

Creating a Global Online Learning Community

The Case of a Language MOOC During the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Our objective in this paper is to propose a new model of a Language MOOC that allows learners to choose among several learning tools while providing a supportive learning community during a time of global crisis like the current COVID-19 pandemic.

For our case study we use *AP® Italian Language and Culture* (from now on “AP Italian”) and “Online Office Hours” (OOHs), i.e. synchronous Zoom meetings with language instructors offered in conjunction with AP Italian. We use Connectivism as the theoretical framework and data from edX analytics, as well as two mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) exit surveys, to analyze learners’ demographics, goals and online behavior. Since both AP Italian and OOHs were taught during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we also discuss the role that this global learning community had in providing interaction and support to its participants during this time of widespread anxiety and forced isolation. We draw the following conclusions:

- *AP Italian* combines elements of an xMOOCs and cMOOC. On the one hand, its content is predetermined: learners cannot add any elements to the course, or change it in any way. However, because of its flexible design and multiple modes of presentations, *AP Italian* also presents some characteristics of a cMOOC. In our discussion we propose the new classification of “elastic” MOOC or ELMOOC².
- This “connectivism” of AP Italian intensified during the pandemic peak, in response to learners’ needs as expressed during the OOHs,

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²To the best of our knowledge, the term “ELMOOC” has not been used yet in the recent taxonomy of MOOCs (Queen & Murugan, 2020; Pilli & Admiraal, 2016). To avoid confusion with the homophonic LMOOC, we propose to pronounce the letters “EL” as an acronym which stands both for “elastic” and “elastic language” MOOC.

with the result that OOHs ceased to be simply a space for learners to ask questions and practice their speaking skills in Italian, but gradually became a forum for the exchange of meaningful communication within a worldwide, global network of teachers and learners.

Throughout the paper and in our conclusions, we make recommendations for MOOC course creators on how to design and offer a more flexible or “elastic” online program that might adapt to different types of learners, and to their rapidly changing needs especially during a crisis like the current pandemic. We also suggest that our experience may be useful not only to continuing and lifelong education programs, but also to residential four-year colleges and universities that have developed online modules.

INTRODUCTION: MOOCs AND THEIR ROLE IN GLOBAL EDUCATION

Since they first started in 2008,³ MOOCs promised to deliver quality education following the principles hidden in their acronym. These courses have the potential of becoming “massive” since their access is free and unrestricted, and they typically attract tens of thousands of learners from around the world.⁴ They are also “open” in two ways: first, access is unlimited, therefore not subject to any prerequisite or entrance test; secondly, they are offered for free.⁵ Scalability also is a key feature connected to the “massive” nature of MOOCs since the material created for these courses must be designed and presented for easy use by large cohorts of diverse learners. Finally, MOOCs are completely online: this means that the learning experience occurs in a self-inclusive way, within the platform itself where all contents are delivered, and can be retrieved at any time, and where interaction can happen at various degrees among learners and learners, and/or learners and instructor(s) or course team.

From the point of view of educators, the massive nature of the MOOCs means a tremendous opportunity for data mining. Tens of thousands of learners offer a global lab that may inform the learning process, pointing out ways in which teaching can be improved: one of the promises of the MOOCs was, and still is, to advance the effectiveness of face-to-face-courses and educational practices as well (Bartalesi-Graf 2017).

MOOCs can be divided into two broad categories (with some that lie in the spectrum), xMOOCs and cMOOCs (Yousef et al. 2015):⁶

³ The first MOOC, “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge,” was created in 2008 at the University of Manitoba, Canada (Downes, 2019).

⁴ In 2019 edX attracted 25 million learners and offered 2,640 courses (data from ClassCentral: <https://www.classcentral.com/report/edx-2019-year-review/>).

⁵ Sustaining free MOOCs’ has proved to be a challenge for many providers (Epelboin, 2017). AP Italian is free with no time limits. However, most other courses on edX are free only for their declared length. For example, the sequence offered by Wellesley College on edX, “Italian Language and Culture: Beginner / Intermediate / Advanced” — is free only for 12 weeks from the day a learner enrolls. After that period of time, a learner must pay a fee (\$49 for each course in the sequence “Italian Language and Culture: Beginner / Intermediate / Advanced”) to regain permanent access to course material.

