Title of Project:
Exploring the Use of Massive Open Online Courses
 (MOOCs) as a Source of Professional Development
for Teachers of English Language Learners

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

With nearly 1 in 10 students identified as an English learner (EL) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), most teachers can expect to have ELs in their classrooms at some point. It is imperative that ELs have teachers who understand their distinct learning needs, including knowledge of language acquisition, incorporation of cultural knowledge, attention to oral language and vocabulary, and the strategic use of home languages (Lucas et al. 2008; Markos, 2011; Menken & Antunez, 2001). Currently many teachers have limited preparation for working with ELs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008), and in-service teachers report that the professional development that is offered is not adequately preparing them to meet ELs' unique needs (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2007). With the great demand for preparing teachers for working with ELs, one potentially scalable solution involves leveraging technology in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a format for teacher professional development (PD). As an online resource, MOOCs can serve large numbers of participants in a variety of geographic locations.

Research Questions

Although MOOCs offer a potential vehicle for addressing the training of teachers to work with ELLs, we need better understanding of how participants may engage with and learn through the MOOC format. The present study uses a multiple case study design to examine participant experiences in a MOOC. Recent best practices for ELs emphasize integrating language and content instruction and the MOOC in this study offers teachers a way to do so through the use of student academic conversations. The course was designed primarily for teachers and coaches of K-12 ELL students in both mainstream general content classes and English language

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development (ELD) or English as a Second Language (ESOL) specific classes. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the roles of teacher characteristics, school context, and course activities in supporting teacher learning in a MOOC focused on promoting academic conversation for ELLs?
2. How do participants interpret and use academic conversations in their classroom practice over the course of the MOOC?

Research Methodology

Participants. While participants signed up for the course from around the world, the focus of this study was on teachers and coaches in K-12 settings in the United States. Overall, 2, 749 participants registered for the course. The study utilized descriptive analyses of all U.S.-based, K-12 educators, using a multiple case study design in order to capture participants' voices and experiences in the MOOC.

Six case study participants were chosen based on variation in roles (ESL or bilingual teacher versus content area teacher) and variation in the amount of explicit school support they received. School support was defined through responses in a pre-survey that indicated presence of one or more of the following supports: (a) colleagues from district taking the course, (b) in-person meetings or workshops to support the course, (c) financial stipend, or (c) time in the school day to take the course. The six case study participants represented a range of roles (high school English teacher, two dual language teachers, high school social studies teacher, literacy coach, and a 3rd grade classroom teacher), as well as differences in prior experiences and certifications (including GLAD, SIOP, etc), school characteristics (small/large, urban/suburban, etc), and district-based supports for MOOC participation.

Data sources. Data sources included the following: (a) pre- and post-survey of all participants, (b) course assignments of case study participants, and (c) two interviews for each of the case study participants. The surveys consisted of a series of demographic questions and background for working with ELs. The post survey also included questions about levels of satisfaction and examples of implementation of course content. The course assignments, which were all based on classroom applications, showed the extent to which participants integrated course learning into their classroom planning and instruction. Two semi-structured interviews with each of the six case study participants were conducted in order to gain information about their experience over the duration of the course.

Methods of analysis. Descriptive statistical analyses were used to understand the background characteristics of participants and some overall patterns in participation. Pre- and post-survey data were analyzed to describe patterns in participant characteristics and responses. This form of analysis provided a foundation for viewing the overall trends and characteristics of course participants.

For better understanding of what course participation looked like at the individual level, a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006) was used in order to look at both the particular cases, as well as general participant experience. As suggested by Stake (2006), data collection and analysis took place in a simultaneous and iterative manner. After coding course assignments, surveys, and interviews by a list of codes developed out of course content, a matrix of participants and course theme codes were created. This matrix was used to identify key themes.

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The participant artifacts (interviews, assignments, and surveys) were consulted to elaborate on those themes and develop narratives of case study participants.

Summary of Findings

Overall, participants appreciated how the course content was relevant for their work in classrooms and that the assignments gave them an opportunity to practice content in the classroom. In the post-survey, U.S.-based K-12 educators overwhelmingly reported devoting more class time to student academic conversations after participating in the course. Case study participants exemplified this sentiment when sharing that "Now I'm more conscious about including and treating the conversations as a very important area of my lesson. I plan for it now and I try to include it in most of my lessons" or "I'm going to do a lesson, model it after a lesson I saw on one of the videos." Overall this course clearly provided opportunity for participants to connect course learning to their own practice, an essential feature of professional development for educators.

