

# Adapting for Learners' Cultural Diversity in Open Courses: MOOC Instructors' Efforts at Personalized Learning Environments

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## Abstract

This mixed methods study investigates the tools and techniques massive open online courses (MOOCs) instructors used to reshape the learning environment for cultural diversity and learner personalization. Leveraging a grounded theory approach the researchers analyzed 19 email interviews from MOOC and distance education leaders supplemented by 28 archival, participant-written case descriptions. Leading to the analysis and formation of an online questionnaire, which was completed by 134 MOOC instructors. While most of instructors did not understand complex issues of cultural diversity, most made attempts to modify their instructional practices to accommodate cultural variances. A majority of the instructors favored collaborative, small group learning; however the instructors could not agree on best practices to establish these groups.

## Research Questions

1. How are MOOC instructors and instructional designers creating a learning environment that accommodates for cultural diversity?
2. What personalization practices do MOOC instructors utilize to enrich the virtual classroom experience of its diverse adult learners?

## Defining Personalization

### Researcher Definition

"The process by which MOOCs instructors adapt their course and teaching to meet students' individual learning needs."

### MOOC Instruction Interpretation

- |                        |                                   |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ▪ Asynchronous forums  | ▪ Self-paced videos               |
| ▪ Timely communication | ▪ A team of MOOC instructors      |
| ▪ Relevant examples    | ▪ Learner-to-learner interactions |
| ▪ Learner based forums |                                   |
| ▪ Extra resources      |                                   |

## Thematic Analysis

- From interviews and case descriptions: MOOC structure (and resources); learner autonomy (and empowerment); processes for supporting individualized learning, feedback and progress; reflective practices; and individualized learning instructional practices.
- From the online questionnaire: The open ended, narrative question prompted 32 MOOC instructors to discuss how they personalized their course and instruction for cultural diversity and technology access.

## MOOC Instructors Interpretations of Cultural Diversity

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ▪ "We used Google Translate"   | ▪ "[showed] videos"  |
| ▪ "Discuss cultural differences"   | ▪ "Transcripts and closed captioning provided"   |
| ▪ "Encouraged participants to develop/share content about their own experiences" | ▪ "Include content from other cultures and places"   |
| ▪ "...It's a primary concern throughout"   | ▪ "Consider...design of assignments and encourage sharing of diverse examples from different countries on discussion form" |
| ▪ "A Facebook group started to translate materials"                              |  |

## Mixing of Cultural Diversity & Linguistic Diversity – A call for follow up research

Nearly all MOOC Instructors in our sample liked the idea of addressing culture

- Many claimed to do *it*
- When asked what steps they took - they were not able to describe "how" they addressed culture (often centering on issues of language competencies)

Further research is needed to determine where diversity is reflected upon?

- Before the MOOC is taught
- Just in time teaching strategies
- Post MOOC reflection

## Common Design & Instruction Practices for Addressing Cultural Diversity in MOOCs

- Supplementary transcripts for videos/audio (n=88) or additional material to supplement activities
- Changing language - Carefully using language and gestures (n=69); Simplify the language used (n=56); & Slowing the pace of speech (n=49)
- Altering MOOC navigation and content (n=36)