

From a FutureLearn MOOC to a blended SPOC: the experience of a Catalan Sign Language course

Albó, Laia; Gelpí, Cristina

Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain
{laia.albo, cristina.gelpi}@upf.edu

Abstract. This paper presents a case study of transforming an existing MOOC into a SPOC for being used in a campus course using a blended learning approach with the aim of providing a reflection of the experience and reporting the challenges of the hybridization process. Results point out that blended learning with MOOCs can be a sustainable model for universities as well as a trigger to the change from teacher-centred to student-centred learning.

Keywords: MOOC · SPOC · Blended Learning · FutureLearn

1 Introduction

In April 2016, the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), launched the 1st edition of the MOOC “Introduction to Catalan Sign Language: Speaking with Your Hands and Hearing with Your Eyes” in the FutureLearn (FL)¹ platform. The course taught the basics of Catalan Sign Language (LSC), the sign language used by the deaf community in Catalonia. Due to the nature of the course, the design of the MOOC was a challenge from different perspectives: (1) Having to change the traditional teaching paradigm of sign languages that is based on teaching vocabulary, face to face (f2f), in small groups, and with a teacher with an omnipresent role. (2) It was a complex technical project: the MOOC had 320 videos and the sign language is not included in automatic video caption (and subtitling videos implies a high level of linguistic knowledge). Thus, the number of people involved in each task increased with respect to a typical MOOC. (3) The multilingual treatment, because sign languages are visual and do not have a written version, offering transcriptions and captions in different languages was also a challenge. And (4) it was a pioneer experience, without precedents in other sign languages. These issues presented an added cost to the development of the course, in terms of time, organization and the need of having a larger team, which would not have been feasible without a strong institutional support. However, the course was a success: 6.059 participants in the 1st edition and 2.505 during the 2nd edition (in November). The MOOC was planned from the beginning

¹ <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/lsc>

under the idea of reusing the materials. Hence, during the MOOC planning, the underlying concept was to create autonomous blocks of learning contents that should be reusable in other learning scenarios. These autonomous blocks will work as pieces that could be assembled and connected in many ways. Since UPF is offering LSC teaching in some university degrees, it opened up the possibility of using a private version of the FL MOOC within a blended learning design of campus courses and use the MOOC materials. This type of learning design is documented in the literature as SPOC (Small Private Online Course) [1]. SPOCs are courses based on MOOC-technology that instead of being massive, they are offered for a limited number of participants. Typically, these courses are used within blended learning designs, where the SPOC is hybridized with f2f (or online) regular teaching in a variety of combinations [2]. There are several studies reporting the use of MOOCs and SPOCs in different types of university courses such as remedial courses [3], reinforcement as well as mixing with traditional courses [2]. But it is necessary to highlight the transformation process of the learning methodologies and learning designs itself that implies the development of a MOOC, SPOC or blended learning courses using both of them. Whereas some teachers have started developing a MOOC from the scratch and then used part of it in traditional courses (sometimes with the aim of leverage all the work that implied its development), others have been done the contrary: transforming a traditional course into a MOOC by means of a SPOC [4]. Regardless the chosen approach, some challenges emerge from the process of setting the final learning design. Furthermore is necessary to keep reporting the different types of challenges as well as the success outcomes to facilitate the use of similar experiences. In this context, the aim of this paper is to provide a reflection about the utility of transforming an existing MOOC into a SPOC for being used in a campus course using a blended learning approach. The reflection takes into account the success experience of carrying out the MOOC and it reports the key issues and challenges of the learning design transformation.

2 Blended learning design with a SPOC

The Introduction to Catalan Sign Language (iLSC) is a part of a compulsory subject Introduction to University and Communication of UPF degrees in Translation and Interpreting and Applied Linguistics. With this introduction, students obtain the basic skills they need to be able to communicate in sign language as well as they find in the strategies to continue the study of LSC in the future. The iLSC course takes ten weeks, has a regular assessment, it represents about 25h of study and it implies a 10% of the final mark of the subject. Is in this context where it was decided to use the SPOC based on the LSC MOOC combined with a specific f2f tutorial activity supported by Moodle. In order to carry out the course, professors had to adapt the MOOC into the SPOC (a private FL instance of the MOOC) as well as planning the hybridi-

