Flipping with a MOOC: A Case Study of an English Academic Writing

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Abstract

Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) have been growing in popularity with educational researchers and learners in online environments. Courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education setting often bring together students from different academic backgrounds. However, MOOCs platforms haven't provided many choices for EAP courses. For this reason, such courses tend to demonstrate materials that are sufficiently general to be practical and relevant to all students. Most teachers often need to supplement their teaching with online materials that are relevant to the students. Although MOOCs have not been designed widely as supplements to English language teaching and learning for EAP, this research investigates the efficacy of integrating MOOC pedagogy in English as foreign language (EFL) writing instruction. There are forty Taiwanese sophomores who enroll in an EFL essay writing course. This study explores the learning experience in an English writing course that includes classroom observation, peer feedback, a teacher's assessments, and perceptions toward MOOCs. In this study, MOOCs writing class is employed as supplementary materials and social interaction in an essay writing class. Data will be included students' perception questionnaires toward online learning environment, teachers and peer interactions, observation, reflective journal, and their writing assignments. It is expected that this MOOC course will facilitate students' learning process by interacting teachers and classmates' feedback.

Keywords: blended learning, flipped classroom, MOOC, English for academic purpose, EFL writing

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Introduction

Technology continues to transform education in a very different way, including traditional and online contexts, as the recent popular teaching and learning platform of massive open online courses (MOOCs) demonstrates (Pappano, 2012; Erdem-Aydin,2015). Although MOOCs are seen to be, and in fact are designed to be, standalone online courses (Hill, 2012), their introduction to the higher education landscape has expanded the format for possible blended course designs. Creating a blended course that incorporates another instructor's MOOC teaching load, while allowing the blended course instructor to shape the in-class components. However, fitting in-class modules into an existing MOOC in a way that optimizes students' engagement and performance, can be really challenging.

This paper reports a case study of a blended undergraduate course in edX Writing 101- English Writing and Style in Fall 2015, which incorporated the University of Queensland MOOC. It blended course design that the researchers think are responsible for these perceptions. Although the blended course adopted the entirety of one particular MOOC, the paper suggests that other course curriculum may well be both possible and desirable.

Literature Review

Blended approaches to teaching integrate traditional (face-to-face) instruction with online material, creating what can be flexible and effective model for instruction (Bowen, Chingos, Lack & Nygren, 2012; Hill, 2012). Although there is no standard and novel approach to blended courses, they often involve a rigorous, time-intensive curriculum design of face-to-face courses to integrate face-to-face and online learning completely.

MOOCs are defined as online course that ensure large-scale interactive participation and aim for open access by the Web. Learners may enroll and track the content. Instruction is delivered via videos, texts, quizzes, discussion forums, sources, and so on. According to Hollands and Tirthali (2014), MOOCs serve many purposes. They might be regarded as an important action for democratization of education because the ability of reach more individuals with better quality of learning materials.

