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Fostering Cross-Generational Collaboration in Adult Education. Case Study on GSmart MOOC

Abstract

The constant changes in today's world, in almost all areas of life, are forcing individuals to continually upgrade their education, expand their competencies to adapt to a changing and unpredictable reality, and efficiently take advantage of the many opportunities provided by modern technology. Learning management systems (LMS) like Moodle, Canvas and Blackboard are becoming increasingly popular in educational institutions, highlighting the growing integration of technology in education. Integrating cloud services such as Google Workspace and Microsoft 365 has dramatically improved the capabilities and accessibility of distance education. These platforms offer tools that enable real-time collaboration, information sharing and effective communication between teachers and students. Today – thanks to constant access to the Internet – learners have a variety of ways to (self-)learn formally and informally, including through mobile devices or social or information services.

The article describes the concept of MOOCs – these are quick courses organized in a virtual space to acquire knowledge, skills and social competencies in an easy and accessible way, availa-

ble to everyone, regardless of the age of potential participants, their qualifications, location or possession of specialized software – and an example of the application of the MOOC concept in adult education which is the GSmart MOOC tool developed within the framework of the international Erasmus+ project entitled Generation: Smart. Social Competences Transmedia Bridge To Cultivate A New Culture For Cross-Generational Collaboration (GSmart) was implemented by us. The emergence of MOOCs, such as GSmart, in adult education underscores a significant shift toward more inclusive, flexible and interactive learning environments. The continued evolution and adoption of MOOCs will be crucial in shaping a future in which lifelong learning is integral to personal and professional development. Moreover, the example of our course may encourage others to apply the concept in various other possible ways.

Keywords: Education, Distance learning, Cloud services, MOOC.

1. Introduction

1.1. Distant Learning Dynamic Landscape

Today's networked society implies the need for continuous learning. It requires a good understanding of unstable reality and awareness of information overload. Manifestations of instability include changes in education (education and competition in the labour market), media (e.g., the issue of cyber security), the economy (labour activity and financial stability), and socio-political ones.

The e-learning landscape in Europe has undergone significant growth and change in recent years. Remote learning for college students has reached record levels, and there has been a notable shift in attitudes towards the benefits of remote education. Surveys have shown that most students want to continue some form of online education even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Around 55% of students consider affordability in self–directed learning (*10 Learning and development trends shaping the 2024 training landscape*, 2024) a critical factor in choosing an online school. Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Moodle, Canvas, and Blackboard have become increasingly popular in educational institutions, emphasizing the growing integration of technology in education (*75+ Incredible eLearning Statistics* (*2024–2028*), 2023).

The integration of cloud services, such as Google Workspace and Microsoft 365, has dramatically improved the capabilities and accessibility of distance education. These platforms offer tools that enable real-time collaboration, sharing of information, and efficient communication between educators and learners. They provide a wide range of applications, including document creation, spreadsheets, presentations, and cloud storage, making working remotely easier for students and teachers. The scalability and flexibility of these cloud services support a more personalized and interactive learning experience, catering to the diverse needs of online learners in today's dynamic educational environment. This development marks a significant shift in how education is delivered and ac-

cessed, leveraging technology to overcome geographical and logistical barriers (*Google Apps for Education vs. Microsoft 365 for Education*, 2015).

Nowadays – thanks to constant access to the Internet – learners have at their disposal a variety of ways of (self-)learning formally and informally, including through mobile devices or services: social or informational (e.g., articles, multimedia content). Global audiences of digital educational content prefer learning to be treated as an experience of acquiring information to build their knowledge. The transformation, as mentioned above, of educational participants from "offline students" to "online students" increases the need to learn more and more about the preferences of "new" learners. Participants' desire in the networked society for permanent access to information has catalyzed the development and growing popularity of global multimedia communication and learning systems. Often, these are media Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) sites, such as Coursera, EdX (Open EdX), Future Learn, and Canvas Network.

