Factors leading to an effective MOOC from participiants perspective

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Abstract- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are dominating the eLearning field due to its sound pedagogical features and being open to any interest participant. Due to popularity and the demand, number of MOOCs increases at a higher rate. However, not all the MOOCs meet the goals of user. In other terms, not all the MOOCs are effective. It is vital to identify the factors affect to an effective MOOC. Since the MOOC concept is new, student's behaviors and requirements are different than a typical eLearning course. Hence we used Grounded Theory (GT) methodology in order to identify these factors. We found 10 dimensions which affects to an effective MOOC; namely interactivity, collaboration, pedagogy, motivation, network of opportunities/ future directions, assessment, learner support, technology, usability and content. This research explains the process of GT and the results dimensions will assist in designing and implementing an effective MOOC.

Keywords—effectiveness; grounded theory; qualitative; MOOC

I. INTRODUCTION

Massive Open online Courses (MOOCs) are the latest disruption in online education. It is a practice of eLearning where any interest party can participate in a course free of charge or considerably low amount. This leads thousands of users enrolling to courses. The year 2012 became the year of MOOC as stated by New York Time because many of the xMOOC platform were introduced in that particular year [1]. However, despite the popularity, it has found that not many students complete the MOOC courses. In other words, in many occasions completion rates did not exceed 20% but ranging 7-11%. Although researchers argue the less competitions are due to the participants own personal motivation and commitment [2], it has found that many MOOC platforms have considerable variation between the quality of courses. At the same time it is found a quality variation among courses in the same platforms as well.

At present, there are many quality metrics, factors and dimensions exists in the eLearning field. However, those quality aspects will not produce effective results in applying to MOOCs due to its unique nature. At the same time there are lacks of empirical research in MOOCs to reveal the factors affecting to a quality MOOC. Even in the small fraction of research who considers MOOCs quality, focuses on case studies and quantitative approaches.

Our research attempts to identify dimensions which affect the effectiveness of MOOC from the perspective of the user. This research is unique in that we incoporated Grounded Theory (GT) methodology to explore the dimensions which users see as important factors to provide an effective eLearning experience in MOOC. We cliam that the GT, which was introduced by Glaser & Strauss [3] is a powerful theory to identify social aspects of research. Our goal is to understand the behavioral process that leads students to choices and thus we take a causal perspective to provide an overall deep view of a novel phenomina. We claim that the introduction of MOOC changed the behaviours and expectations of students and therefore it is essential to conduct the research with more human aspects. Therefore we cliam that the incorporated GT methodology allows participants to identify what they see as a problem in an area and tell the researcher how they manage that in a systemitic process yet incorporating human aspects.

In this paper, first we explore past research relating to quality of MOOCs. Then we describe the process of GT methodology which explain the data gathering and analaysing. Next, we we revealed 10 dimensions which will affect an effective MOOC platform as per students view. Finally we discuss the criteria in the dimensions and conclude with further remarks.

II. REVIEW OF LITERAURE

In order to find factors affecting to an effective MOOC, we searched previous researches which reveal the factors to a successful MOOC. Since the MOOC concept is a new phenomina and introduced recently, it lacks in research relating to effective MOOC. However, effectiveness or quality factors for online learning are widely available with empirical evidence yet those factors will not be suitable for MOOC due to the unique features of MOOC. Hence the critical success factors or factors affecting effectiveness of a MOOC required to research with in the MOOC participants.

It was found that many literatures were at proposing stage of effective or quality aspects to consider in MOOCs. At the same time we observed some literature proposing to use quality metrics which has already explored before emergent of MOOCs. Yet there is a strong argument by Yousef et al [4], which claims that any quality metric in online learning should not be taken for assessing MOOC. It is mainly because MOOC has unique pedagogical features and those metrics were not discovered and validated using MOOC participants. Nevertheless, this review divert the focus in searching for quality metrics frameworks, factors or dimensions based on empirical researches as well as quality metrics without

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empirical researches yet proposed to evaluate MOOCs with strong arguments supported by literature.

A. Emprerical research in MOOC quality

Empirical research in this case are evidence of record of one's direct observations or experiences which can be analyzed quantitatively or qualitatively straight from MOOC participants and/or MOOC courses. Walker and Loch [5], explored the quality of a MOOC in academics perception. In their research, they have distributed a survey among academics who are taking part in MOOC courses via twitter, e-mails, and personal networks using the snow ball sampling technique. Although the research focused on pedagogical aspects of the MOOC, it was evident that with the results, participants brought the need of technological aspects to be considered as to deliver quality in MOOC. However, their research does not directly quote quality metrics in MOOCs, yet their survey resulted with some aspects with video quality, assessments, workload, and social interactions.