zation with the regular f2f course. Existing materials of the FL MOOC were the basis of the course but some reorganizations and adjustments of the original FL materials were done: (1) Redistribution of contents (from the 6 weeks of the MOOC to 10 weeks of the SPOC); (2) Adaptation of the number of weekly tasks to do; (3) Reordering of contents taking into account the new course syllabus; (4) Deletion of activities linked to the organization of 6 weeks course; (5) Modification of some activities related to the internationalization of the MOOC; (6) Adaptation of the automatic weekly messages of the FL MOOC. UPF Moodle was used for communicate organizational issues of the SPOC -information about the academic plan, assessment, weekly signed messages and f2f session materials. The interaction with the course content was planned to happen in the FL SPOC which was offered as “invited only” and 258 participants were registered on the FL course directly by teachers. During the course, three f2f sessions were done in groups of 80 students. Interaction and participation in the forums were recommended (not compulsory).

3 Results from the experience and lessons learned

To have access to FL was a very valuable point of the course. Participants appreciated the possibility to keep the registry access to FL to take part of possible future courses. Most part of students followed the contents weekly as planned, but a group of students started the course 2 or 3 weeks after start date. To have the full course opened since the start date has been a good option, in order to allow students to work at they own pace. Regarding the language of the course, English was the language of tuition, and even though no explicit instruction about language had been given to students, most of the comments were written in English and signed in LSC. Only few students did not communicate inside FL platform (teachers strongly recommended students to participate inside FL platform and discouraged alternative communication channels during the course). Abandonment of the course was insignificant and participation was much higher than expected (about 60.4% of learners participated in the online discussions). From the point of view of teachers, the management of the course was very easy and the objectives of the course were achieved. No technical incidences happened. They stated that FL MOOC materials were clearly useful in the blended learning approach as the main learning resources of the iLSC course. Moreover, existing activities were appropriate to offer a global knowledge of LSC basic content and the number of tests was appropriate to the general purposes. Regarding FL, data provided by the platform was clear and useful, but not enough to assess UPF students. For instance, the average test score was not reliable to UPF system (FL calculates the average test taking into account only the tests done by the students), or the impossibility to track the number of videos posted, since videos were included as links in the comments. Among the challenges found during the hybridization process, highlight four aspects also reported by other researchers [3][4]: (1) the importance of the UPF

support; (2) the opportunity of having a private MOOC instance facilitated by FL. Without this, it would be necessary to look for alternative technologies to host and articulate the course content with the challenge that this would entail; (3) the important role of professors -without their willingness to adapt to new teaching situations, it would have been impossible to carry out this experience; (4) the hybridization made possible to realize the course. The course would not have been possible in a f2f format without a high cost (to fulfil the contents in a regular course 17 student groups would be needed, instead of the 3 groups of the SPOC). Finally, although the course was a success, some minor points could be improved: working with two platforms at the same time (FL and Moodle) was not especially useful for the students; the registration process to FL increases the probability of having errors; and the tracking of students' activities were limited by the external platform, not fulfilling the UPF tuition system.

4 Conclusions

The process of hybridization the FL SPOC on LSC has been a successful experience. The key issues for the success were (1) to plan the original MOOC in terms of reuse (2) the enormous flexibility of FL managers to adapt the platform to SPOC needs as well as (3) the multidisciplinary of the UPF team. This hybrid experience points out that blended learning with MOOCs (or SPOCs) can be a sustainable model to universities since it presents an opportunity of amortizing an important initial investment.

Acknowledgments. This research is partly funded by the Spanish Ministry (TIN2014-53199-C3-3-R). Authors want to thank FL team, UPF LaFactoria+ as well as the professors involved in the project.

References.

1. Agarwal A. (2013). Adapting to Blended Courses, and Finding Early Benefits. Interview at the New York Times, April 29, 2013, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/education/adapting-to-blended-courses-and-finding-early-benefits.html>, last access on April 4, 2017.
2. Delgado-Kloos, C., Muñoz-merino, P. J., Alario-Hoyos, C., Ayres, I. E. & Fernández-Panadero, C. Mixing and Blending MOOC Technologies with Face-to-Face Pedagogies. Global Engineering Education Conference (EDUCON), 967-971 (IEEE, 2015).
3. Muñoz-Merino, P. J., Méndez-Rodríguez, E., Delgado-Kloos, C. SPOCs for remedial education: Experiences at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Proceedings of the European MOOC Stakeholder Summit 2014, 271-276 (2014).
4. Combéfis, S., Bibal, A. & Van Roy, P. Recasting a Traditional course into a MOOC by means of a SPOC. Proc. of the European MOOC Stakeholder Summit 2014, 205-208 (2014).