MOOCs

Idea In Short

The meteoric rise of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) has made higher education from the world's best Universities available to anyone with an Internet connection. Several futurists predicted a major transformation and obsoletion of the traditional education system. Despite the fanfare and excitement, MOOCs haven't disrupted the educational system as the futurists predicted; the dropout rate is about 90%. Only a fraction of people gets anywhere near completing a MOOC. However, through proper planning and diligence, you can increase your odds of completing MOOCs and benefiting from your efforts.

MOOCs stands for massive open online courses:

- **Massive** because enrolments are unlimited and can run into hundreds of thousands of course participants
- **Open** because anyone can enrol. There is no admission process
- **Online** because they are delivered via the Internet
- **Course** because their goal is to teach a specific subject

Most MOOCs are typically offered by universities. Some of the first and most popular MOOCs were offered by Stanford, MIT, and Harvard. However, universities are not the only institutions that offer MOOCs. Some popular MOOCs are offered by such companies as Microsoft, Google, IEEE and the Linux Foundation, to name a few.

Popularity of MOOCs

Today, hundreds of courses on diverse subjects from Engineering and Computer Science to Humanities and Social Sciences are offered by dozens of the world's best universities and professors. The four major MOOC platforms - Coursera, edX, Udacity and Udemy - have attracted several million sign-ups till date. Many futurists and thought leaders predicted a massive disruption to the traditional, university / classroom-based education system. As

predicted, some of the free MOOC courses generated impressive registration numbers, upwards of 200,000 in some cases. On average, around 30,000 to 50,000 participants enrolled in the MOOC courses. Many of the participants were adults, working in full-time jobs. These participants were looking to pick up or update their technical or business to advance in their careers. According to The MOOC pivot:

> When Massive Open Online Courses [MOOCs] first captured global attention in 2012, advocates imagined a disruptive transformation in post-secondary education. Video lectures from the world's best professors could be broadcast to the farthest reaches of the networked world, and students could demonstrate proficiency using innovative computer-graded assessments, even in places with limited access to traditional education.

Completion challenges

Despite the initial brouhaha, MOOCs failed to disrupt or overhaul the traditional educational system, as some predicted. The real problem, though, is that more than 90% of the MOOC participants don't finish the coursework. Many don't even start the courses they registered for. And, a lot of those participants who finish a course don't take another one. For example, the average completion rate for most Coursera courses is around 5%. This means a vast majority of people drop out. So, if you actually do manage to complete a MOOC, you're in the cool minority. However, with some planning, structure, focus and diligence, you can improve your odds of completing a MOOC.

