MOOC, How to Avoid being Old Wine in New Bottle?

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In the past two years, the rise of MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) and mobile learning apps has made online learning a hot topic among both educators and entrepreneurs. In 2012, Harvard and MIT co-founded a non-profit MOOC platform called Edx, in 2013 China’s Tsinghua University and Beijing University also joined this platform and they became two of many world-class institutions on this platform to offer free courses to students all over the world. Meanwhile, China’s commercial internet giants, including Baidu, Tencent and Alibaba, are all rushing to claim some territory in this newly identified “blue ocean”.

Baidu now has an education channel and became a shareholder of Chuanke (传课网), a platform for online courses. Alibaba has launched Taobao Classmates, a "C to C" platform for online courses, and it has invested in Tutor Group, an online language learning platform. Tencent certainly would not allow itself to fall behind, so it has launched QQ groups for online courses, and established a joint venture with New Oriental which is the largest adult education company in China. It seems that the internet is finally bringing a revolution to the field of education.

However, when we examine the existing content of online courses and the experience of online learners in China, we realized that the current online courses are merely aiming to replicate the offline learning experience. What's more, the biggest challenge for online learning now is how to keep the learners engaged. Online education lowers the barrier for entry, but it also makes the exit of learners much easier than ever. In offline courses, the support from teachers and students is often the reason why a learner sticks around, but nothing can stop a learner in front of a computer screen or a phone screen from dropping out when they feel bored or frustrated.
Sebastian Thrun, a former professor of Stanford University, is often called the "Father of MOOC" because he produced an online course on artificial intelligence in 2011 which ended up attracting more than 1.6 million students from all continents of the world. It is this course that turned many skeptics of MOOC into believers. Later, Thrun founded Udacity, one of the largest MOOC platforms in the US. But, Thrun said something that shocked the MOOC community at the end of 2013: "Our product is lousy, we are not educating people in the way we expected." It is one user data that frustrated Thrun so much that he could not help saying something so discouraging, namely, the completion rate of online courses among Udacity's students. The average completion rate of Udacity's courses was lower than 10 percent, and the percentage of students who passed regular final exams was even lower. We did some research on online courses in China and found out that their completion rate is even worse.

Some pioneers of online learning are looking into the mechanism of games for inspirations about how to maintain learners' interest. But the current experiment of gamification in education often stay at the simplistic level of incorporating things like point systems, badges, quests and peer competition, which are formulaic elements of every game. A relatively successful example of such gamification is Duolingo, a language training app. Users of Duolingo are invited to board on a journey in which they need to find paths and pass challenges in order to reach a new level. Duolingo's social features also allow users to add friends, see their progress and even compete with others.

Gamification is an important source of inspiration but it is no magic formula. After all, the same mechanism is used by hundreds of thousands of games that popped up in App Store everyday, but only 1% of these games attract enough users to survive.

Our company has participated in the design of many innovative education programs in different countries, and we founded the open and interdisciplinary "D School" in Stanford University. So we are very interested in exploring the future of online learning. Recently we
gained some important inspiration from a mysterious Chinese online community called the "Subtitling Group".

For Chinese internet users, the "Subtitling Group" is almost a Robin Hood-type hero. They are the anonymous heroes who translate and add Chinese subtitles to the newest foreign films and TV series from the US, Japan, or Korea, and put them online to be freely downloaded. What interested us first is the fact that the members of subtitling groups are all volunteers. They are not receiving any monetary reward, and they usually cannot boast of their subtitling achievement in their resumes. But many of them still spend a large portion of their leisure time doing such voluntary translation work for several years. We also found that they often spend hours doing research and debating among themselves just to get one foreign slang right, many told us that they got more language and culture knowledge in subtitling groups than in any schools. Isn't this the kind of passionate learning that online courses dream to achieve?

We observed that the persistence of subtitler results from the following factors. First, many of them see it as a noble calling to make the best global cultural content accessible to Chinese. Meanwhile, each translation task is a concrete and meaningful challenge for them. Second, there is always strong peer support within the subtitling groups. As soon as a new member joins a group, he/she will be given access to an internal forum where whenever he/she asks a question, there will be some people who’d enthusiastically offer to help. A subtitler told us that while she is working, she always put her phone right next to her computer, so that she can not only discuss with teammates who are next to a computer, but also reach teammates through Wechat the mobile instant messaging (IM) network. Often, the reason why they keep working hard even after an exhausting day at their day-job is the feeling that "I cannot let my team down".

Third, a lot of excitement among subtitlers actually comes from competition between subtitling groups. For example, a member of "Renren" subtitling group told us that when a
new episode of a popular drama comes up, they often stay up all night working on it in order to deliver their translated version to audience before their competitors, such as "Eden", do. What's more, these anonymous heroes often find opportunities to indulge their own sense of humor. That's why sometimes when you are looking at the subtitles of "The Big Bang Theory", you would suddenly find Sheldon or Leonard using jargons and slangs that only Chinese internet users can understand, such as "Diao Si" (losers), "Tu Hou" (Nouveau riche) or "Bu Ming Jue Li (I don't get it but it must be deep)".

Judging from the passion and achievement of subtitlers, we see subtitling group as a rich case study for online education. We can even start to think about design principles for an engaging online learning program based on the model of subtitling groups. For example, it needs to have a mission that people find meaningful; it needs to build a social circle where one can find interesting forms of collaboration and competition; it needs to give people opportunities to showcase their skills, and bring out the best in them through an altruistic cultural context; and it needs to let people see how all their effort is crystallized into a final product that is appreciated by others.

There is no question that MOOC has democratized education as it gives any passionate and capable students in any corner of the world access to open courses from top universities. But since the current online courses are at best a simulation of offline courses, they cannot be anything more than a cheap substitute. The inspiration from subtitling groups in China points out another direction for us: online education should leverage unique online social mechanism, from gamification, crowdsourcing to peer-to-peer exchange, and create whole new learning methods that offline classrooms can only envy.