The research conducted by Yousef [4] categories MOOC quality criteria in to 2 dimensions and 6 categories. Their model is depicted in the Fig 1.



Fig 1: Classification of MOOC Criteria according to Yousef [4]

The research has used 107 students and 98 professors who took part in MOOC courses. Since they did not find a significant difference in 2 categories, they have merged the dimensions and found scaffolding, collaboration & selforganizing as categories which they should consider. The final results of the instrument found 74 criteria for effective MOOC environment classified in to 2 categories. The statistic results of the survey showed that, learning analytics and assessment have obtained the highest average mean scores. Although there is a wide agreement that usability, content, collaboration, and instructional design play a major role in achieving effective MOOCs, in this research, these categories were identified as less important compared to the learning analytics and assessment categories.

B. Other research in MOOC qaulity

A 10 dimensional proposal to evaluate quality in MOOC found in a publication edited by Sir John Daniel and Stamenka Uvaliæ-Trumbiæas "A guide to online learning". The authors of the publication produce 10 quality benchmarks based on previous literature : Institutional support (vision, planning, & infrastructure), Course development, Teaching and learning (instruction), Course structure, Student support, Faculty support, Technology, Evaluation, Student assessment, Examination security [6]. It states that the benchmarks are based on extensive review of literature.

The framework provided by "Quality Matters" program proposes to use its metrics rubric in assessing MOOCs. This program consists with the latest quality dimensions for online learning [7]. The rubric contains 8 dimensions – Course Overview and Introduction, learning objectives, Assessment and measurement, Instructional materials, Learner interaction and engagement, Course Technology, Learner support and Accessibility. The program has evaluated 21 peer reviewed journals and other academic databases such as ERIC, ProQuest and Google Scholar in order to produce the elements in the rubric. Although the 8 dimensions appear to provide a reasonable argument for online learning, it does not specifically address the context of MOOC.

C. Research relating to Grounded Theory

Researchers identified the flexibility provided by GT which not only aids the creative generation of a conceptual framework, but it also ensures that it is intimately linked to data. It has found this anthropological strategy provides one opportunity whereby they can become more closely attuned to empirical data [8].

Previously, GT was incorporated in MOOC by Adamopoulos [9] which presents a novel analysis using user generated online reviews to find the factors which make a great MOOC. They claim their process of GT was used in a quantitative study as well. However the GT introduced by Corbin & Strauss [10] is based on qualitative study and argue that it is not appropriate to apply criteria ordinarily used to judge quantitative studies. At the same time Strauss [11], empathizes with the importance of active human involvement in the study rather than being a passive data collector. We claim that our methodology is solely conducted with active human participation in the courses and based on the process of the Grounded Theory analyzing behaviors and patterns stated by the participants and we have reasoned and depicted the detail process.

Apart from that in terms of effectiveness, the literature supports a wide range of reasons to high dropouts in MOOC [12] [13] [14]. According to Wang [15], three major areas affect retaining students in MOOC: lack of self-efficacy, lack of self-regulation and lack of self-motivation. But research by Liyanagunawardena al [2], claims dropping out is often challenged by different viewpoints and suggested that it is merely failing to achieve personal aims.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research, our main aim was to identify the factors affects to a successful MOOC in learner perspective. We used GT as the focus will be on individuals live experience of events of the MOOCs participants as it is important to understand the depth of social reality, contextual importance in the new Web 2.0 era. In a qualitative method as GT, researcher is involved in every step listening to human needs, and is responsive and adaptive to explore what actually the users in MOOCs find as effective [10].

In a GT methodology coding is the core behind the whole process and it contains two types of coding: *substantive coding*, which includes both open and selective coding procedures, and *theoretical* coding. In all of this process, memo writing took place in order to compare and build relationships between concepts. We explain the detail process in the data analysis stage.

A. Sampling & Data collection

The total participants in all the MOOC platforms as at now provided the population for our study. Some of the platforms are Coursera, edX, Udacity, NovoEd, Udemy, Iversity, future learn, Open2Study ect. For an instance 2 million users from more than 196 countries enrolled in at least one course [5]. The sampling techniques evolved and changed during the period of the research, often using the purposive sampling technique. Therefore we selected very active users of MOOC where they have carried out the practices at least 6 months. We processed our data collection through 41 very active online participants. Qualitative researchers have recommended sample sizes ranging from as few as 6 participants to as many as 30 for a grounded theory study; however, no rationales exist for those recommendations [16].