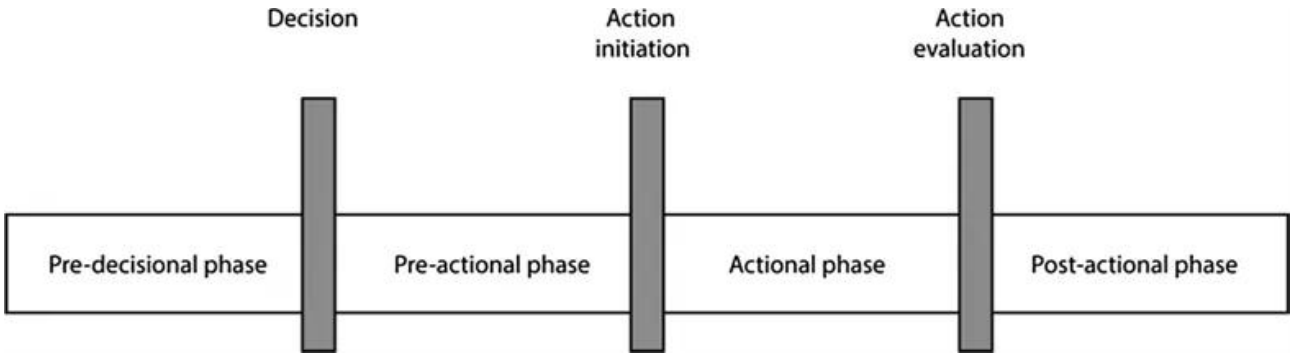
The Rubicon Model of Action Phases

Self-regulated learning [SRL] frameworks can help MOOC participants enhance their motivation and catalyse engagement, persistence, and performance self-monitoring through the coursework. One such framework is the The Rubicon Model of Action Phases1. According to Gollwitzer2, a course of action (i.e. the process of forming an intention to evaluating actual behaviour) is a temporal and horizontal path. This course can be divided into 4 phases:

1. Pre-decisional phase
2. Pre-actional phase

3. Actional phase, and finally
4. Post-actional phase

A transition point marks each phase. For example, setting a goal marks the end of the pre-decisional phase. A plan on how to reach this goal marks the the end of the pre-actional phase. Evaluating the achieved outcomes marks the end of the actional phase.



MOOCs Rubicon

Pre-decisional phase

This phase is about deliberating and weighing the different options you have. In this phase, you set a specific goal or formulate a goal intent. Translated to the MOOCs context, this means you should reflect whether a MOOC fits your needs and wishes for gaining certain knowledge before deciding to enrol. Furthermore, based on the available information about the content of the MOOC, you will make an initial decision whether you intend take up the MOOC. This may have the following trajectory:

Frame the intent → Browse → Finish one or more modules → Complete the course → Get the certificate.

Due to the open accessible nature of MOOCs, you can formulate your own individual intentions.

Pre-actional phase

This phase is about planning concrete strategies to achieve the set goal. Ideally, you should address issues, such as when, where and how learning will take place, tactics to to strengthen the goal attainment, actions to take to manage distractions, etc. The rationale is that formulating if...then questions helps you anticipate issues that could hinder your

learning experience.

If <X> happens, then I will perform <Y> to achieve <Z>

For example, if <my friends invite me out>, then I will <decline & re-schedule this invitation> to <complete the coursework for Week 2>

Actional phase

This phase is about implementing the strategies you planned in the earlier phases. During this phase, you may encounter various disturbances that may delay or jeopardise your goal achievement. In the MOOCs context, these disturbances, or barriers as they are generally referred to, can be either MOOC-related or non-MOOC related. Lack of interaction, lack of instructor presence and bad course content are typical MOOC-related barriers. Insufficient academic knowledge, lack of time and technical issues like bad Internet or lack of digital skills are non-MOOC related barriers. the Your goal achievement greatly depends on the strength of your goal commitment and how effectively you were able to overcome these barriers.

Post-actional phase

In this phase, you evaluate whether you successfully achieved your learning goals. This success depends on two criteria, depending on whether you achieved:

1. Your individual goals you set for yourself in the pre-decisional phase
2. The achievement matches the original expectation

After finishing learning in the MOOC, assess whether the learning gains met your expectations and satisfied all your learning needs. A proper post-actional evaluation will benefit future deliberation and planning needs. Based on the above model, here are some tips to improve your completion rates.

Focus on your goal

Before starting, ask yourself:

> What do I really want to obtain through doing an MOOC?

Determine whether you are motivated to deepen or update your knowledge about something you already know or learn new concepts. As a matter of fact, the Coursera MOOC - Learning How to Learn: Powerful mental tools to help you master tough subjects actually talks about how to focus. Another tip that can help you increase focus while working on the MOOCs is to define the purpose of your efforts. This makes concentration an easy task. Always have a driving force for any of your tasks. You may not be able to focus on something without setting a goal. Having a goal for any of your tasks allows you to remain focus for long. According to Prospect Theory, you should realise that focus is not the gain of focus, but rather, the loss of distraction that will make you more focused.