This article discusses how MOOC platforms exemplify how digital learning can support fairness and inclusivity in education by bridging generational gaps. Through offering accessible and flexible learning opportunities, MOOCs ensure that people of all ages, backgrounds, and technical abilities can engage in lifelong learning. This approach directly tackles issues of educational fairness by providing high-quality educational resources to those who might otherwise be marginalized due to age, location, or lack of specialized software. Additionally, the focus on collaboration across generations fosters diversity by bringing together learners from different age groups, promoting mutual respect and understanding, and improving social skills. The inclusive design and wide accessibility of MOOCs play a significant role in advancing educational practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

1.2. MOOCs and Adult Education

The concept of MOOCs, or Massive Open Online Courses, originated in the United States but is now gaining popularity worldwide. MOOCs are fast-paced courses organized in a virtual space to acquire knowledge, skills, and social competencies in an easy and accessible way. MOOCs are courses accessible to anyone regardless of the age of potential learners, their qualifications, their location, or whether they have specialized software (all they need is a computer and Internet access). Also, the massiveness and diversity of the courses result in – whether one wants to learn on his/her own or use online courses to educate one's employees – a massive convenience in accessing knowledge. The educational materials used in MOOCs are generally in the form of presentations, lectures (often recordings), exercises, assignments, tests, articles, and other textual, graphic, audio, and audiovisual forms. The tasks and exercises prepared for

the courses are developed mainly through interactive quizzes. Various types of interaction are often used, e.g., chat and forum, which allow direct contact between learners and course instructors but simultaneously promote knowledge sharing and generation of new knowledge (co-creation and improvement of the included educational content). In addition, many MOOCs emphasize the possibility of practical training (combining usability translatability of learning into practice with the educational canon) created often through cooperation during the creation of courses of universities with companies, business organizations, and research units supporting development and promoting innovation (Gruba, 2015).

The courses' form, content, and exercises are intended to interest the audience in the topic, stimulate their creativity, and develop self-reliance in expanding and constructing knowledge (Kościńska, Sendur, 2022). There is an ongoing discussion about the appropriate quality of online courses in educational, organizational, and logistical dimensions, e.g., the quality of the academic material itself, the quality related to clarity, comprehensibility, the sequence of modules and activities, and the ease of navigating through the materials contained in the course (Valentine, 2002; Gurba, 2015). Gurba (2015) proposes to take into account three dimensions of assessing the quality of online courses: the degree of institutionalization of the learning process using e-learning tools, the context of methodological maturity and flexibility, and the richness of the forms of knowledge communication, feedback communication and horizontal flow of information between learners (Gruba, 2012). MOOCs, like online learning as a whole, sometimes carry challenges related to learners' lower attention span, many distractions in the educational process, inadequacy of the learner's knowledge, technical problems, often too little interaction with the instructor and other learners, et cetera. However, despite some misgivings, the belief that knowledge should be available to everyone everywhere, including outside the walls of schools and universities and outside of formal education, is making MOOCs increasingly successful. The success of MOOCs is also because they allow a more flexible choice of an individualized educational path, the attractiveness of the forms and tools used in MOOCs is also growing every year, and, most importantly, the quality of the courses offered (assessed on an ongoing basis by the recipients) is increasing.

The digital age has revolutionized many areas of life, including adult education (Bellum, 2013). Massive open online courses have changed their face, offering accessibility, flexibility, various content, and professional and personal development support.

The importance of the MOOC concept in adult education is shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1
The importance of the MOOC concept in adult education

MOOC features relevant to the point of view of adult education	Description of the various features of MOOCs and their impact on the education of adults
Development of professional competence	Continuing education has become essential in an era of rapid market changes and technological advances. MOOCs offer adults the opportunity to develop and update their professional competencies. The courses cover various topics, from IT to management to soft skills. As a result, participants can tailor their learning to their needs and career aspirations. They enable the acquisition of new and often unique skills required in a rapidly changing job market, which is crucial for a lifetime of learning. In addition, participation in MOOCs helps develop digital competence, self-discipline, and time management skills, which are valuable in many aspects of life.
Flexibility, thematic diversity and accessibility	Adult learners often combine learning with work and family responsibilities. MOOCs allow them to adjust the pace and timing of their learning to fit their schedules, offering a variety of learning formats – from short courses to comprehensive certification programs, allowing them to tailor their education to meet their individual needs and goals. Courses cover various topics, from the sciences to the humanities to professional and personal skills. As a result, adult learners can deepen their knowledge in their field and explore new areas, fostering comprehensive development and adaptation to the changing job market. Adults who, for various reasons, cannot participate in traditional forms of education, such as classroom instruction, find a convenient alternative to MOOCs. Platforms such as Coursera, edX, and Udemy offer courses in various fields that are accessible to anyone with Internet access. As a result, working people, parents, and those living in areas with limited access to traditional forms of education can continue their education.
Democratization of education	MOOCs also represent a step toward the democratization of education. Economic, social, or geographic factors no longer limit access to knowledge. Anyone with access to the Internet can take courses taught by lecturers from the world's top universities. It opens the door to education for many adults who may not have had this opportunity.
Community and networking	MOOCs not only provide knowledge but also build learning communities. Participants can share experiences, collaborate on projects, and make professional contacts. For many adult learners, networking is as important as the educational process.

