Do Trainers want to Design Learner-centric Course/ Moocs? A Survey of a Focus Group of Life Skills Trainers

Capt. Prabhu James (Retd.)[*1], **Dr. Sowmya Narayanan**[2]

[*12] Department of Centre for Life Skills and Lifelong Learning, New Horizon College of Engineering, Bangalore-560103, India

jamesprabhu07@mail.com[1]

sowmyagrn@mail.com[2]

ABSTRACT

Design thinking is a buzz word in the marketplace. As a trainer and undergrad educator in life skills domain, I have never thought deeply about pedagogical aspects. This research paper tries to delve into the educators' perspective of designing a life skills course keeping the student/learners in center stage. Here I have tried to understand how a focus group of life skills educators think about the need of such an exercise to become subject matter experts in life skills course design.

I was also keen to introspect on their views of getting into course design aspects from the standpoint of professionals who deliver the course. In other words, do the faculty members want to know or want to be aware of student/learner-centric life skills course design. Subsequently, I have extrapolated the same data from the survey to the MOOCs (Massive open online courses) life skills course design.

The seamless integration of design and delivery and a full learning cycle from designing a course, delivering and assessment of both the course and methods of assessing the learning effectiveness would be worth another effort to investigate the mindsets of a particular focus group of educators.

The brief study shows how the group of educators have a mixed response but do have a general idea and intention to make the course more learner-centric especially if it is online MOOCs (Massive open online courses)

Keywords : Life skills MOOCs, Soft skills MOOCs, Educator viewpoint, learner-centric approach, course design, online courses, Life skills trainer views, Soft skills trainer standpoint, trainers' approach, student-centric courses.

I. INTRODUCTION

Designing a course in Life skills/soft skills is a challenge for trainers or educators because it needs a detailed planning and course design skills. Most educators stick to the course materials provided to them and try to plan within it to deliver the course. However a step backward to engineer the course

design and suit specific student/learner audiences would do a great deal of good for them as it would be 'right from their hearts'. In this brief paper, I have tried to understand why designing a course is a challenge and what does the focus group that I interacted with tell us about the mindsets towards designing the course on a learner-centric mode which they would love to deliver with care and interest to their worthy audiences.

II. OBJECTIVE

To understand whether life skills/soft skills trainers are aware and interested in designing a learner-centric course and if the same can be extrapolated to life skills MOOCs.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

Is the focus group of life skills trainers aware of learner-centric course design?

Do they want and intend to design a course and deliver the same?

IV. METHODOLOGY

Survey questionnaire was given to the focus group and a select number of trainers were interviewed in depth to understand the standpoint and iterations in their process of delivering programs in life skills.

A review of research on course design, learner-centric approach and MOOC course principles was done based on the available body of knowledge on the World Wide Web.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The success of a course commences before the first day of a training session. Excellent planning during the steps of a course design not only makes content delivery easier and more enjoyable, but also facilitates student learning. Once a course is planned, teaching involves implementing the course design on a day-to-day level. This two prong approach for trainers is recommended to take their professional

excellence to the next level. It is better to design the course and deliver it to make learners benefit to the maximum.

1) **Course Design basics:**
For an effective course design, we need to:

 Think of timing and logistics (Schedules, classrooms other administrative requisites)

 Talk to students to understand their needs(Audience analysis)

 Tailor learning objectives (Learning outcomes)

 Think of assessments methods – (assignments/quizzes/project/tests and frequency)

 Tailor appropriate course delivery strategies (Approach – present, practice,produce or Engage, Stimulate and Activate models , Activities, Case studies ,videos, games etc.) [1]

2) **Considering Learner-centric model :**
Once we decide to design a course and be ready with the steps, we need to ponder on the approach to be adapted.

Do we want a content-centric/teacher-centric approach or the latest successful learner-centric approach?

The modern learning thought is understandably switching over to learner-centered approach. [2] This approach has to be embraced when designing a course in life skills or soft skills.

