The Scholarship of Teaching MOOC-Based Degree Programs: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract – This paper explores the teaching component of scholarship in the Digital Age, with a focus on teaching online Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) aligned to degree programs. Instructors are increasingly embracing online teaching as part of their scholarly portfolio, including MOOC development and teaching. There is some empirical research on the impact of teaching stand-alone MOOCs on the instructors’ practices and on learners’ experiences. The impact of teaching MOOC-based degree programs on the instructors’ professional development has not been investigated to this date. This study explores the instructors’ experiences teaching program-aligned MOOCs, with a focus on the online MBA at the University of Illinois, which combines non-credit courses with traditional credit-bearing courses, and the impact teaching a MOOC-based degree has on their professional practice as digital scholars. Preliminary findings suggest that the experience of designing and delivering a MOOC informed the instructors’ teaching practice, and they often reused MOOC content in their face-to-face and blended classrooms. MOOC teaching may not replace traditional online teaching but is perceived as a complementary form of scholarship in teaching. Challenges noted are the time-consuming process of designing and delivering the MOOC-based MBA course, and delivering instruction on two Learning Management Systems at the same time: Coursera for the non-credit MOOC component, and Blackboard for the credit-bearing portion of the online course. Further work will involve determining ways to design MOOCs that positively influence the instructor’s teaching practices and instructor-learner interaction, with the goal to increase performance and motivation of global learners and MOOC-based degree enrolled students.

Keywords: mooc based degree program, online course, massive open online course, online teaching

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Scholarship, i.e. the act of pursuing knowledge by academic study, investigation, observation, or experience, was once limited to printed text, in terms of both research process and outcome. In 1990, Boyer developed a framework of scholarship that includes these four elements: discovery, integration, teaching, and application. Since the second part of the 2000s decade, there has been an increasing pressure to embrace new technologies and media to support academic work.

Scholarship today is not just research, teaching, and collaboration through the use of digital resources and tools, it also involves embracing the open values and the potential of technologies born of peer-to-peer networking ways of working, to benefit both academia and society (Pearce et al., 2012). Using Boyer’s model as a starting point, recent studies from several countries confirmed a trend shift in the way instructors and researchers conduct scholarly activity. Scholarship in the Digital Age is an open and social practice, and there is evidence of social media activity contributing to public engagement, professional development, credibility, promotion, and even tenure in some cases (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Esposito, 2013; Heap & Minocha, 2012).

Scholars in this field have situated their evaluation of changing research practices within Boyer’s model, but the literature on emerging teaching practices is not as extensive.

This paper focuses on the teaching component of scholarship in the Digital Age, with a particular focus on teaching online Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) aligned to degree programs. Instructors are increasingly embracing online teaching as part of their scholarly portfolio, including MOOC development and teaching. The popularity of MOOC-based learning environments lies in their ability to reach a wide audience of learners at no or little cost for them, compared to traditional credit-bearing online courses. On the other hand, MOOCs are still not perceived as complete replacements for other forms of online teaching: higher-order conceptual development and deep instructor-learner interaction appear to be better supported in small cohorts within traditional online courses (Robinson et al., 2015).

There is some empirical research on the impact of teaching stand-alone MOOCs on the instructors’ practices (Ebben & Murphy, 2014) but most studies focus on learners’ experiences (Macleod et al., 2015; Veletsianos et al., 2015). The impact of teaching MOOC-based degree programs on the instructors’ professional development has not been investigated to this date. This study explores the instructors’ experiences teaching program-aligned MOOCs, with a focus on the online MBA at the University of Illinois, which combines non-credit courses with traditional credit-bearing courses, and the impact teaching a MOOC-based degree has on
their practice as digital scholars. The research questions addressed to instructors were:

1. In what ways did designing and delivering a MOOC component of a degree program contribute to your professional development as a teacher and expert in your field?
2. What challenges did you encounter while designing and teaching the MOOC alongside the credit-bearing online course?

Preliminary findings from semi-structured interviews with faculty members suggest that the experience of designing and delivering a MOOC informed their teaching practice and helped them become better educators in a range of learning environments, often reusing MOOC content in their face-to-face and blended courses. MOOC teaching may not replace traditional online teaching but is perceived as a complementary form of scholarship in teaching. Challenges noted are the time-consuming process of designing and developing the MOOC-based MBA course, which in some cases exceeded the faculty members’ initial expectations, and the pedagogical and technical considerations of working on two Learning Management Systems: Coursera for the non-credit MOOC component, and Blackboard for the credit-bearing portion of the online course. Further work will involve determining ways to design MOOCs that positively impact on the instructor’s teaching practices and instructor-learner interaction, with a view of increasing the performance and motivation of global MOOC learners as well as students enrolled on MOOC-based degree programs.

References