MOOCs serve a new option for blended course. Instead of "flipping" one's course by producing online teaching materials, instructors can implement their courses around existing MOOCs (Fisher, 2012). Instructors would choose some parts of the MOOC in their traditional classroom context. The challenges of blended courses are curriculum design and students' engagement in the MOOC course learning. The researchers in this study noted that there is a lack of and a need for studies on MOOCs participants' perceptions and feedback in different context in order to design more efficient learning process in the blended course of MOOCs and traditional course.
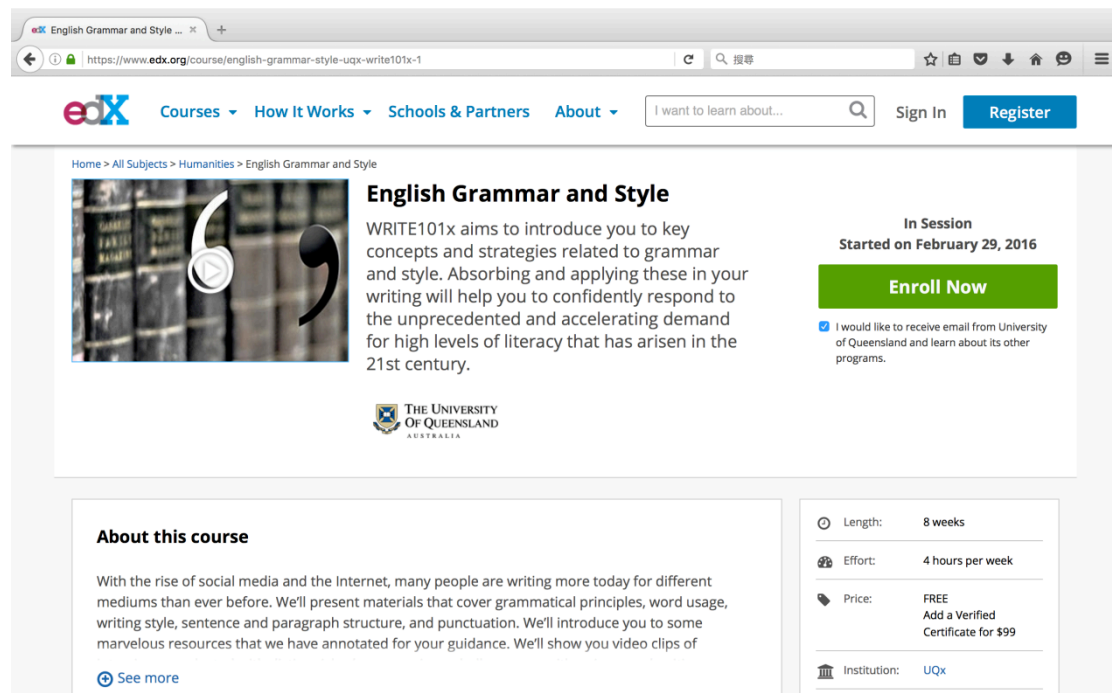
Methodology

Instructional Context

The setting for the present case study was college-level course on English Composition taught at I-Shou University. The instructor incorporate edX MOOC course- English Writing and Style into the freshman writing class. The research as an instructor decided to draw the MOOC main course (online lecture videos, exercises and quizzes) in her writing course syllabus. Forty students participated in this blended course.

The start of the 8-week University of Queensland MOOC happened to coincide with the beginning of the I-Shou University semester, one of the reasons researchers chose to use it as part of this writing course (see Figure 1). Since the topics covered in MOOC course were grammar points that most participants learned before, the instructor introduced and reviewed the lessons in the remaining class periods. Students were also assigned related writing exercises, which were discussed in weekly face-to-face class sessions led by the instructor. During eight-week session, instructor would preview and review the lessons in edX platform. Instructor and teaching assistant checked their progress by using checklists. Figure 2 shows the layout of English Writing and Style throughout the fall semester 2015 course.

Figure 1: The edX homepage of English Grammar and Style

Figure 2: Topics covered in a MOOC course

Week 1	INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE
Week 2	INTRODUCTION TO SENTENCES
Week 3	INTRODUCTION TO VERBS
Week 4	INTRODUCTION TO NOUNS AND PRONOUNS
Week 5	INTRODUCTION TO ADJECTIVES AND DETERMINERS
Week 6	INTRODUCTION TO ADVERBS AND CONJUNCTIONS
Week 7	INTRODUCTION TO PREPOSITIONS AND PARAGRAPHS
Week 8	INTRODUCTION TO PUNCTUATION

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to explore student experiences learning in this blended course, a focus group was conducted with six students during one of weekly class sessions after the MOOC course ended. The focus group was conducted during the outside class periods. Students were informed that the focus group was interested in their feedback on this blended course. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis Later in the semester, students were asked to write reflection journal, which designed some questions by the researchers to further explore their learning process and themes that emerged from all participants.

