

MOOCs as a Hub in Political Science

How online courses can reinforce strategies of academic associations

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Abstract.

This paper analyses the experience of the IPSAMOOC project, a collaboration between Federica Web Learning, the International Association of Political Science (IPSA), and the International Association of Political Science Students (IAPSS) to embrace the opportunities offered by technology and deliver a series of Political Science MOOCs in open-access. The paper looks at the results emerging from these courses and illustrates how this specific MOOC project has provided unexpected opportunities for enhanced academic network building, because of the diverse processes and strategies involved in the creation, dissemination, delivery and exploitation of a MOOC.

Keywords: MOOCs, network building, learning communities, political science

1 Introduction

Since 2012, with the development of bespoke MOOCs platforms prompting the New York Times to dub it the “year of the Moocs”, authoritative US and European universities have been investing a significant amount of financial and organizational resources in distance learning. According to Class Central, the most widely used MOOC Observatory, 900 universities now host a total of 11000 MOOCs on four major platforms and 110 million learners used at least one MOOC in 2018. Along with the amazing diffusion of MOOCs, what has become increasingly clear in recent times is that «technology is currently forcing a serious reconceptualization of accreditation, assessment, motivation and retention, technology-based instruction, and the overall student experience» [1]. Although branding and internationalization largely determined early interest in the MOOC phenomenon, the emerging trends now point towards the credentialing of online learning, and addressing the needs of lifelong learners in the new digital, knowledge society [2, 3, 4].

This paper analyses the experience of the IPSAMOOC project, a collaboration between Federica Web Learning, the International Association of Political Science (IPSA), to embrace the opportunities offered by technology and explore the potential

and benefits of online learning in Political Science by creating and delivering a series of Political Science MOOCs. The courses are in open access, mainly in English language, provide video and text-based learning content, and have been delivered on the Federica as well as the edx platform. The paper looks at the results emerging from these courses and illustrates how this specific MOOC project has evolved.

2 Institutional partnership and links between learning environments

The partnership between IPSA and Federica Web Learning was set up in 2017 to provide a set of 7 introductory MOOCs, with Federica Web Learning providing experience and expertise in MOOC creation and delivery, while IPSA provided leading academics and researchers in the field of Political Science as the MOOC authors. Focusing attention on single contributions, IPSAMOOCs introduce the major subfields of Political Science like comparative politics, international relations, and political theory. The courses are available in English language, with video transcriptions in English, and in the native French, with English subtitles, and Spanish of two authors.

- Comparative Political Systems, Gianfranco Pasquino
- Comparative Research Designs and Methods, Dirk Berg-Schlosser
- Contemporary Issues in World Politics, Ilter Turan and Mehmet Ali Tugtan
- Democracy and Autocracy: Theories and Empirical Findings, Marianne Kneuer
- Politique Globale/Global Politics, Yves Schemel
- Introducción a la teoría política, Fernando Vallespin
- Understanding Political Concepts, Mauro Calise and Werner Patzelt

The courses have been designed following the hallmarks of the Federica approach to MOOCs. They are curricular courses, video-oriented but text-based, enriched through a guided access to authoritative, preferably open, sources on the Web.

Curricular courses lend themselves to blended and mixed-mode delivery models, where Blended learning refers to «the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences» [5], and these have been successfully adopted by some of the Professors involved in the IPSAMOOCs, at the Bilgi University of Istanbul and at the University of Naples Federico II, creating opportunities for cross-cultural learning in mixed on-campus/MOOC student classes, and paving the way for virtual credit exchange between partnering institutions. On this point, IPSAMOOCs started experimenting with credentials as well. IPSA members have been offered a course code that, on completion of their attendance of the MOOC, entitles them to receive an IPSA certificate, and more of a third of enrolling students have used the IPSA membership course code. This represents a first step of an accreditation strategy that is crucial to consolidate an audience in the online learning market.

