ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF SPOCS (SMALL PRIVATE ONLINE COURSES): EXPERIENCES WITH ONLINE LEARNING

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What are SPOCs?

A Small Private Online Course (SPOC) refers to a version of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) used locally with on-campus students. University of California Berkeley Professor Armando Fox coined the word in 2013 to refer to a localized instance of a MOOC course that was in use in a business-to-business context. If MOOCs are used as a supplement to classroom teaching rather than being viewed a replacement for it, they can increase instructor leverage, student throughput, student mastery, and student engagement. SPOC's are online courses that are still free and delivered through the internet, but access is restricted to much smaller numbers, not more than tens or hundreds of students, rather than tens of thousands. Access is restricted to the student groups you are teaching to.

Some SPOCs are meant to support life teaching courses, others are made to replace the reality courses, e.g. for students who are studying abroad (practices) or have to combine work with studies (and can't follow the real courses) or demands more flexible learning pads. In a SPOC as in a MOOC students typically access interactive content at their own pace. The significance of SPOCs is that online learning is now moving beyond trying to replicate classroom courses and is trying to produce something that is more flexible and more effective. SPOCs are typically closed and limited enrolment (for example, limited to the students participating in the corresponding campus course), whereas MOOCs are open enrolment for everyone. SPOCs are online courses taught and assessed by real people mediated by the computer; not just programmed into the computer.

SPOCs support blended learning and flipped classroom learning, which variously combine online resources and technology with personal engagement between faculty and students.

When a SPOC is implemented at an institution, faculty determines which features and course content to utilize. This can include video lectures (educasts), assessments (with immediate feedback), interactive labs (with immediate feedback) and discussion forums. Using MOOC technology in SPOC's allows the faculty to organize their time with students in more different ways.

Implementation in the university college

I worked out a SPOC for my second year students of bachelor social educator at the UCLL (University College Leuven Limburg) for the course *Management and policy of institutions* (in Dutch language). Because of their practice, student only come to the university for two days a week, but some do their practice abroad or have to do specific jobs or have to join meetings in their practice places during the lessons days. For that reason the course 'Management and policy of institutions' is organized on two ways. Students who prefer to come to lessons, can do this once a week on the fixed schedule time. They follow 10 hearing colleges of 2 hours in large auditorium groups. Other can follow the same courses through an online learning platform in SPOCs.

Development for what reasons?

Student who can't join the real courses because of their practice or by motivational problems (there is also an active student life in the evenings) can follow the same course online through a Blackboard course (Toledo variant). Students have a hard copy of the course text (about 350 pages).

In this online course there is a fixed structure: the course is divided in two large topics and each topic is divided in several different themes (=modules).
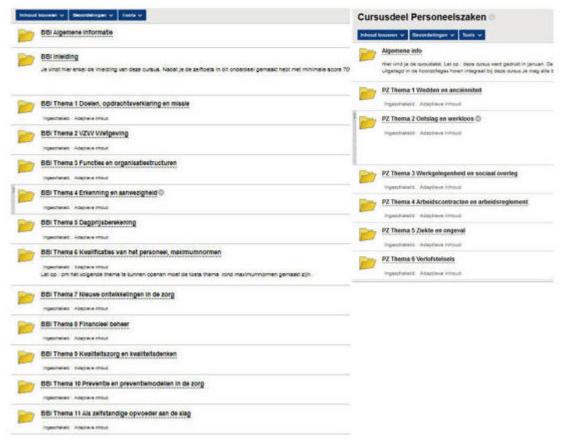

Figure 3. Topics and themes of the SPOC course

Each theme start with objectives (goals to achieve), guidelines for independent studying, the PowerPoint of the theme, extra useful information, an educast of the content (this means a video where the lecturer makes comments to the PowerPoint and the course text, like in the real lesson), an online self-correcting test. Students have to achieve 70% of the online multiple choice test in each theme and in that case the next theme opens on the computer. The student can make the test as many times he likes, until he receives the minimal level of 70% correct answers.
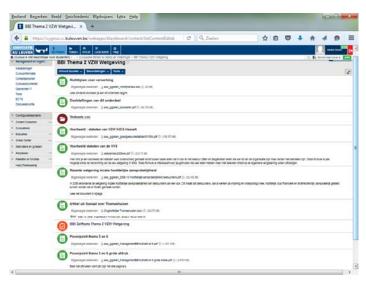

Figure 4. Structure of a theme in the SPOC

It is a private course: students have to login with their own student identity and the lecturer has to give permission to the student to follow this online course. The learning happens in a close environment, only available for the registered students.

There is also an online forum (discussion board) in the course for each of the two topics where the student can ask questions to the lecturer or to other students. The lecturer and students who have subscribed to the forum get an email message when someone has post a question or remark and when the lecturer or other students have answered. So they don't have to check every time for new posts.

The educasts (video capturing of the PowerPoints and course text) are made with Camtasia on a computer. The lecturer recorded small online courses for max 15 minutes and explained everything on the same way he explained in the real life colleges. The video only shows the PowerPoint or the course text, no image of the lecturer himself. Research with the two methods learned that students didn't like the lecturers face at the top of the screen. They told that is was disturbing the attention, but maybe they didn't like the face at all.

Advantages and disadvantages of SPOCs: my own experiences

Advantages

- An advantage of e-learning by SPOCS is likely that the curriculum can be offered in a more varied way with video, extra information, examples, links to websites, etc.. This makes the material easier to be absorbed and makes learning more interesting for students. The course is divided in small short limited themes (modules) so the student can learn more progressive and step by step and can register his own progress.