Source: Own elaboration based on the cited literature.

The lifelong learning perspective guides EU education policy, which includes measures for, among other things (*Long-term National Development Strategy.*

Poland 2030 Lifelong Learning Perspective, Annex to Resolution No. 160/2013 of the Council of Ministers, 2013):

— Learning outcome orientation – emphasizing the broadest possible access to quality learning,
— To subordinate activities to the interests of people, learners in different situations (at school and university, in apprenticeships and courses, at work, in various organizations, and directly in everyday situations) and at different ages – emphasizing the need for consistency in the actions of multiple institutions, ministries, and partners,
— Equal treatment, appreciation, and promotion of learning in various life forms and stages, including adult education

MOOCs in adult education facilitate the realization of all the demands identified above.

2. Practical application of the MOOC concept

2.1. MOOC-Specific Use Case

One example of the application of the MOOC concept in adult education is the GSmart MOOC tool (GSmart – IO3 Framework, 2023) developed as part of an international Erasmus+ project entitled *Generation: Smart. Social Competences Transmedia Bridge To Cultivate A New Culture For Cross-Generational Collaboration* (GSmart Erasmus+ project no. 2020-1-PL01-KA204-081415, 2021). The Project's goal was to develop, test, and validate an innovative educational model based on cross-generational collaboration and then, using the model, develop a GSmart MOOC to promote and develop this collaboration. It is a self-study guide designed for educators who teach adult learners how to foster a culture of cross-generational collaboration.

Cross-generational collaboration, defined as "[…] ability of different-age people to partner in two domains: every life and working life" (GSmart – IO1 Report: Research, 2021), focuses on the social responsibility of the older generation, including decision-makers and educators for the younger generation. Cross-generational collaboration is essential to everyday life and effective management in companies and organizations. In an era of generational diversity in the labour market, understanding and leveraging each generation's unique characteristics and values becomes crucial to success.

Research conducted as part of the Project allowed the design of an educational model, including a training program, aimed at the Project's target group of educators and others supporting adult learners (GSmart – IO2 Framework, 2022). The research focused on cross-generational collaboration in the social

environment, in the work environment as perceived by managers, and in the work environment and daily life as perceived by seniors.

The modern world is characterized by extraordinary diversity, especially regarding generational structure. Representatives of as many as four generations are now meeting in the social space: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. This mix of experiences, skills, and perspectives, while promising, also poses challenges for Cross-generational collaboration. Cross-generational collaboration in the work environment, social life, and everyday life is crucial for effective knowledge sharing, mutual respect, acceptance, trust, teamwork, innovation, productivity, and organizational culture. Each generation brings its own unique experiences, skills, and knowledge. The results of the Project's research clearly show, for example, that the Baby Boomer generation often has a wealth of work experience and industry knowledge. At the same time, Millennials and Generation Z are more adept at digital technologies and adapting new tools, and they are a generation characterized by high creativity. An essential element of cross-generational collaboration for seniors and managers is exchanging knowledge and experience, complementing each other's competence gaps at different ages to carry out professional tasks and responsibilities. When listing the difficulties of managing generations, seniors mention stereotypes and prejudices about age in the workplace. One in two surveyed seniors would primarily like to develop such social competencies as teamwork and cooperation, conflict resolution, and communication skills. The most critical areas of life in which respondents would like to expand their knowledge and competencies included communicating with modern technologies, healthy lifestyles, nutrition, safety, and cyber security. One in two respondents would like to extend their knowledge and competencies in direct contact with an instructor or educator, and one in three would like to do so in a mixed/hybrid format. Noteworthy, there is a strategy for managing employees from different age generations in one in three surveyed companies, institutions, or organizations. In one in three entities, respondents use generational diversity management to improve the functioning of the company, institution, or organization.

Cross-generational differences regarding worldview, human beings, value systems, applicable norms, and social coexistence rules have always accompanied man. In the current situation, they are perhaps exacerbated by the rapid pace of technological progress and the dynamics of the reality in which we live. At the same time, cross-generational collaboration in companies and organizations is inevitable and necessary to enable the different generations' practical competencies. Organizations can achieve more significant innovation, productivity, and employee satisfaction through understanding, respect, flexibility, and focus on common goals, resulting in overall success and development. Therefore, the presented GSmart MOOC tool addresses the problems of cross-gener-

ational collaboration, promoting and developing various aspects of such cooperation.

