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# **NURSING ADVISING USING A MOOC: A CASE STUDY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are being used to provide instruction to thousands of individuals worldwide. Currently, MOOCs are being used for student advising in a variety of career fields (Taylor, 2013). The use of MOOCs for providing career guidance is new and evolving. As is the case of many emerging practices, career guidance via MOOCs lacks standards: best practices have yet to be developed (Parra, 2016). As a result, in developing advising focused MOOCs, creativity, learning from others, reflection, and flexibility will likely lead to success.

At Utah State University (USU), we used a MOOC to provide people worldwide with information to assist them determining if nursing is the right career for them. We titled the MOOC “Preparing for a Career in Nursing” and offered the course through the Canvas Network. Our MOOC design and development team included a nursing advisor, the nursing program director, a course designer, and a very skilled administrative assistant. The course consisted of five modules and was offered for four weeks.

We believe the MOOC was successful in achieving our advising goal and want to share what we learned. In this article, we describe our goals for the course, the theory we used to guide the MOOC development, the way we implemented the course, the characteristics of the students who enrolled in the course, and the lessons we learned in the process of offering the course.

We had two major goals for our advising MOOC. The first main goal was to provide information about careers in nursing to whoever is interested, free of charge, with the prospect of increasing the numbers of people considering the

profession. Health care is experiencing a nursing shortage. In order to alleviate a potential crisis, we need more students to select nursing as a career. However, due to a variety of factors, nursing preparation programs limit the number of students admitted each year. Even if all current nursing program “seats” were filled, there still would not be enough nurses in ten years to meet the projected needs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). To decelerate the shortage, it is vital that we enroll students who will be successful as nursing students and committed to careers in nursing.

One longstanding advising issue is providing adequate career guidance to people in rural communities and/or to those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds (Tabi, 2016). Access to health care career advisors is scarce outside of metropolitan areas and this reduces the potential to advise and support the knowledge of nursing as a career among certain groups of people. With this in mind, we created the MOOC to provide guidance to wide range of potential students. Fortunately, advising MOOCs can be accessed globally which can dramatically increase the number of students served, broadening participation. Our data suggest that we have met the goal of broadening access; many of the students who enrolled in the MOOC indicated they did not live in North America. However, we have not yet collected specific data regarding whether students live in rural areas or are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus, we need to collect data to determine if our course has broadened participation among previously disenfranchised demographics.

The second major goal of our MOOC was to help provide a way for potential nursing students to find out about the nursing programs offered specifically at Utah State University. Our course content did not provide a focus on USU’s programs, but we did mention the nursing programs that were offered through the university. Moreover, MOOC students’ exposure to the USU logo suggests that many more students were likely to have become more aware of the university nursing programs through the advising course.

The awareness of our MOOC did seem to spread rather quickly. Our analysis of course exit data indicated that the majority of the students who enrolled in our course would recommend the course to others. We found potential evidence for the recommendation by the many students enrolling in the second offering of the course in June 2016 which was offered shortly after the first course offering in March of 2016. In terms of influence on enrollment at USU, we did not have data for the full admission cycle following the first course offering, however, numbers of applicants were up for fall 2016 admission.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In developing our nursing advising MOOC, we used the Strength Based Advising (SBA) Model which focuses on helping students build their inherent talents and interests (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). When advising students using this model, focus is placed on students' existing strengths and providing information to assist the students in developing skills and knowledge needed to successfully move forward with their career aspirations. For example, advisors using the SBA model create course content that encourages students to expand their existing study skill abilities. In addition, the SBA model reinforces the use of positive statements to build advisees' confidence in their career choices (Schreiner, 2013).

## **COURSE CONTENT AND THE STUDENTS**

Putting the theory into practice, we, a group of five USU faculty and staff, created several modules comprising the "Preparing for a Career in Nursing" MOOC. These modules were divided up as follows:

- an introduction to the course;
- information on the various levels of nursing education and careers available;
- information on how people prepare for nursing school;
- study tips to improve success rates;
- resources for diverse and non-traditional individuals who want to become nurses.

Most of the modules included a transcribed video recorded presentation providing information on nursing careers, written materials on the topic, links to related sites, and a quiz on the content covered in the module to help reinforce the learning. Students were encouraged but not required to post on the discussion boards. The majority of students did not add to the conversations. Students were able to take the quizzes multiple times and no minimum quiz score was required for the students to move to the next course module.

We offered the first course section in March of 2016 which we left open for enrollment for five weeks. We did not advertise of course beyond creating a brief course description that we had placed on the Canvas Network website in January. In the first offering, we had hundreds of students register for the course (586). Only a little over 150 actually entered and took the initial quiz which unlocked the course content. Even fewer finished the required coursework (under 100). When students completed at least three of the content modules, they could request a certificate of completion which we provided as an email attachment. Of those in the first course who completed the needed modules, a little over 70 of the students requested and were provided a certificate of completion.

In terms of who registered for the first free, non-credit class, the majority of students (54%) who completed the initial survey were from North America. However, students from nearly every continent took part in the course. We identified that there were many non-North Americans before the course began by looking at the roster and as a result added information for people living outside of the USA or Canada who might want to be licensed in other countries. Twenty-five percent of our students were in high school, another twenty-five percent had some college but had not graduated. Nearly thirty percent of our students had graduated from college and about ten percent had graduate degrees.

To help keep the team members' workload down, we did not require any written assignments be completed by participants. We did suggest activities to deepen their learning. These included accessing websites for specialized nursing careers, such as the National Coalition of Ethnic Minority Nurses Association and the National Association of Men in Nursing.