3) **Can Trainers/Course facilitators take up the challenge ?**
As we have understood the steps to course design and the approach we would follow, we need to consider if the trainers/teachers are motivated to create a course based on the learner-centric approach. As per the proponents and experts in education, it is better that the teachers get involved more into the course design part. Upgrading to skills required for a course design and keeping to the boundaries laid by

their parent institution would be a win-win situation for all stakeholders in the higher education lifecycle.

Teachers or trainers need to take new roles in developing

Curriculum or a course but the design aspect of courses could conflict with traditional expectations. Designing a curriculum involves teachers'/trainers' flexibility and uniformity based on the norms of an institution, state or country's education policies when it comes to assessment. [3]

It is but natural to hear trainers complaining about the content of the syllabus given to them to deliver the course. To plug this gap and confusion, trainers must plan, prepare or up skill to become course designers. [4]

It is in the best interest that trainers require to learn instructional design skills and students learning styles. It is in their own interest to upscale to creating a course design for professional excellence and to foster the future citizen minds.

Trainers generally find it hard to adjust their styles to packaged courses and this leads to a course delivery that is rigid, and hardly cater to the needs of their learners. [5]

4) Curious case of Moocs and online courses:

The traditional face to face physical class rooms are going to be out of fashion in times to come. Educators need to be with the times to catch up with technology and screen presence, the bedfellows of millennial learners. So, to create an online course all one needs is precious time, mindset and motivation, and immense imagination.

Soft skills/Life skills trainers need to be experts in their field and this requires passion and commitment. Again as in traditional course delivery, it is worth it to be passionate, to give time to design a learner-centric course in online courses too. If we think about teachers in our lives, we vividly remember the

ones who were passionate about sharing their knowledge and expertise by centering on our needs. Such sessions were and will be memorable and uplifting. [6]

5) Carrying the content to the console :

If content PDFs and videos are ready, one needs to prepare quizzes, create a course certificate, and a landing page. This hardly takes a week to create an online course if you spare two hours a day.

A MOOC is designed for easily repeatable courses; offer pre-recorded, and fixed courses and add quizzes and exams, that could have optional instructor support to help in case of clarifications required by learners. MOOCs come with many benefits for students: Improved access to higher education and flexibility in terms of time and location. It is classrooms coming to your homes like entertainment came to your doorsteps in the form of TVs.

MOOCs generally offer learner to learner interactions and quicker feedback on assessments. This is in addition to traditional course materials. As of June 2012, Wikipedia puts MOOCs registrations at more than 1.5 million learners.

The graphs below taken from the MOOCs platform, Class Central shows the growth of Mooc and the subject-wise distribution of courses:

By the Numbers: MOOCs in 2018
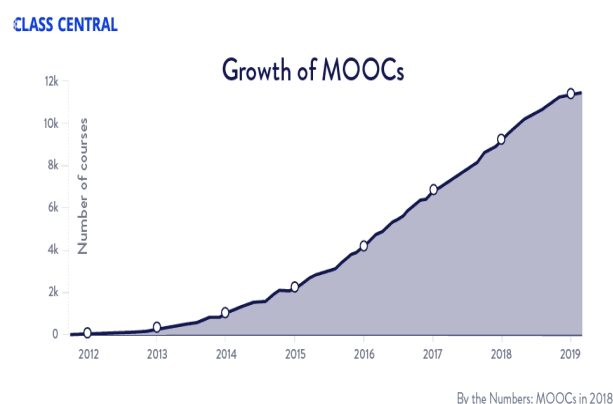
Course Distribution by Subject

By the Numbers: MOOCs in 2018
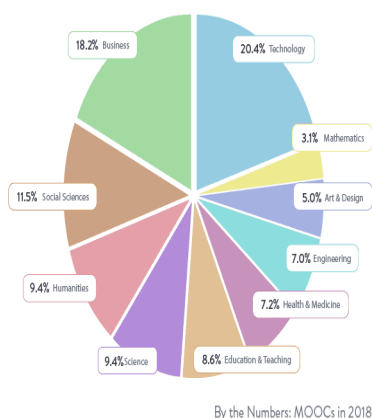
[7]

6) Cutting down on time ? Try mini online course design:

For very busy trainers and teachers a mini-course is recommended. It is a short online course that takes 2 hours or less to work on. The offline content you have at hand can be slightly modified (to suit to the new audience).This is the best if we have never created an online course before. We are on an experimental mode using authoring tools, new social media platforms.