⁶ Recently, MOOC researchers have also identified the categories of hybrid MOOCs (hMOOCs), adaptive hybrid MOOCs (ahMOOCs) and Dual-Layers MOOCs.

xMOOCs (the “x” from “extended” was first used by MIT for its open source program, called “MITx”) use a cognitive-behaviorist model, whereby the learning process is very much predetermined and guided by the course creators, and course structure mimics what happens in the traditional classroom: lessons are delivered via videos, or written texts, assessment consists of multiple choice tests or other self-correcting online tools. Moreover, course progression is linear in nature: learners are expected to follow units in the order they are presented.

cMOOCs (“c” stands for “connectivism”), on the other hand, were born out of the Connectivism theory developed by Siemens (2005): cMOOCs learners assemble different online resources to reach their learning objectives and develop a supportive community with other learners sharing similar interests and goals. Teachers’ role is minimum: therefore, cMOOCs require a considerable level of autonomy on the part of learners who must be able to “self-regulate” and “self-determine” their own learning path (Agonács 2019 et al. (1) & (2)). Siemens (2005) claims that previous learning theories are not suitable to describe and understand how the learning process happens in the digital age where learners freely use a variety of online sources and may enter and exit the learning process at different stages in their lives.

LMOOCs (“L” stands for “language”), a third category of MOOCs, are online courses specific to languages, which may have the characteristics of an xMOOC or a cMOOC.⁷ One of the obvious advantages of LMOOCs is that they

hMOOCs is a term used in two different ways in the current literature:

1. It describes MOOCs used in face-to-face courses (Alanazi & Walker-Greives 2019; Safdar & Yasmin, 2020);
2. It refers to MOOCs that combine characteristics of xMOOCs and cMOOCs (De Caro-Barek, 2019, Koutsakas, 2020). Often the cMOOC component in these hMOOCs requires the use of a separate platform or social network where learners can generate and share learning resources (Koutsakas, 2020). Other studies on hMOOCs (Fidalgo-Blanco et al., 2016) have shown that the rate of completion is higher for this model.

ahMOOCs are hybrid MOOCs offered on platforms specifically designed for adaptive learning and assessment (García-Peñalvo et al., 2018). edX, as well as most platforms used for MOOCs (Coursera, FutureLearn, etc.), do not provide comprehensive adaptive learning affordability. Therefore, ahMOOCs are difficult to scale.

Dual-Layer MOOCs (Crosslin et al. 2018; Penstein Rosé, 2015) are also conceptually hybrid in that they present learners with two frameworks: one is predetermined, designed and run by the instructors and the other is open to contributions by learners. Learners are free to choose between the two learning paths or to pick some components from each path and design their own. Dual-Layer MOOCs, like ahMOOCs, require the use of additional software, for example ProSolo, QuickHelper, and Bazaar, and the integration of Cognitive Tutor Authoring Tools (CTAT) and their integration into the edX platform. For these reasons, Dual-Layer MOOCs, as well as ahMOOCs, are models difficult to reproduce on a larger scale.

⁷ After the first pivotal work in LMOOCs by Martín-Monje & Bárcena (2014), the limits, as well as merits, of LMOOCs have been analyzed by Sallam, Martín-Monje & Yan Li (2020).

The distinctions that some researchers make between online language learning and LMOOCs should also be considered. The following characteristics, not always found in simple

have made the learning of many languages, even less studied ones like Italian, available to thousands of learners who don’t have easy access to traditional teaching modalities for several reasons (limitations due to financial means, location, time constraints). Also, LMOOCs have the potential of solving the much-debated anxiety associated with language learning (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019), in that learners enjoy more autonomy, and can retrieve multi-media material 24/7 for repeated practice. MOOCs’, and particularly LMOOCs’, role in democratizing education and making it more inclusive cannot be underestimated. However, LMOOCs also face many challenges, specifically the difficulty of providing an interactive language experience in an online environment (Bárcena, Martín-Monje & Read, 2015). Language teaching and learning is a complex process that involves human interaction, frequent exposure to a variety of communicative contexts, and regular feedbacks: carrying out these complex tasks and engaging a diverse group of learners located all over the world, coming to the course with different backgrounds, goals and expectations, is extremely challenging through an LMOOC (Bárcena, Martín-Monje & Read, 2015).⁸ Moreover, most platforms (edX, Coursera, FutureLearn, etc.) have not been designed with the needs of the language learners and teachers in mind. Therefore, many LMOOCs need to resort to connecting to “third party” tools in order to make the learning process more interactive and suitable for developing interpersonal and presentational language skills (Alario-Hoyos et al. 2018).