Qualitative data analysis for this study involved the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1988) and development of case studies (Yin, 2003). During the initial stage, the transcripts of focus group and students' reflection journal underwent line-by-line coding in order to establish patterns related to students' learning process and perceptions of this blended writing course. These overarching patterns were triangulated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with researchers' perspectives as the course instructor. During this interactive process, the researchers met twice a month to discuss the emergent patterns and observed classroom, refined patterns, and exchanged ideas.

Results and Discussion

Overall, student responded about this blended learning course was exciting. They stated MOOC's lecture videos as designed simply, presented a little boringly and fast. Also, they described MOOC as generally a little challenging for them because their English is not first language, especially the way they taught grammar terminology. As for the assignment, students described that they didn't have time to complete it due to the limited time and language barrier. Regarding the face-to-face traditional class, students noticed that they prefer to interact with the instructor in the traditional class. Students' feedbacks were collected in the following section.

Nature of Self-Paced Learning

Since none of students heard of MOOC before they enrolled English Writing and Style, they were excited about this kind of online learning community. Students considered that there were several advantages of the MOOC over a traditional course such as flexibility, convenience, and accessibility. After the instructor introduced the MOOC course, students knew that they had to arrange their time on weekly video lectures at their own pace in their spare time after class. As one student mentioned:

"As for the edX course, it was emphasized with British accents and also with the plenty of academic contents initially. In addition, it was about grammar, so I always needed to check out those meanings of terminology of grammar after the edX course." (Student A)

"Because I am interested in learning English, I think that I would like to keep trying the edX course. Also, I like the way watch video lectures if I am available." (Student C)

Students agreed that MOOC course is novel but a little challenging since it was taught in English. Some materials were too easy, but some were pretty difficult. Students mentioned that the first four weeks materials were quite easy, including verbs, nouns and pronouns, and sentences patterns. However, the assignment needed to take a long time to complete it. They didn't have extra time to write this assignment because they also read assigned reading and homework in the traditional face-to-face class.

"Well, there were the four homework at the beginning…..as you had time, We would positively try to finish the homework because of the motivation that we might get some the feedback from the professor. Actually, we think that I would like try that if we have time" (Focus Group B)

Local vs Global Learning Communities

Some students participated regularly in the English Writing and Style MOOC to complete quizzes and exercises; however, edX discussion forums and assignments were the most challenging practices for students to participate actively. As mentioned earlier, students reported that time constraints and language barrier as the reasons for not engaging in the MOOC course. Instead, the instructor asked them to use checklist to check their learning process and write the reflection journal regularly. In addition, they tended to ask questions with the instructor or classmates in the face-to-face class. One student described that no one reply her question in the discussion forum when she posted a question in the MOOC course. This student is an active and hard-working student. She described that "I was okay as it showed on by subtitles because I could repeat it." She also mentioned other problems.

"*As for the edX course, it was emphasized with British accents and also with the plenty of academic contents initially. In addition, it was about grammar, so I always needed to check out those meanings of terminology of grammar after the MOOC course.*" (Student A)

This student's positive feedback on MOOC course revealed that she could take the challenges of learning new MOOC materials in English. She enjoyed this kind of learning and also tried to look for some other MOOC courses related to English learning as her self-study courses to improve her English.

Student Perception of the Instructors

Students reviewed both instructors on the MOOC course and face-to-face class in their reflection paper. Quite a few students perceived the MOOC instructors (at least three) were less humorous and interactive. Sometimes instructors spoke too fast on the lecture videos. Students explained that "MOOC teachers expressed their ideas in a very complex way, and sometime we confused by their explanation." They tried to email the instructors about questions, but the MOOC instructors or assistants did not reply to the students. On the other hand, students pointed out that "*the MOOC instructors were very experienced and professional, but they looked very serious in some way. They did not tell a joke in front of class.*" (Focus Group B)

