Exploring flexible modes of online education

Srećko Joksimović, Vitomir Kovanović, Areti Manataki and Dragan Gašević
The University of Edinburgh

Background

The University has a strategic plan to increase the number of online students from 2,000 to 10,000 by 2020. In order to achieve this, we must accommodate for the needs of online students, who typically combine studies with a busy professional life.

This project aims at gaining insights from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that adopted a flexible auto-cohort course organisation, before deploying such an innovative approach to UG/PG online teaching. Our objectives are:

1. to compare engagement patterns and social dynamics between session-based and auto-cohort courses; and
2. to investigate reasons for students to return/not return to the next course iteration.

Data and Methods

We employed quantitative methods to analyse data from a bilingual MOOC in introductory computer programming, called "Code Yourself" (in English) and "A Programar" (in Spanish). The course has been offered on Coursera in two modalities: initially in a fixed session mode (spring 2015) and then in an auto-cohort mode (August 2015- today).

Data used for research objective 1 included student demographics, assessments, discussion forum interactions, and clickstream logs.

For research objective 2, we invited all students enrolled in Code Yourself and A Programar to fill in a survey about the opportunity to enrol in multiple course sessions. Students that enrolled in multiple sessions were mainly asked about their motivation and learning experience in the different sessions, while students that didn't return were mostly asked about the reasons for not enrolling a second time.

Results

Regarding research objective 1, we found that Code Yourself and A Programar learners had similar engagement patterns, with A Programar learners remaining more active, regardless of the modality.

Behavioral engagement variables
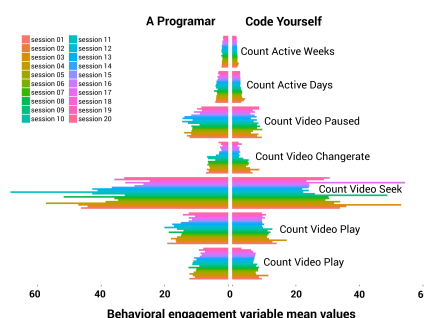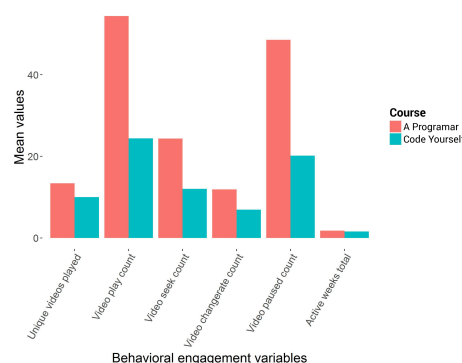
A total number of 223 Code Yourself and 514 A Programar students participated in the survey for research objective 2, with the proportion of returners being 33% and 56%, respectively.

Top reasons for switching to a new course session
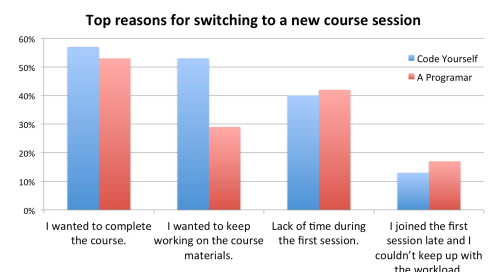
	Code Yourself	A Programar
Return was deemed successful	53%	59%
Return was not deemed successful	32%	14%

The top two reasons for not switching to a new course session were "Lack of time" (38% for CY and 34% for AP learners) and "The first course session covered my learning needs" (29% for CY and 37% for AP learners.

Conclusion

Our preliminary results show that engagement patterns in session-based and auto-cohort courses are, in principle, similar.

The majority of learners that joined a new course session, regarded it as a successful experience. Hence, including this option in UG/PG online teaching may improve the learning experience.

Acknowledgements