In the following paragraphs, we will first discuss AP Italian, and the live and free Online Office Hours (OOHs), offered in conjunction with the course. We will argue that this online course, by combining both the characteristics of xMOOCs and cMOOCs and offering an online (synchronous and asynchronous) human interaction could be the model for a new type of MOOC, which we propose to call “elastic.” During the COVID-19 crisis, AP Italian, and its accompanying OOHs, became a meaningful global learning community that helped learners face a time of unprecedented challenges.

AP® ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: COURSE CONTENTS, DATA, AND DISCUSSION *Course contents*

The online course *AP Italian* opened as a MOOC for the first time on the edX platform⁹ on August 7, 2017 for the academic year 2017/2018. Since then, it has been offered in two different and successive editions, during the 2018/

online language learning, are specific to LMOOCs: “a rich, strong set of communication tools suitable for language learning — i.e., enabling oral communication —, short videos that present examples of the language and culture, and assessment tools that are sensitive to the range of goals and abilities of learners” (Sallam, Martín-Monje & Yan Li, 2020).

⁸ Teixeira & Mota (2014) stress the importance of building a learning community in LMOOCs and propose yet another category of MOOCs in language learning, namely “iMOOCs” where individual responsibility, interaction, interpersonal relationships, innovation and inclusion are fully realized. For the need to establish online successful learning strategies, see also Gacs et al. (2020).

⁹ edX is a consortium founded in 2012 by MIT and Harvard University for the production and dissemination of MOOCs. edX now counts hundreds of partners among colleges and universities around the world. Wellesley College was the first liberal arts college to join edX in 2013.

2019 and 2019/2020 academic years. The AP Italian course discussed in the present paper is the third edition (2019-2020) which opened on edX on 8/20/2019 and was archived on 5/31/2020.¹⁰

Following the ACTFL *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*,¹¹ AP Italian was designed to provide high school students and high school teachers with a solid curriculum in preparation for the College Board’s AP Examination in Italian Language and Culture. The three modes of communication — Interpretive, Interpersonal, Presentational — as described by ACTFL are directly available in each of the six identified curricular themes: Contemporary Life, Personal and Public Identities, Families and Communities, Science and Technology, Global and Local Challenges, and Italian Art and Made in Italy, each of them containing 2-3 sub-themes for further exploration.

The 2019-2020 edition of the course includes the following material:

- 31 original video interviews;
- 9 articles (newspaper, magazine, web);
- 10 literary pieces (short stories, excerpts from novels and graphic novels, poetry);
- 20 different types of realia (TV spots, advertisements, radio programs, statistics);
- six contemporary songs;
- comprehensive grammar review spread over the six modules;
- self-corrected exercises and tests (formative and summative assessments);
- comprehension questions and discussion topics for each item (formative assessments);
- subjects for written compositions (summative assessment);
- 12 downloadable audio programs especially designed for the practice of interpersonal communicative skills¹² (summative assessment).

The Interpersonal mode of communication as described by ACTFL is available through participation in the discussion forum, free OOHs (offered for the first time during the 2019-2020 academic year and discussed below), 12 downloadable and interactive audio programs (described above), and participation in our Online Live Instruction Classes. In this contribution, we will not consider the experience and results of teaching the program “Online Live Instruction

¹⁰ The fourth edition of the course, *AP® Italian Language and Culture (2020-2021)* opened on the edX platform on August 18, 2020.

¹¹ The Standard for language learning issued by ACTFL may be retrieved here: <https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/publications/standards/World-ReadinessStandardsforLearningLanguages.pdf>.

¹² These audio files mimic authentic conversations. The setting and background for these conversations is provided in advance to learners. When the audio file plays, learners hear a series of prompts in the form of questions, requests, complaints, etc., all related to the same topic or conversational setting. Learners must answer in the 20 second pause given in the audio file. Learners can also record their answers, and compare them to a sample set of correct answers provided via audio files and videos at the bottom of the page.

Classes”¹³ because, unlike the free and open AP Italian and OOHs, these synchronous live classes require the payment of tuition and registration fee and, therefore, cannot be considered part of the MOOC experience.

We will use quantitative demographic data from edX analytics to draft a general profile of AP Italian’s student body (enrollment, level of online activity, age, educational background, gender and country of origin). For all other data (qualitative and quantitative) not available on edX analytics, we will present and discuss the results of an exit survey we administered after the course was archived.