Other professors have personalized their teaching program, choosing individual modules from the entire list of IPSAMOOC course lessons to create original learning

sequences, offering opportunities for increasing creativity and contamination between different environments for study and research. The creation of a MOOC implies the construction of a repository of learning content but, in terms of the electronic Alexandria, with the provision of links, learners are encouraged to connect and explore other learning repositories on the Web. And learners on the MOOC Understanding Political Concepts have benefitted from the Hyperpolitics website. Hyperpolitics is a pioneering application of web 2.0 logic to create a Repository of Political Science Concepts; an academic ecosystem, comprising books [6], working platform (www.hyperpolitics.net), hyperlinks and learning communities that defines concepts in terms of their relationship to other concepts.

This methodology forms the basis of the Understanding Political Concepts MOOC and this MOOC was used as the preparatory module of the first edition of the Capri IPSA Summer School 2018, an intensive residential course in Political Science Concept Design for PhD students in Political Science from around the world. Successful completion of the online module is a prerequisite to admission on the second, residential component. A further example of how the effects of the single MOOC resonate across diverse academic networks.

3 Research and learning networks

Building on long research activities on digital sources and web opportunities, the Ipsa/Federica joint venture aims at giving a relevant contribution to help scholars worldwide to cope with the new and moving frontier of weblearning. Previous experience with IpsaPortal, (www.ipsaportal.net), the official publication dedicated to the retrieval and evaluation of web sources for Political Science [7], has clearly showed that, whilst limitations of accumulation and access have been disappearing in web environment, an authoritative guidance may allow for a fruitful use of the tremendous opportunities offered by the new cyber environment. With the worldwide MOOCs spread, higher expectations have brought about a new quest for a common space for experimenting and sharing higher education. IpsamooCs may serve both the PS community and citizens interested in understanding how the study of politics can improve their own lives, by assuring a space for learning and research dissemination.

Integration of learning and research activities represents one of the most diffuse aspirations of academic culture. The concept of a research-teaching-study nexus traces its roots back to 1810 formulations of Wilhelm von Humboldt, according to which in higher education students are engaged in an unceasing process of inquiry and both «teacher and student have their justification in the common pursuit of knowledge» [8]. The increase in online education assures unprecedented opportunities in the Humboldt's knowledge triangle, as research methods and findings may be presented in an open learning environment for millions of students. The IPSAMOOCs help to set the research agenda within the field, and advanced online courses may represent a unique media mix for research dissemination, by combining the reputational factor of outstanding scientific research with an extremely successful multimedia format. For instance, looking at the first pilot set of IPSAMOOCs, the course on *Democracy and Autocracy* by Marianne Kneuer calls for a reversal of traditional studies on

democratization, and questions whether a democratic world can flourish when it is faced with the peril of regression.

The collaboration between Federica and international publishers like Springer further extends the potential reach of this multimedia research via online educational channels.

4 Academic association for lifelong learning

In the current global political climate and in the changing nature of the professional profiles in the job market, interest in Political Science learning content from the wider public seems to be increasing. This is attested by new and consolidated courses on global issues on all four major MOOC platforms [9]. In response to this trend, Federica decided to broaden access to the IPSAMOOCs to a more global audience, especially since IPSAMOOCs cover topics at the cutting edge of research innovation, such as investigations into progress and regression of worldwide political regimes. They did this by publishing all 7 courses on edX, to benefit from edX branding and its wide international network of users and providers, many of them English-speaking.

Edx has the added advantage of offering an optional verified certification track, learner data and dashboard for evaluation and analysis, and, more importantly, the possibility to cluster courses to form a core curriculum. 5 IPSAMOOC courses (English Language delivery) were grouped, and starting times staggered, to create a solid academic preparation in the basics of Political Science - known as an XSeries on the edX platform – which also allows for an overall XSeries Certificate. The 5 courses in the XSeries are first available in instructor-based, structured format, each lasting 5 weeks. The courses are then made available in self-paced mode, enabling a wider audience to access the courses on an anytime anywhere basis.