2.2. GSmart MOOC aims, content, and structure.

The GSmart MOOC is a blended training program that serves as a self-study guide for educators who teach adult learners in everyday life and the working environment. The course is specifically designed to cater to the needs of the Project's target group. The service aims to instruct educators on using the GSmart project solutions to promote cross-generational collaboration.

The service structure embraces a landing page and five parts – modules that concern the merits of the course. Short video presentations have introduced five modules on the landing page. They were explicitly designed to encourage the audience to continue their increase of know-how in the subject of cross-generational collaboration education.

Each of the subject matter modules regards one particular topic:

1. Introduction – this section has been devoted to presenting the GSmart MOOC's concept and allowing the audience to navigate the service efficiently. The course's structure and educational paths have been shown, as the following parts have been based on them.
2. Theory – in this module, the theoretical background is described. It regards the GSmart Research and the Cross-Generational Collaboration (CGC) Model. This part focuses on inspiring educators to zoom theory into practice. Therefore, this part includes practical exercises facilitating the comprehension of the Project's ideas.
3. Domain choice – the module lets the audience choose the right educational track depending on who they teach. The course enables educators to follow two tracks—the first deals with everyday life, and the other deals with the professional environment.
4. Practice – having chosen the best educational track, the educators continue to the course's module, presenting ways of practically incorporating the Project's methods into educational practice. The application can follow hybrid activities, workshops, or – if an educator decides– a creative merge of the two approaches.
5. Follow-up – in the summary module, the authors of the GSmart MOOC propose that educators participate in the Educators' Discussion Café, an online forum – GSmart community. It is a cosy online place to exchange ideas on cross-generational collaboration in adult education. To ensure skills interoperability in the educational market, obtaining a certificate to participate in GSmart MOOC is possible. The forum offers opportunities to network with other educators and brainstorm new projects.

2.3. GSmart MOOC Three-Level Taxonomy

The GSmart MOOC employs a three-level taxonomy to enhance educators' learning and teaching experience. These are the taxonomy's components and objectives:

1. Knowledge acquisition and understanding
   This first level focuses on the foundational aspects of the course, encompassing modules 1, 2, and 3. The aim here is for educators to deeply understand the core concepts, theories, and knowledge that form the basis of the course. This stage is a 'back-end,' meaning it is more about acquiring information and concepts before applying or teaching them.
2. Skills and attitudes transfer
   The second level is a progression from simply understanding the concepts to being able to impart this knowledge effectively to others. It involves developing the necessary skills and attitudes to transfer the newly acquired knowledge. This stage is crucial for educators as it is about up-skilling and preparing to teach these concepts in various settings, be it everyday environments or more formal work settings.
3. Practical application
   The final level involves applying the knowledge and skills in real-world scenarios. It can be described as a 'front-end' process, more about outward application and interaction. This stage typically happens during training sessions and continues afterwards as a follow-up. It involves modules 4 and 5 and emphasizes cross-generational problem-solving within an educated group of adults. The focus here is on practical implementation and seeing how the concepts and skills learned can be applied to solve actual problems or enhance understanding in diverse groups.

This three-level approach ensures a comprehensive learning experience, starting from fundamental understanding, moving through skill development, and culminating in practical application. It is particularly effective in adult education and professional development contexts, where the end goal is knowledge acquisition and the ability to apply this knowledge in real-life situations.

2.4. GSmart MOOC Trial – Evaluation and Feedback

Two training sessions were organized to present the GSmart MOOC's innovative educational solutions. They were integral to disseminating information about the course and played a crucial role in the evaluation processes. The objectives and impact were as follows:

1. Knowledge sharing
   The primary objective of these training sessions was to share knowledge about the GSmart project's innovative educational methods and tools. It

aligns with the first level of the GSmart MOOC's three-level taxonomy, where knowledge acquisition and understanding are paramount.

