

Prequalification as Prerequisite of MOOCs Applicants

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Abstract

Despite dramatic development, MOOCs witness undesirable efficiency as measured in average completion rates. Here arises the necessity to undertake prequalification in terms of background competency, motivation and personality. Such prequalification helps learners to improve their efficiency and effectiveness in learning.

Key words: MOOCs, prequalification

Challenges facing MOOCs

A MOOC integrates social networking, expert facilitation and freely accessible online resources (McAuley et al., 2010), consequently MOOCs are surrounded with publicity, enthusiasm and excitement (Conole, 2013) and expands dramatically. 2013 alone witnessed 4 millions students in Coursera which provided 400 courses from 80 institutions (Shumski, 2013).

The fascination with online learning witnesses rapid implementation in many universities [Foss et al, 1992], however, there is no reason to blindly worship MOOCs. Russell (1999) examines 350 studies over 75 years, to conclude that “no significant differences [are] found in outcomes in students in...two [technologically different] modes of instruction.” Similarly, Shirky (2012) scorns at MOOC, deeming it as disruptive to higher education as MP3 to the music industry.

Their worries are not groundless: efficiency and effectiveness of MOOCs are troublesome. In the University of London: of 210,000 initial registrations, over 90,000 are active learners while only 8843 are awarded Statements of Achievement, namely 4.21% (8843/210000) of the applicants achieve their original learning object while majority of them fail to complete required tasks (Anabela, 2015: 17), to the great disappointment of the academic community. Such poor rates suggest that emphasis in quantity (enrolment) rather than quality (learning effectiveness), under pressure from competition, is not worthwhile at all, since education quality is the priority in education: without desirable educational quality, quantity of enrolment is meaningless.

Considering that only a small percentage of participants in MOOCs approach them as courses, DeBoer et al recommend reconceptualization of MOOCs [DeBoer, 2014], hence for the sake of healthy development of MOOCs, this paper suggests prequalification as a countermeasure against poor efficiency in MOOCs.

Necessity of prequalification

MOOCs so far are featured by “open enrolment”, with no qualification requirements whatever of applicants to any course, thus inviting trouble both to the instructors and to the learners, since some applicants, though deemed by the instructors in a specific field to fail to satisfy the minimum background requirements, are still welcome to engage in a specific course. Such disqualified learners may in the end find their learning experience is a curse rather than an anticipated blessing, a waste of their own time as well as a waste of the instructors’ time. As a case in point, University of Pennsylvania reports a 4% course completion rates out of their 16 MOOCs. Another publicly reported data from 29 MOOCs indicate an average completion rate of 6.8% (Anabela, 2015: xvii).

Such an output quality is disturbing, since “quality is the most decisive factor determining the future of e-learning” [Ehlers, 2006]. Moreover, MOOCs demand vigorous attention, persistent diligence, active engagement and timely preparation (Kellog, 2013), hence arises the necessity to conduct pre-qualification to guarantee that learners achieve their objectives of participation in MOOCs. Here “objective” is defined by process quality [interaction of learners, desired training goals] and output/ outcome quality [the increase in learners’ professional competence] [Donabedian, 1980].

Prequalification as the first step in accreditation process achieves quality control by helping to identify and target potential eligible learners to save time for instructors and to guarantee efficiency for the learners themselves. Without prequalification the non-eligible learners may be enrolled and are certainly to suffer frustrated experience due to lack of background competency, motivation, and personality.

Prequalification of background

Identification, based on eligibility criteria, of potential applicants' background competency, will help avoid wasting the applicants' time. By sieving out the unqualified applicants, limited access is established to a specific course thus to guarantee quality discussion among registered learners, efficiency among peer assessment and construction in education reformation. To this purpose, prequalification as a process control that is beneficial to the learners may be achieved first of all through background knowledge satisfaction in terms of three aspects.

Table 1 Background Prequalification

Knowledge competence	Q1 Do you have sufficient knowledge competence to this MOOC? a) Yes. b) No.
course information	Q 2 Do you know the MOOC contents, level, pedagogical methods, etc? a) Yes. b) No.
course objectives	Q 3 Does the course objective satisfy you? a) Yes b) No

a) Knowledge competence

Since the level of MOOCs span from beginners to intermediate to advanced and specialized, here arises the necessity to help applicants assess their own background competency. Without an objective assessment of their own levels, learners are most likely to make blind choice to take MOOCs, only to end up in ineffective learning. For example, a course called *Impact of Bible upon British-American Literature* requires background concerning both knowledge of the Bible and some masterpieces by British-American writers, so Q1 No may be presented this way:

Do you have sufficient knowledge competence to this MOOC?

a) Yes. b) No.