Learners’ Profile

Enrollment and completion rates

A total of 11,830 learners enrolled in AP Italian during the 2019-2020 course run (August 2019-May 2020) and 117 of them (1%) completed all course components with a score of 60% or higher.¹⁴ In addition, a total of 798 (6.7%) learners completed at least one test with a passing grade (60%). EdX analytics doesn’t provide any aggregate data on other types of online activities (such as video watching, attempts at exercises and tests, time spent on readings, etc.), so we don’t know how the remaining learners used the course, or whether they used it at all.

Age, educational background and gender

The median age of our learners is 30, and 24-34 is the age range with the highest percentage of learners (32% of those who provided a year of birth; see Fig. 1). Data regarding age is consistent with data on their educational level (Fig. 2): the majority of our learners already have a BA degree (34.8%) or an MA (26.8%): therefore, they are older than the typical high school or college students.

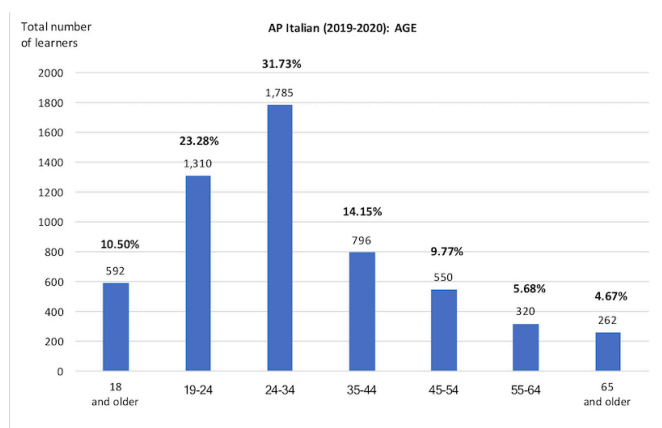


Figure 1. AP Italian (2019-2020): Age (edX analytics)

¹³ Learners who successfully complete AP Italian in conjunction with one of our Online Live Instruction Classes receive a Certificate from Wellesley College with a letter grade that they can present to their high school for registration on their transcript, or to any other institutions as proof of having taken and passed a College Board approved AP course.

¹⁴ 74 learners (out of the 117 who completed the course) requested a *Verified Certificate of Completion* issued by edX. This requires the payment of a \$49 fee.

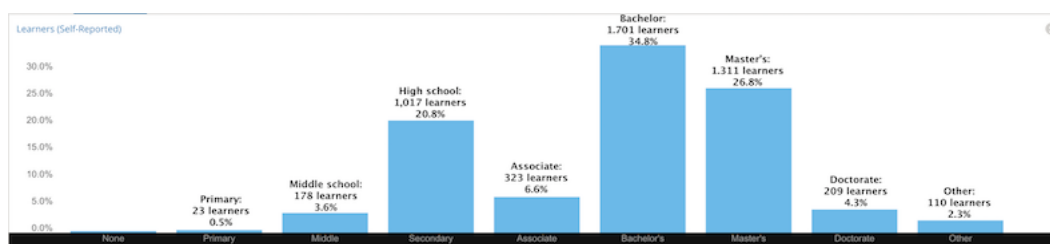


Figure 2. AP Italian (2019-2020): Highest education (edX analytics)

AP Italian gender distribution (64.6% women versus 34.8%, see Fig. 3) shows that AP Italian female learners are a higher percentage than in general MOOCs.¹⁵ Female preponderance in language courses is a well-documented fact, and AP Italian reflects this reality across the USA and beyond.¹⁶

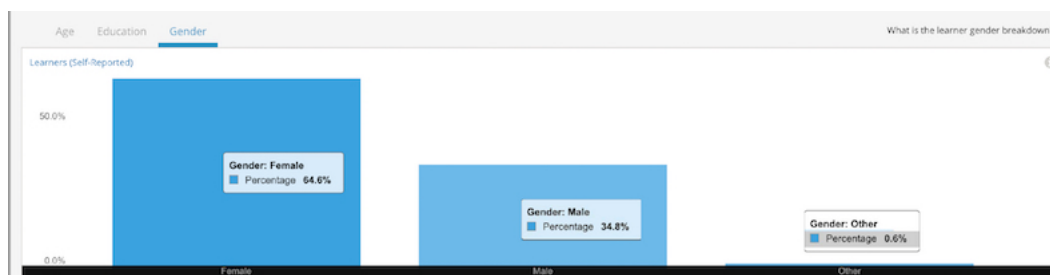


Figure 3. AP Italian (2019-2020): Gender (edX analytics)

Countries of origin

AP Italian learners came from 147 different countries, the top five being the USA (2,720=23.1%), Italy (704=6.8%), Brazil (578=4.9%), UK (425=3.6%), and Mexico (420=3.6%). We infer that the 704 residents of Italy enrolled in the course are mostly recent immigrants in search of an opportunity to improve their Italian.