A mini-course can also be used to test the audience and can be like a movie teaser.Mini courses require less resources and can be 0.5 – 2 hours long. If your audience shows interest in your mini-course, that means that you have proof that a detailed course would be a worthwhile effort. And you will gain some experience in designing an online course.

Growing institutions can ensure faculty up gradation by conducting workshops and learning by doing sessions for mini course design. This would really enhance learner-trainer experience.

In the above paragraphs, we have noted the need for trainers to step back to become course creators.

## 7) Caring for learners – learner-centric approach :

Now, let's sift and understand what learner-centric or student-centric in course design means. If a course is designed in a learner-centric method, it means tremendous thought has been given to the requirements, interest and skills sets of students/learners. As opposed to content-centric / teacher-centric design, where teacher lists out topics and plans the time to deliver each one. The difference in a learner-centric method is to think first what learners can learn in relation to a particular course and then work on how to assess students' performance and arrive at delivery or facilitation techniques.

Students / Learners are at the center of the learning cycle. [8]

Various research projects have led to the conclusion that a learner-centric approach is the best so far. The learner would have iterated varied situations, behavioral development or had had unique experiences. These factors affect learners while acquiring knowledge and its application. Applying a teacher-centered or content-centered approach vis-à-vis learner-centered one is a path to course failure.

Keeping Learner at the center of course design:
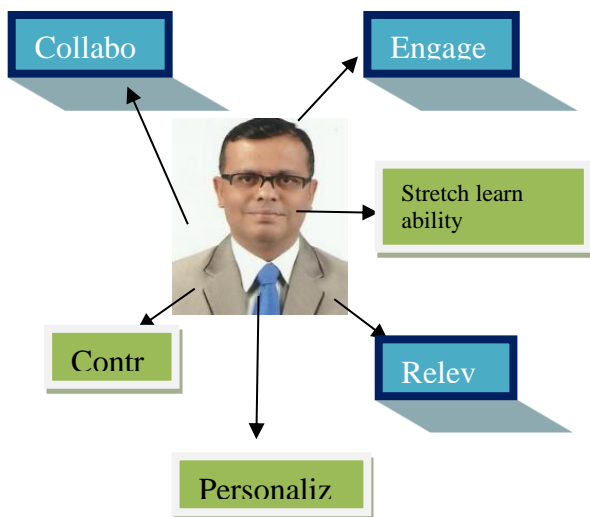
a) Stretching learnability

Learners who confront relevant challenges while learning are required to apply knowledge, not just remember it. As course designers our main aim should be to engage learners and challenge their understanding at critical junctures. We need to include challenging tasks that enable them to apply known and learnt knowledge.

b) Engagement

Engagement of learners should go beyond clicking an icon on the screen or acknowledging the lecture in a classroom. The connect should happen at a cognitive level. Learners should be encouraged to process moments of thoughtful reflection during the course. The content has to connect their intellect and emotions as well. Only this kind of deep and meaningful engagement leads to a lasting change.

We should introduce real or imaginary situations where they have to arrive at solutions using the content. Do use case-studies and scenarios that get the learner to analyze information and apply to the particular situation.

c) Personalization

Some prefer reading to listening or the majority of learners may expect on-time feedback through mails/chat windows in a MOOC or an in-class oral feedback in offline programs. Learning styles are always different and the multiple intelligence theory proves this. Moreover diverse backgrounds of learners need to be taken into account.

We should remember to include multiple formats in the content – audio-videos, visual graphs, charts, quizzes, activities etc. Determining educational background, interest and goals of learner audience would help the process of personalization.

d) Control

Allowing students a sense of control and responsibility would make all the above aspects come together for a successful course design. Learners with control over the elements of the content would want to learn with better motivation and application and become active learners.

e) Collaboration

Effective real life learning is collaborative, a group/pair task-oriented one. Learners must be encouraged to collaborate with peers to actively ask and provide information and derive cognitive insights. These result in a heterogeneous set of notions and students can soak into a rainbow of standpoints to make a colorful mix of an ideal and progressive society.