Open entry, to enroll anyone regardless of their prior academic achievement, is to open Pandora's jar, by attempt to teach someone impossible to teach, impossible because of their lack of the minimum qualification. Prequalification of knowledge competence is supposed to kick out the disqualified to save time and guarantee efficiency both for the learners.

b) Course information

Q No2 : Do you know the MOOC contents, level, pedagogical methods, etc?

a) Yes. b) No.

Applicants for any MOOC are supposed to be well informed of its contents, level, pedagogical methods and structure. For example, a cMOOC by providing opportunities to discuss online with instructors and peers in a synchronous and a- synchronous discussion forum is more attractive to European learners; in contrast, a xMooc appeals more to American learners, thus the applicants should acquire enough information in this respect to help make the right choice. [Anabela, 2015:14] In case the applicants are ignorant of the MOOC's learning, level [from beginners to intermediate to advanced], or pedagogical methods [student-centered], their application should be rejected, for their own good.

c) Course objectives

Learners apply for a particular MOOC for different reasons. Curtis et al identify two categories: employability and capabilities development [Curtis et al, 2015], hence applicants must be well informed of their objectives in attendance in a MOOC. So Q NO3 is:

Does the course objective satisfy you?

a) Yes b) No

The applicants must be well informed of the objective of a specific MOOC before application. Such educational object clarification from the learners help them make right decision about whether to take this course. This saves their time and energy and improve their efficiency and effectiveness.

Prequalification of motivation

Duke University identifies such two motivations when learners enroll on MOOCs as

△ think the course will be fun and enjoyable.

△ Curious to take an online course.

However, since Duke is focusing on lecture content, it will not be a piece of cake or a comfortable journey through MOOCs, so there will be no “fun” at all. Besides, curiosity comes easily and dies readily: the large number of students enrolling compared to the relatively low number of students finishing may support this assumption [Anabela, 2015:7].

To go a long way toward achievement in MOOCs, learners must be strongly motivated, otherwise their participation in the course will decline dramatically, as illustrated in the table [Curtis, 2015: 72]:

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Number of forum posts	505	178	109	146
Video viewers	676	516	301	246
Feedback videos	466	283	146	97
Reflective essay contributors	42/1426=3%			

This table indicates that unless strongly motivated, otherwise the learners suffer from low completion rates [Selwyn et al, 2014] and will not be persistent and devoted to a MOOC until they achieve their objectives.

The prequalification of motivation is to correct the misleading concept held by MOOC learners: MOOCs is not for fun, it is for serious and dedicated learners. With flipped class becoming a widespread trend, “online learning requires a high level of self-motivation and autonomy” [Conradie, 2014:255], otherwise the learners are doomed to suffer frustration. So Q No4 is

Do you take this MOOC

a) for self-improvement b) for fun

Anderson et al identifies 5 types of MOOC users: viewers, solvers, all-rounders, collectors and bystanders [Anderson, 2014]. The purpose of motivation prequalification is to welcome all-rounders and reject bystanders.

Prequalification of personality

Since “the effectiveness of online instruction depends both on hardware and software capabilities, including such factors as the teacher, the medium, the course and the characteristics of students” [Hiltz, 1994], there is necessity to deem learners’ personality as a pre-requisite for MOOCs, as shown in this table:

Prequalification of personality	active vs. passive	Q5 Are you a self-directed learner? a) Yes. B) No.
	collaborative learner	Q6 Are you a collaborative learner? a) Yes. B) No.
	patient and persistent	Q7 Are you patient and persistent? a) Yes. B) No.

Prequalification of personality: active vs. passive

Self-directed learning is associated with more desirable academic performance, heightened curiosity and creativity, confidence and even life satisfaction [Pintrich, 1995]. Moreover, MOOCs are developed on the assumption that learners take responsibility for and manage their own learning process by identifying goals, locating resources, making strategy decisions, executing and then evaluating the results [Mezirow, 1985], this means persistent and autodidactic learners are more likely to complete the challenging tasks. In addition, in a MOOC there might be no alert system to notify the learners of their absences, missing assignments and/or failing grades. This requires the learners to depend upon themselves to get back to track, hence Q No5 is: Are you a self-directed learner?

a) Yes. B) No.