In order to formulate the theories grounded on data, we enrolled in 16 MOOC courses from 5 different MOOC platforms over a 2 year period of time. The 5 platforms were Coursera, NovoEd, edX, Iversity & open2study. Data was collected and gathered through observations on forum postings, social media postings, formal and informal interviews. Beyond that we selected a few very active users in every platform and connected with them informally and spent time apart from the course to observe the livelihood of an active user.

As we were participating in the courses, we were building relationships with students during the courses in order to be actively engaged in gathering data. At least one course was selected from 5 platforms. Initially data was gathered by observing the problems students face in the platforms, how they react to the problems, what they post in forums, what are the threads inside the course consist of and also outside the course via social media and Coursetalk(a network of sharing information reviews of courses). Then we selected students who contribute to the course very actively. Generally the active students are those who submit assignments, take quizzes and contribute to the forum much more than an average student. At least 30 mints in depth interviews were designed with 1 participant or a group of participants. Though the interviews were semi structured, we provided casual movements as not to restrict the open answers. All the interviews were conducted via skype or Google hangouts.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A. Substantive Coding

In substantive coding, the researcher works with the data directly, fracturing and analyzing it, initially through *open coding* for the emergence of a *core category* and related concepts.

1) Open coding

The open coding process begins with open questions and we presume that we know little about learner's aspects of successful MOOC. In this case, we sought to learn from participants, who take part in MOOCs. We decided to gather data from MOOC participants after a preliminary search by exploring online students and inquire whether the MOOC is effective to the learner, why it is effective and what students in massive learning environments perceive as effective to the learning.

This process consumed most of the time in the research, and obtained about 95 codes explaining the data. For instance, following explains narrative of one participant's explanation and the codes used to capture the data.

".....I felt so isolated in MOOCs; there was not a particular friend as in like a class, there was no one to interact when I want, I had to wait until someone answer my forum question, or even finding someone to collaborate was not easy....."

Codes: Isolation, interact, collaborate

Once we identified the codes, we were required to categories codes which provide meaningful relationships and patters. Such as students interaction with other students, the systems, the instructor and the content was categories under the core of "Engagement". In this research, 7 core categories identified in order to explain the open codes; engagement, technology, pedagogy, motivation, usability, content and assessment.

2) Selective coding

Selective coding begins after we identified potential core variables, in this case 7 code categories. Subsequent data collection and coding is delimited to that which is relevant to the emerging conceptual framework (the core and those categories that relate to the core). By focusing on the core and other related categories, subsequent data collection can go very quickly; merely minutes, with a few field notes to be captured and analyzed. In this way, we saturate the selected categories that form the basis of the emerging theory without collecting a lot of additional material that has no relevance to the developing grounded theory.

This selective data collection and analysis continued until the we sufficiently elaborated and integrated the core variable, its properties, and its theoretical connections to other relevant categories. This process was initially introduced and carried in the research by Glaser [3] and also lately was emphasized by Charmaz [17] to improve the actions to produce codes where it reduces the time and improves the quality of the findings. By this process the data will be more similar to codes and will support theory efficiently.

Elaborating more on data, once we did the interview with few edX participants, we anchored the conversations and observations over the 7 cores and the relating codes. But at certain time the interviews and observations revealed new concepts and relationships. Students were unclear about the direct benefit from the participation of the courses in MOOC. Many of the students happen to participate merely to improve their knowledge and as a result it could benefit them in their daily chores or the institution they work. It is mainly student's claim the ineffectiveness arise because as at now there is no standard recognition or accreditation on the MOOC courses. In this occasion, some of the participants were embracing the opportunities given in edX Entrepreneurship 101 courses to practice the learning in real world using a Coursolve (www.coursolve.com) platform. At the same time the students were expressing the desire to have new connections, networks of community where they can practice lifelong diverse learning culture. Hence our sample expands to explore students who have found network of connections. Students in NovoEd platform revealed they were using the network connections or new contacts to explore new opportunities other than in the course. It introduced a new direction to our core category and codes model which is "future directions" as additional core category.

B. Theoritical saturation and Theoritical Sampling

Our sample was initially gathered from students in Coursea and later edX, NovoEd, Iversity, Open2Study students were selected. After defining cores and more codes, as a result of in theoretical sampling, our approach was to process theoretical coding. We finished the major core categories which became dimensions and it contributed to describe most of the data. At this time our study researched theoretical saturation. This often interpreted as the situation when the researcher does not hear anything new from the participants [17].