Diligently select your learning platform

There are several companies competing in the MOOC space, and the experience can be very different on each platform. Hence, you should choose a good platform. Regardless of the platform you choose, familiarise yourself with the platform features before you begin to review the content. Then, dedicate time to understanding the course organisation, structure, content, deadlines, and tools.

Choose your course

There are several fantastic online courses from top professors at great schools. And, there are also a lot of indifferent, un-rigorous, or badly done ones. Regardless of the course quality, if you can't justify your personal and professional case for taking up a course, you won't probably stay motivated to complete it. Hence, you should skip enrolling in the course up front. While some courses are going to be better than others, the baseline on good platforms will be solid. Yet, you should reflect on your motivation to take up a course and stick to it. You should have a good enough reason or passion for the subject that you're willing to skip your social commitments to spend time on the course.

Choose your professor

If you are taking a MOOC for the very first time, choose a course hosted by a popular professor who's has offered the course you're interested in more than once. Though a professor offering his / her first MOOC may turn out to be excellent, those who have done it several times may have refined their courses to work better. Consider the different options

considering not only the content, but also the institution, professor, certificates, etc. that support the course and its prestige.

Mind the pre-requisites

If a course says that you need to know calculus in order to take it, believe it. Don't think that you'll pick it up along the way unless the course explicitly says that it will teach the needed material. It's difficult enough to stick with one of these courses, so having to learn background material in addition means you're more likely to get behind, get frustrated, and drop out. When in doubt, stick with the introductory course. It's better to be a bit bored or skip a few early lessons than be overwhelmed after a couple of weeks.

Schedule your study

One of the biggest boons of online courses is that you can take them anytime and anywhere you want. In contrast, this also the biggest reason why many people drop out. Though most course pages cite 3-4 hours of study per week, I typically found that a thorough study of the course requires at least 2-4 times as much time investment to achieve a good understanding of the subject matter, complete the quizzes, assignments, etc. For most people, this translates to 10 -12 hours a week, which is a lot of time required to complete an online course.

Avoid multi-tasking

I'm guilty of this. I manage several complex projects involving many people at my work place. In the beginning, it may look like you are killing it by excellent multi-tasking. But, you are just training your mind to divide focus by always jumping around from one task to another. Doing multiple things at the same time can neither result in productivity nor focus. All that it does is to cause a distraction. Many people believe in doing more than one thing at the same time thinking that they can be more productive. But, the answer is no! It does more harm than good. Your mind cannot focus on anything for long if you overdo this. However, if you can set your mind on just a single task, you would achieve more. The key is to find the right balance.

Avoid rushing

Especially for courses that progress sequentially and have assignments with specific due dates, it's incredibly easy to leave multiple hours of lectures for the day before you can complete an assignment before the deadline. Most people who take up MOOCs have full-time or multiple jobs or other pressing obligations. In other words, distractions that keep them from completing the coursework before completing the required assignments. This often results in a backlog that keeps piling up and incomplete assignments that eventually compel switching sessions or even, dropping out. Always have time on your side. If you have a deadline, start early not at the last minute.

Spread out your learning

The best way to avoid this situation is to spread the work out and complete at least a bit every night or a couple times a week, rather than leaving everything for the weekend. Furthermore, having less time at hand adds pressure. Some people think that they have better focus with pressure and doing things at last minute saves them time. But, the stress is not sustainable in the long run; it causes more anxiety eventually affecting your focus. If you have something on your mind, do not force yourself to do work on the course. It will only cause distraction impacting your focus. Clear your mind first.

Exercise discipline

Mark study times on your calendar. Then, treat them like a real commitment. Set reminders on your calendar and on your phone. Don't forget that you've set aside time to study & handle it with respect and diligence! Plan your schedule and set aside at least 3 hours of study per week. Do the assignments and take the quizzes. As with any online course, there's an option to simply audit the class i.e. watch the lectures and do the reading without doing any of the accompanying activities. That's a mistake. Even if you're not enrolled in a course, skipping the quizzes makes it more likely that you'll pay less attention. Subsequently, you'll learn less and increase the chances of your dropping out.