A passive learner will easily be distracted and feel frustrated [Downes, 2013] since MOOCs require learners to teach themselves [learner-centered], so this prequalification will invite active learners while reject disqualified applicants.

Prequalification of personality: collaborative and independent learner

Bryn (2006) states that “e-learning environments demand that course management, design procedures and protocols needed to be developed to shift the emphasis in teaching towards student engagement and peer support.” Learning should be undertaken both independently and cooperatively, since “Learning to learn... involves learning from others, learning to learn with others, learning to mediate others’ learning not only for their own sake but for what that will teach oneself...” [Solomon et al, 1998]. MOOCs require learners to make critical, constructive, timely and relevant feedback to peers’ completed assignments for the sake of monitoring their own progress [Candy, 1991]. Hence Q No6 is:

Are you both a collaborative and independent learner?

a) Yes. B) No.

If not, the applicants would be deemed disqualified to MOOCs in which only the fittest survive [Kolowich, 2013].

Prequalification of personality: patient and persistent

Although most students prefer the convenience of online platforms, they have the common perception that online course takes longer than face-to-face instructions, hence patience and persistence is highly valued in MOOCs [Olaniran et al, 1996]. In addition, “without guidance and direction from the instructor during weekly face-to-face class meetings, many students are lulled into inactivity with a false sense of security...It can be difficult for all but the most dedicated of students to be successful in an online environment.” [Curtis, 2015: 122]

There is a 10~20% higher dropout rate amongst online learning courses compared to traditional higher educational courses [Carr, 2000], possibly attributed to learners’ lack of

persistence. So Q No7 is: are you patient and persistent in learning?

a) Yes. B) No.

If the answer is “Yes”, it is better for applicants to give up right now rather than halfway.

Conclusion

This paper proposes prequalification in terms of background competency, motivation and personality, satisfaction of which is supposed to meet the minimum requirement of MOOC learning.

Table 2

Prequalification Of Background Competency	Knowledge competence	Q1 Do you have sufficient knowledge competence to this MOOC? a) Yes. b) No.
	course information	Q 2 Do you know the MOOC contents, level, pedagogical methods, etc? a) Yes. b) No.
	course objectives	Q 3 Does the course objective satisfy you? a) Yes b) No
Prequalification of motivation		Q 4 Do you take this MOOC a) for self-improvement b) for fun
Prequalification of personality	active vs. passive	Q5 Are you a self-directed learner? a) Yes. B) No.
	collaborative learner	Q6 Are you a collaborative learner? a) Yes. B) No.
	patient and persistent	Q7 Are you patient and persistent? a) Yes. B) No.

The more “Yes” the MOOC applicant ticks, the more likely he or she is qualified. Of the seven items, over five “No” will constitute sufficient ground to reject an applicant. In a word, to enhance learning experience, to minimize dropouts, and to improve discussion efficiency and effectiveness, there is urgent necessity to undertake prequalification of MOOCs applicants to help learners achieve their learning objects.

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Another benefit from prequalification lies in cheating prevention. Prequalification is likely to reduce cheating in examination. Since cheating constitutes a major threat to online education, prequalification may be a desirable measure to prevent cheating: qualified learners, due to sufficient background satisfaction, are supposed to perform well in active learning, online engagement and discussion, thus favorable for their completion of the course study. In other words, they are less likely to resort to plagiarism in order to pass the examination. This prequalification on the other hand will reduce challenge from original work validation, thus to improve efficiency in instruction.

Generally speaking, prequalification may be conducted in the form of multiple questions. However, since some learners are well informed of the general information, not of details or specific message as required of a specific course, a question-answer prequalification may be undertaken in order to make sure that the applicants are equipped with sufficient knowledge, skill and personality, enough to meet the minimum requirements of a subject.

On the other hand, educational objects must be noticed to and examined by the applicants who will decide whether a specific course meets their needs.

But this prequalification is far from enough., based on the harmony of this course's object with their intended purpose to take this course. Supposed the applicants attempted to acquire information of the Bible doctrine, while this course aims at interpreting the British-American masterpieces in light of the Bible, the applicants may immediately find that he or she would go the wrong way by taking this course.