Overall, the courses have proved to be a success with the international audience, registering more than 23,000 enrolments, with a 100% increase in enrolments in the last 6 months. The global reach is impressive, with learners hailing from 120 different countries in the first edition and more than 143 in the second one, with a predominance of American and Indian learners. Five courses currently running in 2 editions and enrolment numbers are consistently higher on the second edition, which is unusual for MOOCs.

In terms of user demographics, the current state of second editions of the three IPSA courses confirms a higher percentage of male learners on all courses with a tendency to narrow the gender gap. The age distribution amongst the IPSAMOOC learners, which, in the first edition was very much in line with global MOOC trends, with a predominance of learners in the 26-40 age range, changed in the second edition, where we saw a growth in the number of learners. This result is an early indication of the success of the dissemination strategy, which specifically aimed to target and engage with a digital native audience. They are the sector of the population who will tend to maintain a constant rapport with online education throughout their working lives, to update or change their skills profile in line with the new demands of the job market.

This shift in the balance in terms of age is also reflected in the area of educational qualifications. The predominance of MOOC learners already in possession

of a College degree is confirmed, with a slight increase recorded in this round, and there is also a higher percentage of registered participants with a qualification below degree level. On the other hand, there is a significant decrease in the number of students with a more advanced qualification.

The global reach of the IPSA MOOCs has proved to be impressive, with learners hailing from 120 different countries in the first edition and more than 143 in the second one. The decision to use the channel that Federica opened on edX proved to be a success in this sense, and has led to the implementation of new strategies to continue to exploit these opportunities for internationalization. The predominance of American learners was confirmed, with India in second place. The relative interest on the part of UK learners attests to edX marketing communications that use English and reach out to an English-speaking public. The course in French language but with English translation attracted the same learner demographic as the courses in English.

5 Link to Students Associations

An agreement was finalized between Federica and the International Association of Political Science Students (IAPSS) in October 2018, setting out plans to consolidate collaboration between the two parties to promote quality online education in Political Science and build competence in digital teaching and learning; connect learners and create learning and research communities in the field of digital PS education; create opportunities to raise public awareness and knowledge of relevant global PS issues in a shifting geopolitical landscape.

One of the main pillars of collaboration to achieve these objectives is via the IPSAMOOC project. The role of a select team of IAPSS is three-fold:

- Dissemination of IPSAMOOC-Federica courses on edX to international students in political science via a comprehensive, wide-reaching communication program lasting 10 months to encourage student uptake across the globe.
- Creation of a SPOC around the XSeries program on edX, offering tuition and learner support services to a select group of students from 9 different countries across the globe. These students will become a network of international ‘ambassadors’ for teaching and learning Political Science in the digital environment.
- Analyze the approaches, benefits and potential of online learning for Political Science:
 - For the general courses, quantitative analysis of participants, learner type and demographics as well as learner behavior. For the IAPSS class, qualitative analysis of participant behavior, interaction with the XSeries courses and reaction to the learning experience. Responses will feed into improvements in subsequent editions.
 - Survey designed - for the whole public of learners - to analyze how students use and interact with the courses based on the learning experience, and evaluate the overall success of the learning pathway and its various components, including self-paced learning and assessment and a roadmap for future developments.

7 Internationalization: global connections

The paper looks at the results emerging from the set of Political Science MOOCs that are the fruit of a collaboration between Federica Web Learning, IPSA and IAPSS. It illustrates how this specific MOOC project has provided unexpected opportunities for enhanced academic network building, because of the diverse processes and strategies involved in the creation, dissemination, delivery and exploitation of a MOOC. The individual MOOC is central to the creation of a wide-reaching repository of learning content, that in turn connects learners to different learning environments. The range of communication and dissemination initiatives around the MOOCs has attracted interest from a broad public who form diverse learning and teaching communities where the message resonates and opens the way to institutional collaboration. And the involvement of Research students in learning support roles also represents the development of research communities around specific academic areas. The MOOC has moved from stand-alone unit designed to achieve specific learning objectives to an academic hub that connects and promotes a complex series of institutional networks and interests.

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