Preliminary analysis about course completion was consistent with prior MOOC research highlighting large rates of attrition. Although 2,749 people signed up for the course, only 52 actually completed the course (.02%). It is important to note, however, that those participants who completed the first assignment, were more likely to complete the entire course, such that 55% of participants who completed the first assignment went on to complete the entire course. In addition, teacher role did not tend to influence who completed the course with an even number of ESL/bilingual and content teachers completing the course.

In-person support for MOOCs did not relate to higher rates of completion. Although little research on professional learning communities in online settings has been conducted thus far, we do know about the benefits of interaction, relationships (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010) and professional learning communities for in-person PD (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). In previous research about MOOCs as a form of PD, Rutherford-Quach, Zerkel and Williams (2015) found greater rates of course completion by participants who completed hybrid forms of the MOOC in which they had in-person support alongside the online version. When looking at final course completion rates, participants who had high levels of school support had similar (52%) completion rates compared to participants who had low level of school support (42%).

Given the lack of clear findings about how role or school-based support may have shaped course completion, the qualitative data sheds light on actual participant experiences. Findings from the case study analysis suggest that school practices that supported a culture of collaboration and emphasized academic language fostered meaningful course experiences.

Case study analysis and narratives of Julie and Ana, two elementary teachers both working in bilingual settings, highlights the role that school context plays in individual MOOC learning. At first glance, Julie appeared to be set up for course success because she attended live workshops at her district to support participation in the MOOC and received a financial stipend for participation. Ana, on the other hand, had signed up for the course on her own and was receiving no explicit supports for taking the course. Despite the lack of school support, however, Ana operated in an environment in which collective learning was an institutional practice and academic conversation (the topic of the course) was widely supported.

When describing her school context, Julie responded that she had not shared course learning because

"my colleagues, I don't think they're willing to try some of the stuff" and that the colleagues that I have wouldn't be interested, so it's hard to share with them. The other colleagues at my school aren't very respectful. If I were to suggest anything, there would really be no point because they would just be, 'Why are you telling me this?' It's not very collaborative. It's not a very collaborative school.

The school culture that Julie described made it difficult for her to share learning from the course and discuss content with colleagues within her site. In addition, Julie expressed her view that most of student language practice in her class was focused on scripted language practice. Julie's beliefs about the limited potential for student conversation combined with the lack of collaboration in her school site presented challenges for full participation and learning about academic language conversation in the MOOC.

Ana, on the other hand, came from a context where she regularly utilized routines and practices to support academic conversation because of a recent grant that the school had received. She shared that "[we] teach academic language because we picked that. We got to pick what we wanted to learn about and at our school, teachers decided that." When speaking about teacher learning opportunities at her school, Ana shared that her school utilized book clubs and "visitas" in which colleagues observed one another teaching and discussed the use of academic language. She stated that the observations are non-evaluative and a positive thing for teachers. In the case of Ana, she valued conversation in her class and this belief was also supported by her larger school community. Therefore, she utilized course learning to refine her practice around academic conversation and was able to engage with the course content surrounded by peers who also values conversation and act in a collaborative spirit.

Discussion and Implications

Based on these findings, I suggest that as researchers and practitioners we expand our conceptualization of school support for MOOCs to go beyond superficial supports and instead include institutional practices and goals that emphasize a collaborative learning culture for teachers. For school administrators, it may be helpful to offer incentives for taking the MOOC or time to complete the course work, but, ultimately, this support must be accompanied by sustained practices that foster interactions among staff and align with the content of the course. At the administrator level, principals and curriculum leaders can include structured times and coaching support for teachers to work in professional learning communities. Specifically, ESL and bilingual specialists' teacher knowledge can be leveraged to support dialogs about course content. Valdes, Kibler, and Walqui (2014) recommend that in light of new college and career ready standards, the role of ESL teachers should be shifting toward a more collaborative role with content teachers. When given opportunities and routines that facilitate planning together, content teachers are more likely to engage in collaboration with ESL specialists (Hopkins, Lowenhaupt & Sweet, 2015; Santos, Darling-Hammond & Cheuk, 2012). EL teacher expertise can be useful for localizing learning in the MOOC and facilitating discussions about course content. The innovative design and format of MOOCs offer the potential to reach a large number of teachers and, thereby, support the ever increasing need to prepare more teachers to work with ELs. Like any form of teacher PD, however, administrators and school leaders must carefully consider implementation of MOOCs within existing practices that promote collaborative learning communities.

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