Enrollment from developing countries is also worthy of note.¹⁷ Here is a sample of the most represented countries:

Africa	Asia	South America
Egypt: 215 Algeria: 53 Morocco: 48 Nigeria: 53	Turkey: 352 India: 212 Indonesia: 95 Thailand: 84	Argentina: 292 Columbia: 245 Peru: 155

Table 1. Enrollment from developing countries (edX analytics)

¹⁵ Bonk et al. (2015) report that women enrolled in MOOCs are 57%, and Bayeck (2016) reports that they are 60% of the total.

¹⁶ According to a report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “70% of all Bachelor’s in languages and literature other than English went to women in 2015 (most recent data).”

¹⁷ For a definition of “developing countries” we used the document issued by the UN titled “World Economic Situation and Prospects 2014,” available online: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp_current/2014wesp_country_classification.pdf

EdX analytics doesn’t provide data on other categories, such as occupation and learning goals. Therefore, all data presented below on these categories was captured by a survey sent to all learners at the end of the course. This survey received 226 valid and complete responses.

Occupation

Data on occupation (Fig. 4) reveals that the two most representative activities are “retired” (25.6%=53) and employed full time (24.15%=50). The data about retired learners doesn’t quite match the demographics data from edX analytics (see Fig. 1) that shows the age group 65+ as being only about 4.65% (versus 25.6% of retired learners in the exit survey). It’s possible that retired learners were among the most active and motivated online learners, and therefore answered the survey in much higher numbers. The category “furthering my education” (14.49%=30) likely comprises high school or college students, or other adults seeking a career change (high school age learners are 10.5% according to edX analytics data - see Fig. 1 above).

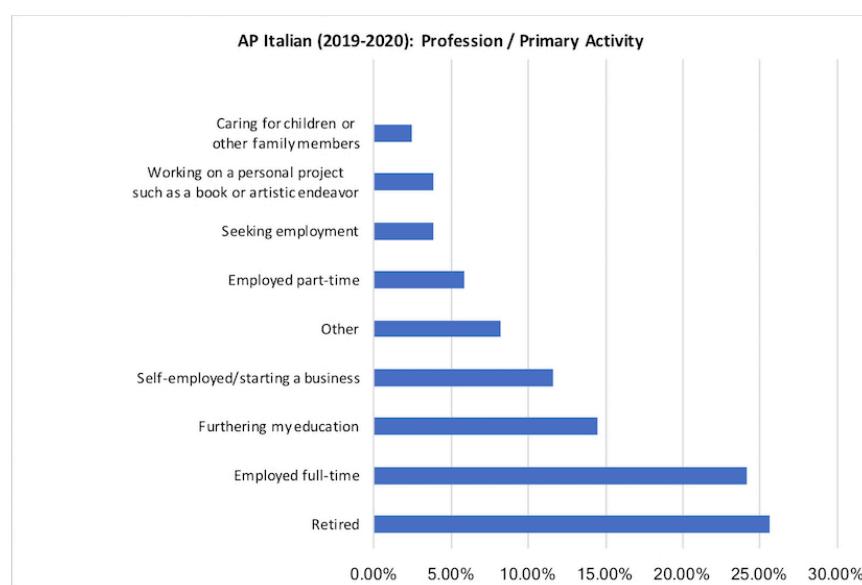


Figure 4. AP Italian (2019-2020): Profession / Primary Activity (AP exit survey)

Learners’ goals and course results

The following survey question captured learners’ initial motivation to take the course: “Why did you register for AP Italian Language and Culture (2029-2020)?” See Fig. 5 for learners’ answers:

