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Capstone Report: MOOC in the Middle Grades

Creating and piloting a MOOC at the middle school level required an abundance of research, trial, error, and modification. Since the majority of MOOCs are designed to accommodate students in higher education, it was a challenge to find a collaborative source and learning model that would accommodate the teachers’ needs and be cognitively appropriate for all students. After assessing research on MOOCs, blended learning, and project-based learning, it was very apparent that the blended learning model provided typically provided the most satisfaction for both teachers and students (Chan and Jia). Therefore, the teaching team believed that this would be most appropriate for our desired outcomes. The students participating in this MOOC pilot program had major discrepancies in their exposure to technology. The teachers believed that a blended learning model would give the students the opportunity to excel online, in a traditional classroom setting, or both. Once a delivery method was decided upon, the teaching team needed to choose a delivery method. Several websites and learning management systems were evaluated.

After much debate, the team decided the best housing website for the MOOC was Schoology, but as the project evolved Wix, Edmodo, and MackinVIA, a research database purchased by Cobb County, were the tools that students were already the most comfortable with. The students had already completed WebQuests from Weebly websites customized for their classes, so a Wix would feel very comfortable for each student. Each student in the pilot program has also used Edmodo and MackinVIA throughout middle school. Students in the preview have a wide variety of experience with technology, so using tools they have already been exposed to enriched their experience.

Once deciding on the hosting websites and platforms, the collaborative professionals reviewed the goals and objectives of the assignment. The goals were then turned into four weekly modules that contained cohesive content designed to keep the students working at a steady pace. The titles of each module, or week, were as follows:

Module 1: Introduction Phase-What is your passion?

Module 2: Research Phase- What information do I need?

Module 3: Creation Phase- How can I show what I know?

Module 4: Critique Phase- What can I learn from my peers?

At the beginning of each module, students were given a color-coded checklist that would match the remainder of than handouts received during that module. This made for easy organization. Each module took an average of three to four work days in the computer lab with the exception of module 1. In the planning stages of the project, it was anticipated that students would be overwhelmed by the amount of topics to choose from. However, when the students were given the topic choices they decided on a topic within fifteen minutes and dove into the research process. Because each group of students is different, there will not be any changes to this module’s length, but in the following years it would be best to have a smaller topic selection and a bulleted list for students to choose from instead of the standards.

Module 2 is where the students research deficiencies began to show through and impeded the project’s progress. Students were given a list of reliable websites on their course site, Edmodo, and shown how to use the school district’s research database, MackinVIA. Despite this training and modeling, the general education teacher and special education teacher implementing the project continuously saw students relying on Wikipedia and other miscellaneous sources found through hasty Google searches. With intensive monitoring and modeling how to correct these behaviors the majority of students were able to compose a list of sources that were credible.

Throughout the planning, the project molded to what would suit the group of students implementing it. Initially, the goal of the assignment was to have weekly videos for the students to use. However, due to other central tasks requiring more attention, this task was not completed in order to make time for better course materials and website design. As the project was implemented, many changes were made to suit the needs of individual learners in each class period.

During the planning phases it was decided that students would contribute to discussion posts in both modules two and three. However, after doing this with two class periods, the teachers determined that this was not a wise use of the time and not contributing to the students learning and understanding. Another prominent issue during the project were the citations. Although students were given a comprehensive overview on how to use MackinVIA and MLA format at the beginning of the project, this is where they struggled the most. One observation made by the main classroom teacher and the special education teacher was the students’ tendency to Google or use Wikipedia instead of taking the time to find thorough, reliable resources.

In order the prevent these shortcomings in research skills, the social studies teachers will create more research based projects throughout the year that require students to use MackinVIA and MLA. When students are already familiar with the structure, teachers feel like students will be more successful. In addition to building more background with the students, teachers also believe that it would be beneficial to teach MLA during the revision stage. The two on-level class periods participating in the project tended to catch their peers MLA errors during the peer review session, but the co-taught classes overlooked this. Each student was given a rubric during the peer review stage, so teachers believe remediating and reteaching would be the best way to prevent this problem in the future.

Though there were several shortcomings of implementing the MOOC, the over-arching objectives of giving each 7th grade student a comprehensive overview of the 8th grade social studies materials were met. Students were able to find something they were passionate about and discover new information. As a result, almost each unit in 8th grade was covered in some aspect. The special education teacher in the pilot program noted that this will have a huge impact on the special education students because it gives them background, confidence, and some expertise in their research field. Because they have had this exposure, they should feel more comfortable contributing to the class discussion.

