with limited extra costs as numbers of students increase. The more significant resource implications of scaling up numbers of students are borne by the local Chinese institutions, and this allows the collaboration to take advantage of the different costs bases of UK and China. It is expected that the course can be expanded to several Chinese institutions and to set up a consortium through the host Chinese institution to share the cost of expertise input from the UK partner.

3. Developing an open learning model in institutions

Figure 2 illustrates an open learning model. The underlying proposition is that by allowing learners to choose the level of support they need or can afford, it will make access to higher education a possibility for people who would otherwise be disenfranchised by student fees. In response, capacity and capability need investing in to transform appropriate courses for open learning and develop and resource the processes that enable a 'pay-as-you-go' approach to support and assessment.

In the diagram, two dimensions are identified that are central to the model.   First the extent to which there is formal recognition of learning (summative assessment, accreditation, awards) or self-evaluation by the individual concerned.   Second, a continuum of institutional resource implications that has at one extreme the campus attendance supported (lectures, tutorials, seminars, etc.) through to no ongoing resource implication beyond making the open learning materials available.   Between these two dimensions there are many possibilities and an individual learner would, in the open learning approach, select the appropriate option for them at a given time.
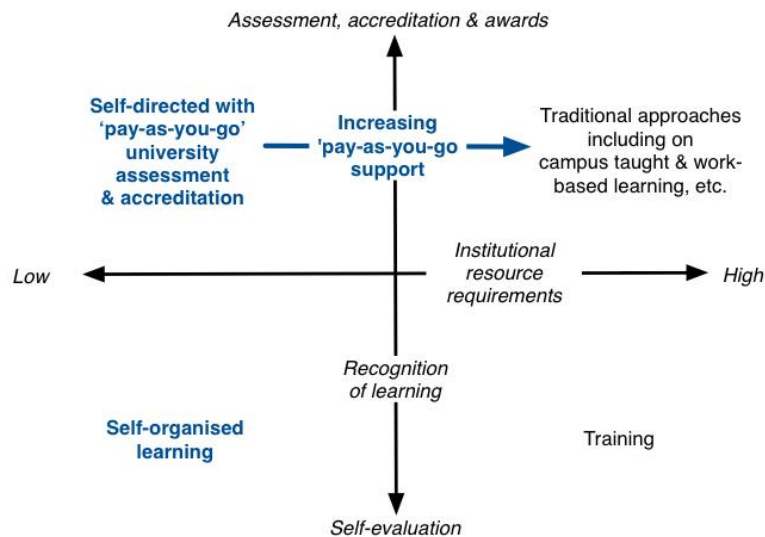
Assessment, accreditation & awards

Self-directed with 'pay-as-you-go' university assessment & accreditation

Increasing 'pay-as-you-go' support

Traditional approaches including on campus taught & work-based learning, etc.

Low

Institutional resource requirements

High

Recognition of learning

Self-organised learning

Training

Self-evaluation

Figure 2. The New Open Learning Model

Conclusion

This open course made it possible for more Chinese students, including those studying in Chinese institutions or self-learners, to gain UK educational experience and if registered with the university also gain credits. Although DL21C is not "massive" compare to other MOOCs at the moment, it has the potential to scale up through work collaboratively with Chinese institutions. For most students in developing countries, one of the feasible approaches toward effective learning in MOOCs is to transfer the original MOOCs created by western institutions into local degree-granting program accompanied with the localisation of learning content and activities, learning support from the original course providers and local teachers. There is a need to develop open learning strategies in institutions in order to make higher education more accessible, flexible and cheaper by adopting open online courses (or MOOCs).

References

Winter, R., Parker, J. Ovens, P., 2003. The patchwork text: a radical re-assessment of coursework assignments. Innovations in Education and Teaching International. 40 (2), pp.111-122.