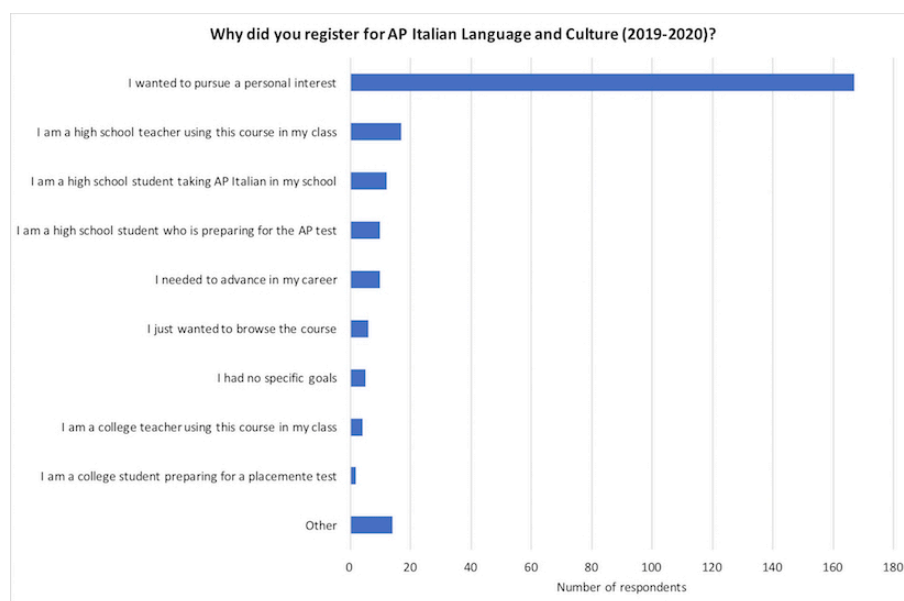


Figure 5. AP Italian (2019-2020): Goals (AP exit survey)

Two questions captured learners’ satisfaction with their overall experience in the course. First learners were asked to rate on a scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) the following statement:

“The course AP® Italian Language and Culture (2019-2020) helped me achieve my learning objectives”

The overwhelming majority of learners felt that they achieved their learning objectives (84.23% agree or strongly agree, with a mean value of 4.15 on the 1-5 scale, standard deviation 0.96).

Another question asked learners to complete the following statement:

“My overall experience with Italian has been ...”

On a scale 1 (poor) and 5 (excellent) this answer received a mean value of 4.23 (standard variation of 0.92) and 95.41% of respondents had a good, very good or excellent experience.

DISCUSSION: COURSE CONTENTS AND LEARNERS’ PROFILE

AP Italian is divided into units, sub-units and lessons, and follows the relatively rigid structure which is typical of an xMOOC. However, it does not ask learners to adopt a linear learning path or to enter and exit the learning process at any given point in the course or at any given time: when learners register (and registration is free), they have immediate access to all course components and they are free to explore the lessons in the order they wish, and to leave at any point. Units are independent from one another, may be completed in any order, and learners can skip any content and return to it

later, or decide not to complete it. There are no requirements (such as passing a test) in order to access a new unit. The course is self-paced, and doesn’t have to be completed by a certain date: as long as learners enroll before the course is archived, they have perpetual access to all online material.¹⁸ Finally, exercises may be taken multiple times, and graded tests allow for two attempts. A certain amount of flexibility is allowed in many MOOCs. However, for most, learning happens through a series of stackable units that depend on one another, and that are designed to build learners’ knowledge following a linear progression. Units of AP Italian, instead, are organized around completely independent cultural themes, and therefore may be considered like self-standing mini-courses.

The relatively low completion rate (1%) might suggest a widespread lack of motivation and/or self-directedness on the part of most learners, perhaps caused by the flexible course organization described above. On the other hand, edX data on weekly online activity (see Fig. 10) shows that a minimum of 400 and a max of 1,110 learners¹⁹ were active in any given week. This means that many browsed the course for personal interest and/or cherry-picked what was of interest following a personalized learning path, while skipping other contents and, in doing this, they took advantage of the course flexible organizational design: in other words, they used the course more like a cMOOC. This suggests that many learners had different and varied learning goals when they entered the course, and that these learning goals didn’t necessarily mean “completing the course.” Asked “Why did you register for AP Italian Language and Culture (2019-2020)?” (see Fig. 5), 68% answered “I wanted to pursue a personal interest.” This may have a variety of meanings for different learners and some learners’ comments in the survey reveal this personal non-linear use of the course:

“I used the course component not in systematic way [...]”

“I picked some units but without continuity”

“I used all units without completing each section”

“[I covered] 3 Units and a few parts here and there after, all grammar”

“I dipped in and out”

“I hopped around”

“We did bits and pieces of each section”

“I didn’t use [writing and speaking activities] because I liked the other parts better and had a limited amount of time”

¹⁸ Only learners who want to pursue a *Verified Certificate of Completion* must complete all course requirements before the course is archived. When the course is archived, some functions, such as “Course update” and “Discussion forum,” are deactivated. All other course contents are still available.