- Learners have 24 hours and seven days a week access to the learning environment. They don't have to move anymore to the university and can study at home (or abroad as Erasmus student). SPOC students appreciate the way of teaching because it makes their learning more flexible. They can do a job during daytime and study in the evening, or can be present at their practice places when they are needed for meetings or urgent interventions. They can start later in the year with the course and even follow all the lessons with all the explanations at their own pace.

- SPOC students can participate individual in feedback dialogues with the lecturer and other students through the discussion board; they can ask questions and get online answers and they can participate in activities that are facilitated by real people. Some students do not dare to ask questions in large auditorium college groups (more than 100 students together) and prefer to ask more anonymous through the learning platform.

- SPOC students can test their knowledge through the online questionnaires. It is an extra motivational point that they can go to another theme after succeeding the 70% minimum of the test. You can compare it with gaming. Reaching a specific goal means they can go another (higher) level.

- Also the lecturer can follow the progress of the SPOC student, he sees when the students have logged in, how many hours they spent to the course, which level the student reached, etc.

- The final exams happens on the same way as the online tests. Students have to fill in 40 multiple choice questions like the online tests. So the SPOC student is well prepared for the final way of examination because of the same way of testing during the training period.

- The knowledge acquired by the specialized lecturer, is not lost (when he leaves the organization) and can be taken over by colleagues. If the lecturer can't teach for some reason f.i. by participating in seminars or due to illness or other university duties, the student can still continue with the online course.

Disadvantages

- Personal contact with the students is missing for the lecturer. Especially the educasts are difficult to make and are impersonal if you don't see students before you. You can't explain everything on the same way as in real classes because you haven't any feedback on the things you tell. I found a solution for this problem by making notes of all the

questions and remarks during the real lessons and tried to integrate them in the online educast but it still keeps anonymous.

- During real courses students can immediately ask questions and get direct feedback. This is not the case through the online course: it takes some time before the lecturer can answer in the discussion board and it is more difficult to answer with a written text than with life spoken words. Although direct feedback in my case is also relative. I have to teach during hearing lectures in a large auditorium to a group of about 100 students. So the threshold to ask questions in this large group is also very high. In reality during these hearing lectures there is also less interactivity. I noticed that students who follow the real lessons preferred to ask questions in the discussion board too.

- The tests are self-correcting. But the items of the tests have explicit no feedback information. The students can make the tests as often as they like, but when there should be feedback information on each question, the challenge to find the correct answers themselves is left undone. But this hampers a correct learning process.

- I noticed by analyzing the learning process of some students that they use sometimes trial and error in making the tests. They make the test once by guessing and write down correct and wrong answers. They do the test again, and again, without thinking until they have all the correct answers to go further in the course. Students are also clever in exchanging of information: they share answers of the questions on Facebook. For this reason I offer the tests each time with questions in arbitrary sequence and also within the questions with the items arbitrary offered. But stimulating self-learning as goal isn't always reachable and is often only a wish from the lecturer.

- A student should possess ICT skills. This means he should be able to get along with internet anyway and have good and fast internet access. During the years I worked with the SPOCs I met several technical problems with the learning environment: tests didn't work properly or not, students were blocked in the system for unknown reasons, etc. This hampers the enthusiasm of the lecturer and students.

- Motivational problems. E-learning requires heavy demands on the self-discipline of the students. In other words, it requires a high commitment and good motivation. I noticed lot of postponement behavior. This means that students who don't follow the real lessons, start very lately with the online course. Some students only start the online course some weeks/days before the exam period. So the wonderful idea of self motivated students who learn flexible and independent at their own pace is for lots of unmotivated students an utopian dream. For this reason I had to put final goals dates in the course. If they succeed in a specific number of themes (making the online tests and go further with new themes) before a certain date they can earn already some points for the final exams. Because I didn't make a difference between kinds of students, the students who follow the live lessons also have to make the online tests before the goals dates.

- Developing quality online courses is still labour-intensive. Before the SPOCs I had two large auditorium groups of each 110 students. Now with the SPOCs there is only one teaching group. It took persuasion to convince the management that an online course

also asked time commitment of the teacher even though the teacher itself no longer attends school. Teaching jobs at the university are often calculated in real contact time and the management forget that even after an online course is finished there is also much time needed for online interaction with students.

- It takes a lot of time for the lecturer to create online courses and if anything changes in the material within a previously recorded educast, that educast should be re-recorded and also the online tests need to be adjusted, which is not always easy for technical reason as a student already has made some tests.

- Learning is a social process in which interaction, communication and collaboration plays a crucial role in knowledge acquisition and development of learners. It is also important that learning takes place in a relevant, complex and flexible, authentic setting. Through online learning students are missing this life social network, personal contacts and the peer pressure to study and work motivated for the courses.

- It is not possible to reach all the learning objectives with e-learning. This means that it contains most of time lower thinking level knowledge like facts and concepts and less productive skills like application, analysis, creating,…(cfr Taxonomy of Romiszowski) Criticism, creativity, etc is less stimulated during this online courses. It could be possible to have them make online discussion and reflection tasks, but with a group of more than 200 students, this is impossible to correct. In smaller groups this is absolutely necessary.

Conclusion

Working with SPOCs is an interesting way to let students learn flexible. The quality and cost of the courses has not to be so high because the information is only made available for a small limited group of students. It is not intended to reach a large mass of students but works as an additional tool to provide your students flexible learning.

It is contemporary and has a good answer to questions about flexibility, student friendliness, and modern learning. For motivated and committed students this is a way of stimulating them to powerful learning. But if you want to work with it you have to consider a number of essential conditions. SPOCs have advantages and disadvantages. From my experiences I would never force students to choose one or the other way, but offer both learning systems side by side so that the student can learn in the most appropriate way for himself.

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