The content must empower learners to talk to each other in a classroom setting and initiate interactions on their own with a larger group so that they can own the learning iteration. Listening to and learning from people around makes an ideal learning environment.

f) Relevance

Courses should address a student's present requirements or gaps in cognition and skills. In order to connect to learners, relevant information and activities for practical application that the learners need must be included. The content should be meaningful and up-to-date to make the course a worthwhile and successful effort for all stakeholders.

VI. FINDINGS

In order to answer my research questions whether learner-centric approach is known to the trainers in the focus group that I contacted and if trainers in question are interested to take a back step and reflect and develop a course based on the new approach, I have taken into consideration some available literature and ideas.
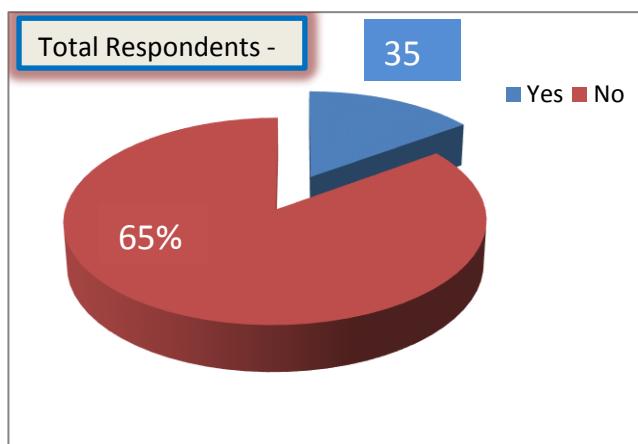
First, the results of the survey of the focus group of life skills trainers:

a) Learner-centric course design awareness of trainers.

20 focus group trainers were surveyed with the help of the below questionnaire:
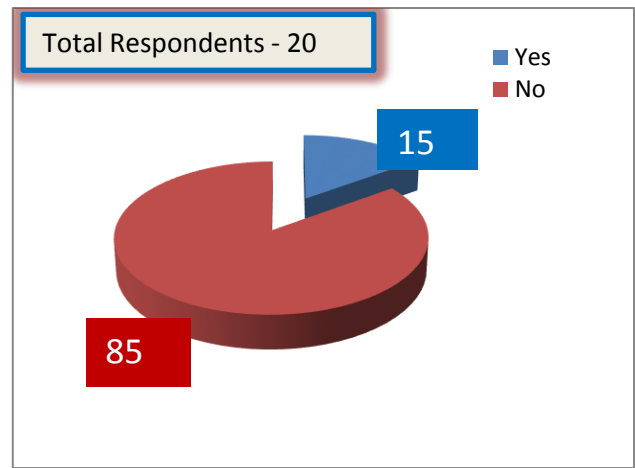
Survey Questionnaire -Annexure - 1

Pie-Chart - 1

The survey reveals that the awareness level is at 35 % and there is a need for faculty development programs to implement learner-centric model.

b) Desire and intention of trainers to design and deliver the learner-centric course:

Intention to design courses Questionnaire – Annexure - 2

Pie-Chart – 2

The pie-chart-2 reveals that the intention and desire level is only 15% which means that the trainers need to be motivated and incentivized to take up designing courses and launch online courses of their interest and the interest of the parent institution. A clear cut policy and implementation plan at department levels would be a game changer.

The result of the above task makes it evident that the learner-centric approach to course design is the order of the day. The methods reviewed in the literature review is enlightening and makes for a good read to assimilate it in one's course design.

As for the Moocs or online courses, a trainer can attempt a mini-course to learn the ropes and be ready with the pdfs, videos, and assessment methods and also have a recourse to available authoring tools in the World Wide Web. It really is not a rocket science to use the tools as they are user friendly like any software package of the day.