¹⁹ edX counts as “active learners” the following categories:

- learners who completed any type of course activity.
- learners who played any course video.
- learners who submitted an answer for a problem.
- learners who added a post, response, or comment to the course discussion.

“I did not use these activities [writing and speaking] because I really wanted to improve my listening skills.”

“I eventually skipped the “scriviamo” and forum sections to devote more time to reading and grammar.”

In support of the hypothesis that learners carried a variety of learning strategies, is the online behavior, captured in edX grade reports, of at least 89 learners who did not complete the course: they took at least two initial tests, then skipped at least two or more tests jumping to contents ahead, and completed a few tests in later modules.

Flexibility and freedom in deciding one's learning path, however, also requires that learners possess a certain level of autonomy and be able to self-determine and self-regulate their learning (Agonacs et al. 2019). This may have been an obstacle for some learners, as shown in the following comments gleaned from the exit survey:

“I struggled to motivate myself without timing”

“I found it difficult to get motivated to do the Scriviamo exercises”

“My level of tenacity could be improved, as I am not very disciplined....”

MOOCs flexibility might indeed represent a double-edged sword: it certainly meets the needs of many autonomous learners but might represent an obstacle for learners who are in need of a more structured educational environment.

Some studies have used MOOCs' low completion rate to argue that the MOOC experience is a failure (Reich 2019; Lederman, 2019). When analysing MOOCs, however, we cannot employ categories that belong to a completely different learning environment, i.e. the face-to-face, “brick and mortar” teaching institutions, where a completion rate of 1% would mean a systemic failure. MOOCs are different realities that need to be evaluated with different parameters. Our study moves beyond the mostly quantitative analysis of student completion rates or dropout rates. Quantitative measures are useful but they do not adequately explain the reasons why participants find the whole course or certain segments of the course engaging. For this reason, we propose that criteria other than completion rate be used to measure MOOCs success, such as level of satisfaction at having achieved one's own very personal, and often unique, learning goals, and weekly learners' activities as measured by analytics (if activities other than completing exercises and tests are measured, such as watching videos or simply browsing the course are captured). The results of our exit survey show that the vast majority of learners expressed both a high level of satisfaction with the course (mean: 4.15, on a scale of 1 to 5) and of confidence in having achieved their learning objectives (mean: 4.23 on a scale of 1 to 5).

AP Italian offers a flexible learning experience in yet another way: course material is presented in different but parallel formats, so that learners can choose how to tackle any given content: for example, readings are presented as

downloadable raw pdf files and in html format with embedded annotations, and some readings are also presented as downloadable audio files;²⁰ video interviews may be viewed in four different formats: raw, with timed transcript, with closed captions, and with embedded activities (comprehension questions and cultural notes). Finally, both videos and readings are preceded by optional pre-viewing/pre-reading activities (introduction, cultural notes, new and relevant vocabulary and expressions presented as a simple html list, and in four different study modes via Quizlet).

Two questions in the exit survey were meant to capture learners’ use (or lack thereof) of these optional online tools. One question asked learners to what extent each learning tool contributed to their learning experience. See Fig. 6 for learners’ answers.

