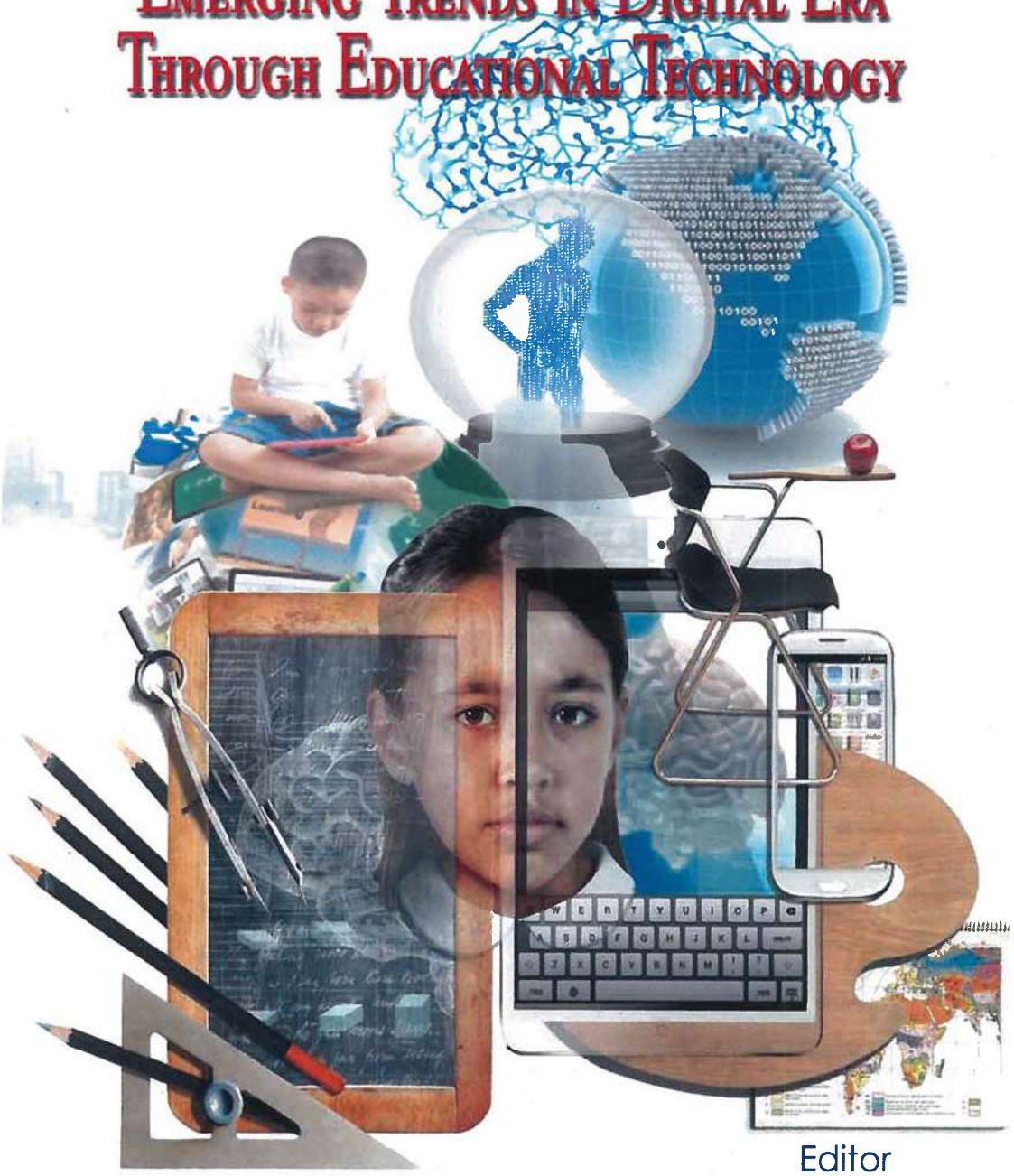
Emerging Trends in Digital Era Through Educational Technology



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Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): Why Do We Need Them?

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ABSTRACT

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are online courses that cater to a huge population. MOOCs have been around for quite some time; however, they have begun to gain importance only in recent years. With technology-infused classroom instructions on the rise, techno-savvy students with little patience for hour-long (or even longer) lectures and the necessity to earn has led to the popularity of online courses among the student population. The obvious benefits of taking up online courses include, among others, self-paced learning, and learning while earning, and learning from absolutely anywhere. An upcoming form of online learning is the massive open online courses (MOOCs). This paper discusses the concept of MOOCs, their history, and their need in the present scenario. This paper also focuses on the benefits and the possible challenges that MOOCs face.

Introduction

The busy world that we live in the perpetual lack of time, and the need to earn has made it almost impossible for the 21st Century learner to continue with formal education. But the urge to learn, never-the-less, has inspired and led to the invention of several media by which learning is made possible. One such media is online learning.

Online learning makes it possible for learners to take up a course without attending an educational institution. Learners get the benefit of taking up a course from their home or from any place they're comfortable. It also enables learners to get credible certifications, thereby, improving their qualifications, which, in turn, play an important role in career progression.