In contrast, students regarded class instructor's role in the face-to-face class as a responsible facilitator. They described the instructor as arrange their learning tasks on schedule in the MOOC, explaining reminding students to complete their in class exercise and MOOC exercises and checking their learning process every week. In the focus group, one student reported:

"*I think that teacher could explain some useful sections of edX course instead of learning those uselessly difficult words. As we learned edX course, we often click on that videos many times because there is no handout for that. Even though the instructor always reminded us to complete our homework, we sometimes needed teacher's more explanations in class.*"

Another student also commented about this issue:

"*After we have done the exercises, we can discuss them together then we will find out the final answer. I think that we could try to give them our explanations for each question. Also, there were some questions without the correct answers so the classmates and I had no idea to know if we really get the correct answers or not. If teacher could spend time elaborate about the question and discussed in class, that would be better for us.*"

As noted above, students reflected that the class instructor still played an important role in organizing and facilitating learning process, especially in the MOOC course. Students understood the flexibility and accessibility of MOOC courses; however, they would appreciate the "real" instructor to solve problems and suggest that the instructor needed to support them to figure out some challenging exercises in the MOOC course. They were more likely to enjoy interacting with instructors in the traditional face-to-face class.

Conclusion and recommendation

Recently, many universities are encouraged to establish MOOCs in Taiwan. The current study investigated a case study of a blended undergraduate course to integrate a MOOC into the curriculum and course. The instructor introduced edX Writing 101-English Writing and Style in the freshman English composition class. Forty students participated in this blended writing course. While these numbers are small to support conclusions on the efficacy of this blended course, students' experiences can provide a guideline of implementing a blended course in the future study.

From students' reflection journal and interviews, they agreed that MOOC course is very interesting but a little challenging since all materials and lectures were taught in English. When it came to mentioning materials, students reported that some were too easy, but some were pretty difficult. Students also commented that the first four weeks materials were quite easy, including verbs, nouns and pronouns, and sentences patterns. However, the loading for the assignment was very heavy and needed to take a long time to complete it. They didn't have extra time to write the assignment because they also read assigned reading and homework in the traditional face-to-face class. The finding supported Samuels' statement (2014) that he claimed that instructors still need to use actual class time to help students to engage in a MOOC course in a critical and creative fashion. Moreover, students' positive feedback on this MOOC course revealed that they could accept this kind of global learning community and were willing to take the challenges of learning new MOOC materials in English. Some enjoyed this kind of learning and also tried to look for some other MOOC courses related to English learning as their her self-study courses to improve their English. Finally, drawing on the findings of earlier studies (Firmin, et al, 2014; Mehaffy, 2012), the researchers believe that students would spend more time on engaging the MOOC course and then they would understand the significant role of autonomy in language learning.

When compared to the instructors between the MOOC course and face-to-face traditional class, students reviewed both instructors were different in terms of teaching style and interaction. Quite a few students perceived the MOOC instructors (at least three) were less humorous and interactive. Sometimes instructors spoke too fast on the lecture videos. Students explained that "MOOC teachers expressed their ideas in a very complex way, and sometime we confused by their explanations." They tried to email the instructors about questions, but the MOOC instructors or assistants did not give any feedbacks to the students. Some students reflected that the class instructor is important to organize and facilitate the learning process, especially in the MOOC course. Students understood the flexibility and accessibility of MOOC courses; however, they would appreciate the "real" instructor to solve problems and suggest that the instructor needed to support them to figure out some challenging exercises in the MOOC course. They were more likely to enjoy interacting with instructors in the traditional face-to-face class.

Recommendation

The research suggests that additional investigation could be conducted into the role of online and other learning resources can play a key part in increasing persistence of effort to improve students' learning outcomes for different student populations such as Japanese or Korean. For non-English native learners, it takes efforts to practice the listening comprehension and writing proficiency. Teachers should prepare related MOOC materials to enhance students' learning outcomes and introduce key concepts before taking a MOOC course. Moreover, teachers should offer an incentive to encourage students' more engagements and persistence when participating in a MOOC course.

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