After reflecting on the project, teachers and students noted that their overall experience was a positive one. Each teacher and student felt that with slight changes the MOOC could have a tremendous impact on students in years to come. Teachers wanted to see refinement in project selection and the process of citation. Students wanted more choices and diversity in project selection. This year, the project’s emphasis was on doing research and creating a project in a digital format (this project was completed in the classroom), but next year there will be the inclusion of books and non-technology based project options. During the 2016-2017 school year, teachers will provide a more detailed list of topics, include more research projects throughout the school year, and do more online discussions to properly prepare the students for their learning experience.

During the implementation of the My Georgia MOOC, there was a huge change in the teaching style. Learning became student-led and student-focused. Students were able to consult the teacher with any issues, questions, or concerns, but since they were given clear guidelines, most were able to excel in their own strength. This was very insightful because the teachers were able to work one-on-one and in small groups with the students who needed extra support, and students were able to arise as leaders with other students who were focusing on the same topics. In most cases, this was helpful for everyone. The teaching team noted that in the future there needs to be more extensive scaffolding for this project in co-taught classes, but this can easily be adjusted.

Although most of the project was fairly easily to facilitate, there were difficult days. For instance, one day an entire row of computers lost internet access. Unfortunately, this occurred when there was only one teacher present in the classroom, and the teacher spent most of the period readjusting the cables. Another day, one of the websites students were using to produce their projects, PowToon, was down, so the students had to use Word to type what would have been on their slides. In each of these scenarios, the teacher(s) were able to come up with a solution that allowed each child to remain on track, but it added a lot of stress to the day. When conducting a project that is technology based, teachers can never predict what might go wrong. Teachers should always have other relevant activities on-hand for when these mishaps occur. Using a blended model helped during these days because the classes were able to go back to a traditional learning model for the day.

The blended learning model to help students achieve maximum success. Since this project had a student-centered focus, the team looked to section 2 of the PSC standards to guide the planning process and implementation of the project. These learner-centered strategies (PSC Standard 2.2) of giving students time to learn by direct instruction and independent inquiry were perfect for students. Students could get the basic details about Georgia’s geography and culture during a traditional class setting. Then, students could research the impact of these things on their topic of choice. These topics varied from the influence of Arthur Blank to Spanish Exploration of Georgia; however, each topic had a significant connection to Georgia’s geographic structure and culture.

PSC standards 2.3-2.5, which refer to differentiation, higher-order thinking skills, and authentic learning were also essential to the My Georgia MOOC project. The learning was authentic and interesting to students. Each student was genuinely excited to research a topic of interest about their home state and sometimes even their own city. It was incredible to see students passionate about research.

Throughout the project, the lead teacher was differentiating (PSC 2.5) by learning interests and ability. The special education teacher in the classroom was a very instrumental part in this process. For students with learning disabilities, she stayed after school for tutoring sessions, and provided step-by-step instructions on how to access technology tools from home. Because the main teacher and the special education teacher spent approximately a month collaborating in preparation for this project, all learners were able to learn something they were interested in at their own pace.

Higher-order thinking skills (PSC standard 2.4) were critical during modules two and three of the MOOC process. Students located reliable primary and secondary resources that pertained to their project topic in module two, which was one week. For module 3, they took all the information they documented and created an original presentation. While this process was supposed to be less intense and structured than the research process, all observers and teachers noted that students struggled with choice and creativity. Most students elected to create a PowToon video. The lead teacher and the special education teacher discussed this in depth and are preparing to take professional learning to enhance these skills and increase the LoTi score for years to come.

Teachers contemplating creating a MOOC for student use in the future should first assess the technology skills their students already have. They also should not underestimate the importance of having the support of the county office or a community. The team was able to refine to goals and outcomes of the project and provide resources and other perspectives on the creation of the project. With the support of the team, the lead teacher was able to turn ideas into a project that have a profound, individualized impact on each student in the classroom. All teachers involved in the creation of the MOOC plan on editing this project for future use and eventually expanding it to use within more of Cobb County School District.

References

Chan, D., & Jia, W. (2014). The effect of human interactions on student performance and satisfaction of blended learning. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, *18*(3), 11-21.