One such online learning medium are the Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs). A MOOC is best explained by elaborating on the four words that make up this acronym.

Massive: The word massive indicates the large student population the world over that such an online course caters to.

Open: This word, as used in MOOC, could mean any of the following:

- It is open to everyone and does not require learners to fulfill certain criteria such as in terms of qualifications.
- It could also indicate free access to educational resources.
- Open could also refer to the fact that educational resources are hosted on open platforms such as Wikis.
- Lastly, it may also refer to the fact that there is use of open content extensively. This indicates that the content generated by the course is published open for use by others.

Online: An essential feature of any MOOC is that it is online, meaning that the learners can take this course using the Internet. This is where it benefits learners who are located in remote locations.

Course: The word "course" indicates that a MOOC has clear learning objectives, an instructional strategy, and the testing of the learning that may have occurred.

By virtue of having these features, MOOCs today, provide the promise of heralding a new wave of learning in distance and adult education.

The Beginnings

The Industrial Revolution necessitated qualified manpower for work in factories. This, in turn, led to the growth of the now almost extinct term "correspondence courses." But these courses were not able to meet the requirements of massive student populations. This requirement was, however, met by the emergence of electronic media such as the radio and television. These media enabled learning to be carried to the masses, even those who were located in remote geographical regions. But what still lacked was the all important teacher-learner interaction, which was taken care of by the introduction of e-Learning courses with the aid of the Internet. That gave rise to the online courses, as they are commonly called today. Only those who had access to a computer and the Internet at that point in time, could access online courses.

Meanwhile, the 1960s saw the rise of open universities, which changed the face of distance learning. Not only did they provide correspondence courses, broadcasting and publishing of courses, and courses at local and regional levels, they also adopted an open policy. This meant that more students could have access to academic knowledge. Today, open universities also provide online courses to learners all over the world.

All of this ultimately paved way for the development of the first MOOC in the year 2008. Created by Stephen Downes and George Siemens, the MOOC was called Connectivism and Connective Knowledge/2008 (CCK8). This MOOC used many platforms such as blogs and forums to engage learners. The course, obviously, was open and free.

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Later, in the year 2012, Stanford Professors Sebastian Thrun & Peter Norvig created an open and free course on Introduction to Artificial Intelligence. The course saw a massive registration from more than 160,000 students across 190 countries ultimately leading Thrun & Peter Norvig to develop Udacity, a model for online knowledge. Today, there are several start-up models for MOOCs including the famous Coursera.

MOOCs, today, are catching up with learners, especially adult learners, as their choice of distance learning because of the obvious benefits that they have to offer.

Present Scenario

From 2012, which was declared the "Year of the MOOC" to present, MOOCs have come a long way. MOOCs today are not only being provided by the best universities around the world but also by individual instructors/teachers. There are many more platforms now available to host MOOCs. One field where MOOCs have played a vital role is that of distance learning. Open resources, accessibility and credible certifications have made MOOCs quite popular.

Benefits

MOOCs are getting more and more popular; this is because they offer several benefits in terms of accessibility, increased potential for student engagement, and lifelong learning opportunities.

MOOCs are free and available to learners at a low cost and they are easily accessible because they are online. Being online, MOOCs attract learners because they offer a certain degree of freedom and flexibility to the learners. There is no special requirement in terms of educational background, as well. Other than that, there is no age limit to take up a MOOC and learners can access MOOCs from anywhere and at anytime.

Additionally, MOOCs are a great medium to ensure continuity of learning. Be it for career growth or purely for the sake of learning, MOOCs have the potential to guarantee lifelong learning. These benefits only seem to indicate that MOOCs are here to stay.

Challenges

The biggest challenge that MOOCs face is that of high dropout rates. Even though massive numbers of students may register for MOOCs, the number of students actually completing the course is much less. Another challenge that MOOCs face is integration with classroom instructions. Presently, MOOCs only have a supplementary value and are not in a position to replace classroom instructions completely. Finally, employers may not really recognize the credentials that come with MOOCs.

MOOCs: A Boon to the Teachers

Even though technology continues to make major impacts in the field of education, the teacher remains at the helm of learning. Moving from a traditional classroom and specializing in one subject to a classroom in which learning is infused with the use of various technological aids and requires a teacher to be multi-faceted, the role of the teacher has now been raised to that of a guide and a facilitator. It, therefore, becomes essential that teachers today keep renewing their knowledge and get comfortable with technology.

As working professionals, in constant need for time, teachers could actually turn to MOOCs to upgrade themselves with recent developments not only in their field of expertise but also on several other aspects such as the use of technology in education. There are MOOCs available which help teachers in terms of their professional development. MOOCs on various subjects, too, can be taken up by teachers that will help upgrade their knowledge and probably even learn something new. Additionally, teachers can also come up with their own MOOCs and make significant contributions to the society.

Conclusion

MOOCs seem to be a buzz word today because of all the digitization that is taking place in the field of education. Considering the massive population of learners the world over and especially in a country like India, MOOCs have a great potential to get education across to masses. It is time that universities, educational institutions, and most importantly teachers come to the forefront to get such initiatives in place and running.

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