Engage with the community

Make the most of the community that lets you be a participant in the MOOC. Connect with other students with the same interests, take advantage of the forums to clarify doubts and share contents that you think would be interesting to the community. Get some friends to take the course too! Study groups can help you stay motivated, collaborate, etc. If you don't

have any friends in the class, reach out to other students and see if you can create a study group.

Do High-intensity interval training

Leverage the Pomodoro technique. Focus on an activity and finish it without distractions. Then, take a small break. Take longer breaks for activities that are heavier on the mind.

Eliminate distractions

Maximize the course video. A simple but effective way to minimize distraction. Close all other windows. This is more aggressive, but it may be necessary. Log out of your email and social media. And, while you're at it, make sure you disallow these programs from sending you notifications even while you're not logged in. The same goes for your phone. Put your phone on silent. Maybe put it in another room, too. According to a 2018 consumer survey from Deloitte, the average American adult checks their phone a whopping 52 times a day.

Organize your environment

If possible, use noise-canceling headphones. Block out audible distractions and stay focused on the task at hand. Make your study space comfortable and enjoyable to be in. Put images in your field of vision that will inspire you to succeed. Tape a goal to your workspace. Having a written goal in plain sight in your workspace can help you keep your eye on the prize. Close your door and windows to eliminate distractions. These are simple tactics but are highly effective!

Move around

Exercise while taking up a MOOC course. However, I found that this only works if you're just listening to a lecture and don't need to take notes or work on practice problems. Stand up or move away from the computer. If you don't need to simultaneously work on problem sets or answer quiz questions, move out of reach of your keyboard to avoid any lingering temptation to see what's going on in other browser tabs.

Psychology tricks

Emotions carry a lot of power with them. If you are always slouched over, always bored and tired, you will never find the energy, nor the reason to get excited. Instead, smile, laugh, sit straight and tall, and allow yourself to get excited for what you are about to do. Set up some triggers that will remind you of your why or of the importance of the task or some that motivate you to work harder. Whatever you need to stay focused, set up alarms on your phone for it to trigger the thoughts multiple times throughout the day. Reward yourself for completing small tasks. One completed lesson = one hilarious YouTube! video. Though you can audit most MOOC courses, pay to enroll and earn the course certificate. According to the MOOC platforms, people who pay for a course certificate are more than ten times as likely to finish the course. Once you've earned your certificate, log your accomplishments on your professional networks, such as Linked, XING, etc. Whether you display your certificates on your LinkedIn profile or on an educational portfolio, or even in a private list, make sure you're tracking your success.

Broadcast your intent

Announce your intentions publicly. As the Choiceology podcast titled, The Price of Your Vice suggests:

> Giving in to temptation is all too easy in the moment. But raising the stakes just might bolster your resistance.

The podcast begins with two short stories of temptation and procrastination. It also cites the account of Victor Hugo's struggles to complete his novel The Hunchback of Notre Dame in the face of his own procrastination. In both stories, the protagonist employs a clever strategy to reach his goals. In our context, when you register for a new course, post about it on Facebook, Tweet it out or mention it to friends and colleagues. The peer scrutiny, pressure and review will help you achieve your MOOC completion objectives.

Summary

A tip from a MOOC aficionado, Feynman Liang:

> The first few lectures are usually going to be much easier than what comes later. There's some house cleaning and basic content to get through before the real meat of the course. Keep an open mind about switching courses until week two. Just because the first one you try doesn't work out, doesn't mean you won't love the next one.

Finally, reward yourself for finishing less pleasant tasks, such as MOOC videos, assignments and quizzes. Rather than thinking of MOOCs as another to-do on your list, use your coursework as a reward for completing a difficult or un-enjoyable task. This way, you'll successfully complete your courses, while acquiring more knowledge.