C. Theoritical Coding

At this time the 7 core catagories expanded to 10 after rigourresly compare and contrast the memos which we created after each observationa and interview. The 10 categories are exleained in terms of dimension in theoricical coding process and it contained the realting codes to support the concept.

a) Technology dimesnion :

This dimension explains the ability to continue learning in MOOC with the existing hardware, software. At the same time to be able to take lesions either synchronous or asynchronous modes of delivery.

b) Pedagogy dimension

This dimension explains the method of MOOCs learning delivery. How the learning notes provided, video chunks, the learning time and pace to have self pace or week by week continuation. At the same time the arrangement of the learning such as with aid of time to time direct discussions, hangouts, social media aid to enhance the delivery engagement.

c) Motivation dimension

This dimension explains the motivation to use the MOOC courses. Motivation was described by whether it keeps the attention of the participant by keeping the learning relevant. At the same time make the user confident in the provided learning while providing satisfaction of the overall course.

d) Usability dimension

Usability of the MOOC was identified by the interface design, navigation interactions, learning environment support to learners' ability to learn and the facility provided to obtain feedback on any issue on the platform.

e) Content/Material dimension

This dimension will provide effectiveness by providing useful and relevant up-to-date content. Apart from that participants endorse to be effective in having rich multimedia and collaborative content.

f) Support for learner dimension

This dimesnion was required by many of MOOC participaint as in MOOC scenario, learner is not directely involve in the institution or the platform. They were needed to provide psychological and social support. At the same time students required administrative support and a proper complaints procedure on the issues they face during learning in the platform.

g) Assessment dimension

Assessment dimension explained by students indicated they value collaborative assessment, mastery of the content or material, periodic assessment in program, satisfaction assessments and regular reviews of students' achievements.

h) Future directions/Networks dimension

This dimension revealed that MOOC students expect to have credentials or recognitions for their achievements in MOOCs to be effective. At the same time they embrace the exposure to other interest network of community whereby leads them into new opportunities, such as internships, projects.

i) Collaboration dimesnion

This was explained as effective if the students given chance to collaborate with other students, with institution, instructor and industry of their learning interest.

j) Interactivity dimension

This dimension was explained by the oppotuntiv given toa student to interact directly with other students, instrustor, content and the instituion no matter what is the platform.

D. Validity of the Dimensions

The results from the GT study was expressed as a substantive theory, that is a set of concepts related to each in cohesive manner. In our findings, we fleshed out each major code, examining the situation in which they occurred and why it occurred. At the same time we reached theoretical saturation where we were able to cover the aspects of effectiveness according to the student participant's perspective. We did the diagram of design, written memos and rigorously searched the dimensions which not covered to eLearning. Our theory of 10 dimensions affecting to effective MOOC related to one another in a cohesive manner, now accounts adequately for all the data we have collected. We have presented the developing theory to very active MOOC participants and found it was accepted and resonated the dimensions. At the same time the dimensions were presented to experts in the MOOC field intending to have the results validated. Since the process is conducted through ethnographic qualitative research method GT, we intend to conduct a statistical analysis as the future work for this research.

V. DISCUSSION

We provide an answer to the main research problem, "what are the factors affecting effective MOOC?". The research used a qualitative method GT and found 10 dimensions and out of all 10 dimensions, our research found "Network of opportunity" is a very important dimension which was not identified in any research. It is a very important fact that student's value, which has not been considered in any occasion earlier. This is not merely employment, but the students valued the introductions of further groups where they can practice what they learn or keep in the network. They valued the relationships built during their online courses. It was found that students learn more of the interests' topics through the interests groups they found online while learning in a course. Since many of the platforms of MOOC do not provide a feature or do not facilitate or promote the network culture of learning, often students find social media as their learning space. However during our participation in courses & interviews we found that this culture of network being able to publish the work to the outside via social media was facilitated by the NovoEd platform. From time to time some of the courses in Coursera platform allowed students to share the work with a link provided where other interested students can provide feedback on the work; but often students were not encouraged or their behaviors are somewhat different from the intention of building a relationship for further learning. We recommend to the platforms or the instructors to initiate the culture where students build relationships among other students who exhibit common interests in academic work and facilitate them through their learning journey to build the network of interest groups to study.

