Is it Time to Move On from MOOCs?

When MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) were launched they were hailed as a major change in education. Participants could take courses from top institutions on a range of topics, all in a flexible format which wouldn't cost them anything beyond the price of their internet connection. For those interested in professional development this was big news and uptake amongst the library community was swift. But now that MOOCs have moved from being new to normal maybe it's time to ask how useful they really are for professional development.

The plus points

One of the main benefits of MOOCs is their flexibility. Although courses are offered over a defined period there are no set lectures so participants can learn when it suits them. For busy people the opportunity to fit this in around existing schedules can mean the difference between taking a course or not. Most courses are either repeated regularly or leave materials accessible so that even if students need to take a break they don't miss out on content.

MOOCs are also useful if learners want to 'try before they buy'. With budgets stretched it's unlikely that people will get much time to attend training, especially if the topic is not directly related to their role. MOOCs allow for a short taster of a topic to decide if it is something worth pursuing in a more formal way. The range of topics covered by MOOCs is extensive so there is something to suit most needs which is especially useful if learners want to move sectors. Libraries are found in all types of institution and it's impossible to be an expert on everything but MOOCs can be used to get a better grasp of basic concepts or brush up on terminology. This can be especially useful in job applications and interviews.

The online format means that MOOCs can be more responsive to new topics than traditional courses which have to adhere to a wider curriculum. MOOCs are often run as one off-courses based on a topic which is likely to be of wider interest and are a good way to stay on top of the latest trends.

Finally MOOCs help to provide a structure for professional development. When learners want to study a subject it can be hard to know where to start but these courses offer guidance from basic to more in-depth material. Having a structure can also be good for learners who need the motivation of a deadline in order to finish.

The downsides

The major issue with MOOCs is cost. When they were introduced the majority of courses were free to access and included a certificate. This model has evolved and it's now possible to take an entire degree through MOOCs but this comes with costs comparable to university fees. Even for one-off courses there is often a charge for a certificate which is often the only tangible proof of participation.

Though the format is more established it's not clear whether some employers actually value MOOCs as a method of learning. Including participation on a CV or application may not always receive the desired response and it can be hard to demonstrate learning. There are also misconceptions about how the robustness of online education which can make qualifications gained from MOOCs a hard sell.

Many MOOCs use video lectures but this can cause issues. Videos without transcription can result in accessibility problems but watching videos can be problematic for others. If workplace technology doesn't allow videos then learners may be forced to watch content in their own time, not a good way to preserve the work/life balance. Some may also find the MOOC experience isolating. Although there is a community aspect to these courses, learners are often studying alone which can be very different from previous experiences of face-to-face learning.

Conclusion

So are MOOCs useful for professional development? It depends on the individual learner and what they aim to get out of the experience. These courses can be a great way to dip into a new subject, refresh knowledge or offer some structured learning but they might not work for all. Although library specific MOOCs tend to be hard to find there is scope for learners to put together a course of study to suit their own individual needs with courses on discipline specific topics such as data as well as those covering more general topics such as management. Although not a replacement for traditional qualifications these courses offer a valuable addition to the professional development toolkit.

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