## **STUDENT COURSE FEEDBACK**

Students were able to provide feedback about the course through a survey which was composed of quantitative and qualitative items. Students also provided feedback through discussion board postings. Our analysis of the students' feedback revealed that overall, the participants appreciated the advising MOOC. Approximately 90% of the students responded favorably that the course materials (lectures, videos, and documents) and course activities (discussions, assignments, and quizzes) had a positive impact on their learning experience. Our analysis of students' feedback about the ideal course length revealed 29% of students preferred a 2-4 week duration and 35% indicated that 4-6 weeks was best. The majority indicated they spent under two hours per week on the course content.

The narrative comments provided by the students were the most informative. One student who did not speak English as a primary language wrote about how she wanted to go to nursing school when she was younger, but missed the application deadline. As a result, she took a job as a cook and had been working in that position for years. She continued, "*...but now i (sic) know this is my chance to change everything back and i (sic) know this course will help me get to nursing school. I may be just a cook but enrolling in this course have (sic) really pushed me to have confidence that i (sic) will make it.*" Feedback like this suggested to us that through our MOOC we were successfully advising students who were considering nursing careers. As this was our first time offering a MOOC, we were encouraged by the students' feedback.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

We learned several lessons in developing and offering the MOOC advising course. Faculty member workload is an issue that needs consideration when developing MOOCs (Lombardi, 2013). For our MOOC, we found that the time to develop the course, respond to student discussion comments, and send out certificates of completion did add to the amount of work both faculty members and staff needed to do. As a result, we learned a lesson about the importance of keeping the course simple, particularly with respect to the students' assignments. We also realize that individualized frequent faculty member feedback is impossible with large courses, so we now know it is wise to develop assignments and/or quizzes that are self-graded to keep the workload burden associated with the MOOC to a minimum.

We learned that our course goals do not necessarily match the goals of the MOOC registrants. Before the course began, our thought was most students who registered for the advising MOOC would complete the coursework and be excited to move forward with a career in nursing. Our group quickly realized that students didn't consume the information we hoped they would. Many students registered for the course but either did not enter the course or did not complete the assignments. In the first course offering, we had 593 students registered and only 156 completed at least one quiz, which is 26.3%. The second cohort was at 29.6% with 257 registered and 76 taking at least one quiz. Seeing these numbers was a bit disappointing at first. However, after reviewing the literature, we found that MOOC completion rates are typically around 5-15%, so not having a majority of students complete a MOOC should be an expectation not a disappointment (Greene, Oswald, & Pomerantz, 2015).

Another student goal that did not match with ours related to course outcomes. We focused on providing career guidance and not on developing a sophisticated course completion certificate. We were surprised to learn how important a nicely designed certificate was to the students. We also became aware that course completion tangibles such as certificates and badges seemed to be at least as vital to students as gaining career information. As our MOOC was a non-credit course, students who completed the work would not receive a transcript. The certificate allowed students to document the work they finished. The literature does reflect participants value of a tangible proof of course completion. According to Greene, Oswald, and Pomerantz (2015), certificates are important to MOOC participants and enhance student retention.

After the initial distribution of our first few certificates, we were informed by a very adamant student that the document we had developed needed some upgrading and had to include:

1. The logo of the organization offering the course;
2. A unique number to each;
3. The participant's name;
4. A signature by the instructor.

Based on the student's feedback we immediately modified our certificate. The revised award seemed acceptable to the subsequent course completers.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

We offered the course for a second time through the Canvas Network. The Canvas Network allows for four offerings of the non-credit, non-charge course each year. Taking into consideration the students' feedback, we shortened the course duration to four weeks, which provided participants plenty of time to complete the work. As we get more feedback from students, we plan on making additional changes to best meet their advising needs.

## **ADVICE FOR DEVELOPERS**

For those who are considering developing an advising MOOC (or courses with alternative foci), we have several suggestions. Unfortunately, practitioners tend to lack knowledge of best practices in MOOC design and delivery (Parra, 2016). This is particularly true for MOOCs focused on career advising. However, we suggest designers and faculty enroll in and complete an advising MOOC before developing such a course. The experience will provide an opportunity to learn how to (and not to) structure an advising MOOC. A variety of free courses are listed at: <https://www.mooc-list.com/> or <https://www.canvas.net/>

There are other valuable resources available to potential course developers and faculty. Before starting with course creation, it is helpful to read articles and websites on MOOC development. Some helpful videos and written advice can be found at <https://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2014/02/02/mooc-development-advice-from-instructors-that-have-been-there-done-that/>.

We recommend that developers keep advising MOOCs simple. Workload can be an issue, particularly with larger MOOCs (Lambadi, 2013). As a result, reducing or eliminating the need for faculty members to grade assignments can keep the amount of time spent administering and managing a course to a

reasonable level. Another simplification is course content language. As enrolled students may not speak English as a primary language, MOOC course designers need to take student cultural and language abilities into consideration (LiyanaGunawardena, Williams, & Adams; 2013). We recommend when making course videos to speak slowly, reduce or eliminate the use of colloquialisms and professional jargon, and be as clear with your words as possible to help reduce confusion or misunderstandings.

We suggest including a variety of people in your design group. In our situation, we found health care advisors to be very helpful in providing the guidance information students need to learn in an advising MOOC. Course designers effectively assisted in developing the easy to navigate course. Also, we found the necessity for an administrative assistant to transcribe the videos. Last, we strongly suggest developers work with a graphic designer to create a quality certificate or badges that will be shared with students who complete the course.

## **CONCLUSION**

We hope that others can learn about our experience and are inspired to develop and offer effective advising MOOCs in nursing and other career areas. The use of MOOCs to help people find their career path is just beginning and will continue to grow, given the capacity of MOOCs to reach people who may not otherwise have the resources to make informed career decisions.



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