2. Targeted Audience
   The participants in these sessions came from the Project's targeted groups. It implied a focused approach, where the training is tailored to the needs and backgrounds of specific groups, ensuring that the information is relevant and impactful for them.
3. Introduction of GSmart MOOC
   These sessions served as a platform to introduce the GSmart MOOC to the audience. Informing the participants about the available educational resources and encouraging them to engage with the MOOC for a more comprehensive learning experience was a significant step.
4. Engagement and interaction
   When organizing these sessions, the GSmart project facilitated direct engagement and interaction with the target audience. This approach is beneficial for clarifying doubts, receiving immediate feedback, and understanding the needs and perspectives of the learners.
5. Promotion of innovative solutions
   The sessions likely showcased how the GSmart MOOC incorporates innovative educational solutions. It could include technology, new teaching methodologies, and unique content delivery approaches distinct from the GSmart initiative.
6. Feedback and improvement
   Through these training sessions, the organizers would have the opportunity to gather feedback from the participants. This feedback is valuable for refining and improving the MOOC and other educational solutions GSmart offers.
7. Building a learning community
   Such events are often instrumental in building a community of learners and educators interested in similar topics. This community can provide ongoing support, collaboration opportunities, and a network for sharing experiences and resources.

Overall, these training sessions represent a vital component of the GSmart project's strategy to disseminate knowledge, engage with its audience, and enhance the effectiveness of its educational offerings. They bridge the gap between the MOOC's online resources and the real-world application and understanding of its content.

3. Conclusion

The emergence of MOOCs, such as GSmart, in adult education highlights a significant shift towards more inclusive, flexible, and interactive learning envi-

ronments. These platforms unite people of different ages and backgrounds, making education accessible to everyone. The GSmart MOOC exemplifies how such innovations can promote cross-generational collaboration, enhance digital competencies, and cater to diverse learning needs. MOOCs' continued evolution and adoption will be crucial in shaping a future where lifelong learning and cross-generational cooperation are integral to personal and professional development. This trend aligns with the growing demand for dynamic, interconnected educational experiences that cater to different age groups and learning styles, leading us toward a new era in adult education.

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Wspieranie współpracy międzypokoleniowej w edukacji dorosłych. Studium przypadku dotyczące GSmart MOOC

Streszczenie

Zmiany zachodzące w dzisiejszym świecie, w niemal wszystkich dziedzinach życia, zmuszają jednostki do ciągłego podnoszenia poziomu wykształcenia, poszerzania swoich kompetencji w celu dostosowania się do zmieniającej się i nieprzewidywalnej rzeczywistości, a także efektywnego korzystania z wielu możliwości oferowanych przez nowoczesne technologie. Systemy zarządzania nauczaniem (LMS), takie jak Moodle, Canvas i Blackboard, stają się coraz bardziej popularne w instytucjach edukacyjnych, podkreślając rosnącą integrację technologii w edukacji. Integracja usług w chmurze, takich jak Google Workspace i Microsoft 365, znacznie poprawiła możliwości i dostępność edukacji na odległość. Platformy te oferują narzędzia, które umożliwiają współpracę w czasie rzeczywistym, dzielenie się informacjami i skuteczną komunikację między nauczycielami i uczniami. Obecnie – dzięki stałemu dostępowi do Internetu – uczniowie mają wiele sposobów na (samo)uczenie się w sposób formalny i nieformalny, w tym za pośrednictwem urządzeń mobilnych lub usług społecznościowych lub informacyjnych.

W artykule opisano koncepcję MOOC – są to szybkie kursy organizowane w przestrzeni wirtualnej w celu zdobywania wiedzy, umiejętności i kompetencji społecznych w łatwy i przystępny sposób, dostępne dla każdego, niezależnie od wieku potencjalnych uczestników, ich kwalifikacji, lokalizacji czy posiadania specjalistycznego oprogramowania – oraz przykład zastosowania koncepcji MOOC w edukacji dorosłych, jakim jest narzędzie GSmart MOOC opracowane w ramach międzynarodowego projektu Erasmus+ zatytułowanego Generation: Smart. Social Competences Transmedia Bridge To Cultivate A New Culture For Cross-Generational Collaboration (GSmart) realizowanego przez nas. Pojawienie się MOOC, takich jak GSmart, w edukacji dorosłych podkreśla znaczącą zmianę w kierunku bardziej integracyjnych, elastycznych i interaktywnych środowisk uczenia się. Ciągła ewolucja i przyjęcie MOOC będą miały kluczowe znaczenie dla kształtowania przyszłości, w której uczenie się przez całe życie jest integralną częścią rozwoju osobistego i zawodowego. I niech przykład naszego kursu zachęci innych do zastosowania tej koncepcji na wiele innych możliwych sposobów.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja, kształcenie na odległość, usługi w chmurze, MOOC.