...." I really like the connection we had while we were doing the team work, most of us had the same interests in common and we even worked beyond the groupwork, sometimes we gathers in hangouts to talk about the work we do and learn from each other sort of like brainstorm ... "

It is understood that there is a gap between the learning's and the needs in the industry. Students valued the path to contribute to the needs of the industry. They often complained that it is very rarely they get a chance to implement or practice what they learn in a course in the real world. Some courses in the MOOC platforms catered to this in many ways, which was found very helpful and effective for their learning. For an example the Entrepreneurship 15.390X, the course offered by Massachusetts Institute of Technology in edX platform, bridged the gap between learning and the industry needs by facilitating students to take part in the industrial needs published in a platform (Coursolve.com). In other cases, students were directed and introduced to the industrial perception of the learning's by live webinars with guest panelists who are key relevant people from industry. It is not common that these effective practices are followed in MOOC platforms; we in this research found that students highly valued such activities and it is a very important dimension for a learning to be effective.

"... I was overwhelmed for the chance I got to execute what I learnt it the 15.390 MIT Entrepreneurship course via edX. In the class we learnt how to identify your customer and in the class offered me a link where I can find industry who is seeking collaborations to similar need ..."

Another dimension, "Usability" of the platform plays a valuable role in effective learning. As the participants point out some of the platforms navigations are difficult to trace and often lacked in usability heuristics. Many of the participants regarded the easy and simple style of web interfaces and the similar functions to be attractive and made it easy to navigate through the site. Among the functionalities in the system, assignment uploading, forum postings, watching video clips, submitting quiz answers were identified as very important to provide a usable framework. At the same time this research found providing help to the students with regard to platform problems were very important and contribute to an effective learning. In particular to MOOC the students feel they must have a contact point in the internet where they can request help for platform matters.

"...it's important that I have a contact point to request help as I recall I was unable to submit my assignment due to the network problem where the course platform supported me with the matter after I contacted through the link provided by the platform..."

Another important dimension "Interactivity" found in the research plays a major role. We found that initially students valued level of engagement with course and participants were important to a successful learning outcome. We further analyzed and found the engagement varied with different levels. Mainly the students seek interactions between other students, content and also the instructor. These interactions triggered collaboration and motivation to study which was then found as being effective in learning from MOOC. Students stated that many MOOC providers do not pay attention to the level of collaboration, whereas most of them tried to cover the interactivity part. In the revolutionizing of education it is very essential that participants learn from each other rather than just learning from a guided curricular [18]. In

our research, we discovered the fact that students presented much interest in learning from each other.

Participants found that careful attention to pedagogy and the assessment as effective to their learning in MOOC. They often claimed some of the courses had only quizzes to assess and they found it as less encouraging to an active learner. They preferred to learn by doing, where the best way to assess is the overall view in the course. It is often an aggregate of participation in group work, Apart from material assessment, helpful peer grading and students also valued the assessments of their motivation to the course as well. At the same time the pedagogical changes that took place in the MOOC era have many values that students grasped as being effective for their learning. Much of the practice is in the way in which the course is conducted; having small chunks of videos, engaging in questions at the end or in the middle and students often claimed the video presentation style was important as well.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this research, we answered to the main problem "What factors are affecting an effective MOOC?" We used Grounded Theory (GT) methodology found 10 dimensions which affects to an effective MOOC. Those are namely Interactivity, Collaborativeness, Usability, Pedagogy, Assessment, Network of Opportunities/Future Directions, Content/Material, and Support for Learners and Technology dimension.

MOOCs are popular and new in the eLearning field. New MOOC platforms and courses are introduced at a higher rate. Although it is said to provide gains in learning's, there is a concern of the MOOC being ineffective due to various quality aspects [19]. Our research found 10 dimensions where MOOC designers and developers should pay attention in creating an effective MOOC. This research found a unique dimension that student's embrace which no other research found. It is described under "Network of Opportunity/Future Direction" which explain the students opportunity to practice what they learn in industry projects. At the same time the networking opportunity where students can know each other in lifelong learning and expand the possibilities for future collaborations. It is crucial that the participants should establish some connections in the network to share experiences and learn from them and at the same time it is very important for any student to connect, collaborate with peers, students from other networks and industry.

The 10 dimensions found in this research will be a guide and should be emphasized by any platform in order to provide an effective learning experience. At the same time it is important to keep identifying the changing patterns of behaviors in students while taking the MOOC courses, whereby e more affecting dimensions can be identified which will contribute to produce an effective eLearning experience.

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