It is also found that a great deal of planning as a novice course/instructional developer would save precious time and resources and would make the trial and error gap narrower. The point to remember is to make the learners, their needs and motivations relevant, before embarking on the course design journey. It also makes sense for the trainers to become designers for their own good and upgrading into master class educators to the millennials both in

terms of offline / online course content and delivery. We can easily deduce that a small start (drop of water) would make an ocean of difference for the trainers to learn, implement to become course designers under the learner-centric life skills modules. Becoming mooc designer would be a feather in their caps. I also found the effort to understand the whole idea and process to be personally fulfilling and wish to be the trainer that I have detailed above for the readers of this research paper.

VII.   ANALYSIS

In tune with the findings of this paper, the trainers who would be motivated to become designers and developers of learner-centric courses must definitely excel in their craft.

It makes sense for them to start with the plan, design and implement based on the aspects detailed above. The readers would really benefit from the encouragement to become significant change agents in the education life cycle.

The department heads and institutions should be requested by the trainers of life skills or other departments to inculcate design thinking of course content and delivery to make the learning and teaching experience go to the next level. All stakeholders would count this journey of learner-centric courses, MOOCs a worthy effort without any side effects and redundancy.

The survey on the focus group shows that the awareness and interest levels of trainers have room for improvement. Like learners, trainers and educators too need learning outcomes with regards to learner-centered approach and online course design. A concerted effort of trainers, department heads and the institution quality set up need a revival in this regard.

To sum up, the center of all MOOC content design is focused on the learner's needs and interests. Learners should engage and connect with the content proactively and should be able to acquire information and application in their own time and space. The learner audience analysis should ensure that the learning needs are personalized and standardized.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

The research started with two questions to trainers. Are they aware of learner-centric course design concepts and would they like to take a backward step to fulfill an exciting task of designing learner-centric courses especially in the online mode of MOOCs. In the process we have browsed through and learnt about course design principles, MOOcs design steps, about the mini course flow and elements of a learner-centric course design.

In the literature review we observed that the course designer should consider certain aspects while planning a course. Once this is done one needs to write down the outcomes. Finally, the content must follow the guidelines obtained from the above exercise and materials must be collated and created for offline or online courses respectively.

As we considered whether trainers need to take roles in development of course content, the experts are sure that it is required. The involvement and upgrading of trainers in instructional design skills is the need of the hour.

As regards the MOOCs is concerned, a learner-centric approach would challenge the learners' previous knowledge and make them connect to new learning .In this connection the designer of a course must ensure engagement of the learners .Engagement would be possible if the course is reaching out to the target learners by personalizing to the learning styles (audience analysis should bring this out). Lastly, the relevance of the course must be

catered to in the design stages to plug the knowledge gap and skill requirements of the learners to make it relevant for their real life situations at the present and their near futures.

We can conclude that learner-centric course design needs passion of trainers to connect to learner needs. The best way forward is to design a trainer's own course or in the least effect changes to an existing one to make learning meaningful and effective. The institutions and department heads should encourage them to be course design thinkers.

IX. ANNEXURE

Annexure - 1
Learner-centric course design awareness

Designation	
Institution	

Read each question carefully, and then write T (true) or F (false) on the line given.

1. ____ I understand the learner-centric course design.

2. ____ I don't know what learner-centric means.

3. ____ I design courses based on this model.

4. ____ I create content that is relevant and helpful for learners at present and their future studies and job.

5. ____ The presentation of the content is interesting as per my learners.

6. ____ Learners share that they are better prepared to apply the skills and concepts from the training in practical life.

7. ____ My content challenges the learners to stretch their cognition and skills.

8. ____ The course content that I make makes the learners be active and engage in thought processes and apply learning immediately.

9. ____ The content that I make helps learners to collaborate either in pairs or groups most of the time.

10. ____ The course content I make is usually made to be relevant to the learner's present and near future.

11. ____ Learners have control of their learning in my course design and they become accountable to their learning.

12. ____ I have learnt about my audience and made the courses suit their personal learning styles.

Annexure - 2
Desire to design and deliver the learner-centric course

1. ____ I have learnt about learner-centric methods and have applied it to design my courses.

2. ____ I have read about the learner-centric model and have discussed the same with my peers to implement it.

3. ____ I intend to learn the model and implement in this academic year.

4. ____ I am hard pressed for time to do this and feel the content that I have is sufficient.

5. ____ The content given to me is suitable to all types of students.

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