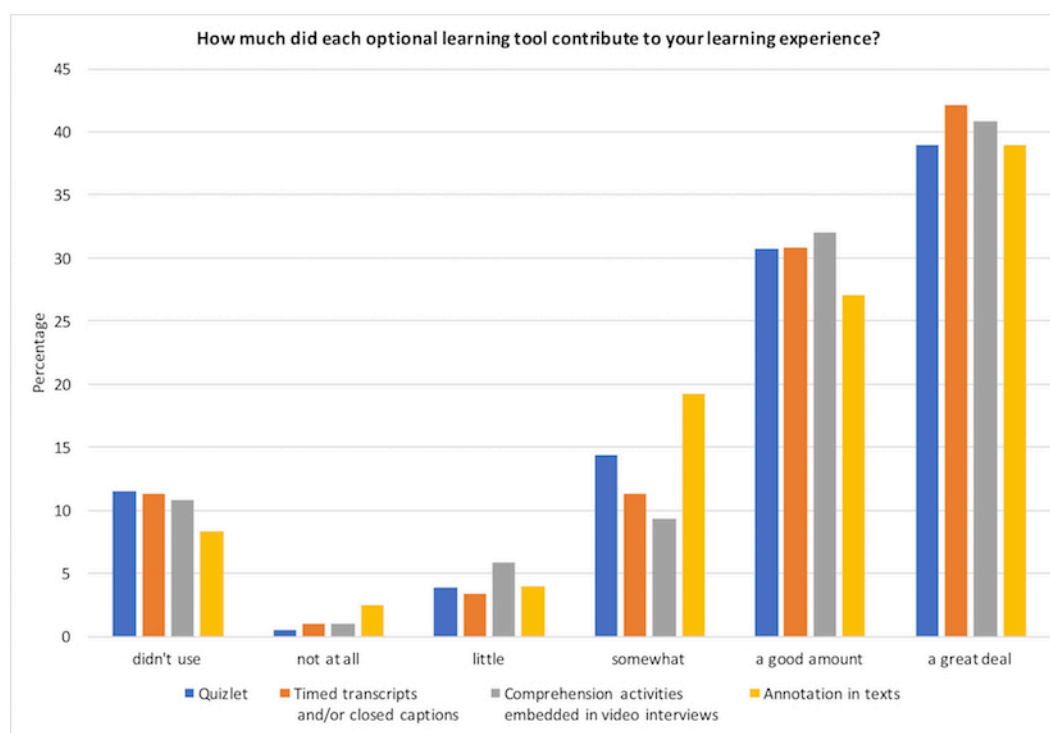


Figure 6. AP Italian (2019-2020): Optional tools (AP exit survey)

Most learners used these optional tools and found them helpful. Mean values, on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal) scale, were as follows for:

- Quizlet: 4.69 (standard variation 1.58)
- Timed transcripts and/or closed captions in videos: 4.76 (standard variation 1.58)
- Comprehension activities embedded in video interviews: 4.73 (standard variation 1.58)

²⁰ Not all readings received copyright clearance for this form of presentation.

- Annotations in texts (readings where words marked in blue reveal an annotation, e.g., translation, explanation, comments or external link): 4.71 (standard variation 1.49)

However, a small but notable group of learners (about 10%), did not use these tools at all.

A second set of questions was meant to capture learners’ level of use of the proposed studying scaffolding, i.e. pre-watching and pre-reading activities. See Table 2 for results:

	never, rarely or occasionally	very frequently or always
“I watched the videos directly <i>without</i> completing the pre-watching activities (studying vocabulary & Quizlet)”	80%	20%
“I read articles and literary pieces <i>without</i> completing the pre-reading activities (studying vocabulary & Quizlet)”	76%	24%

Table 2. AP Italian (2019-2020): Pre-reading & pre-watching activities (AP exit survey)

Results show that most learners followed the suggested scaffolding for videos and readings (they completed first the pre-reading and pre-watching activities), although a sizeable group did not, and rather chose a more direct and possibly more difficult approach: they jumped to the content without completing the preparatory activities.

In the open field related to these questions several learners commented favorably on the variety of learning tools and styles of presentations offered, and the flexibility that the course allows, and on the difference. Here is a sample of a few relevant comments:

“The variety of methods used was excellent”

“I liked [...] the variety of the presentation of the material.”

“LOVED that all these options [learning tools] were available!”

“The course [...] offered such a variety of learning activities.”

In conclusion, data shows that the majority of learners took advantage of many of the suggested and optional learning tools, but some of them showed more independence in their learning strategies. Thus, both the course flexible organization where lessons can be skipped and returned to later, as well as

the several learning options accompanying readings and videos, met a wide range of learners’ preferences and needs.

Another important indicator of learners’ level of ownership and control of their learning process is their participation in the Discussion forum, which was optional and ungraded.²¹ Writing prompts for the Discussion forum are provided throughout the course and learners are invited to express their opinion or personal experience on a variety of topics discussed in the course. Some of these topics involve cross-cultural comparisons, such as a comparison between different national Constitutions and health care systems. AP Italian had a total of 556 separate Discussion forum entries during its course run (August 2019-May 2020), a relatively high number suggesting a level of engagement not supported by our data: in the exit survey we polled learners about their experience in the Discussion forum with the question: “How did the Discussion forum contribute to your learning experience?,” and answers were quite divided (see Fig. 7). Many learners didn’t use this tool at all (48.24%) and, among those who used it, the majority (66%) wrote that this tool contributed “little or not at all” to their learning experience or they never used it, whereas 34% answered that it contributed a “a great deal, a good amount or somewhat” to their learning experience. This polarization, combined with the relative high number of entries (556) is yet another indicator of how the course was freely used by learners to fit their needs and learning goals: many learners were just not interested in sharing their opinions in the Discussion forum, whereas others found the process interesting and useful, and likely used it multiple times.²²

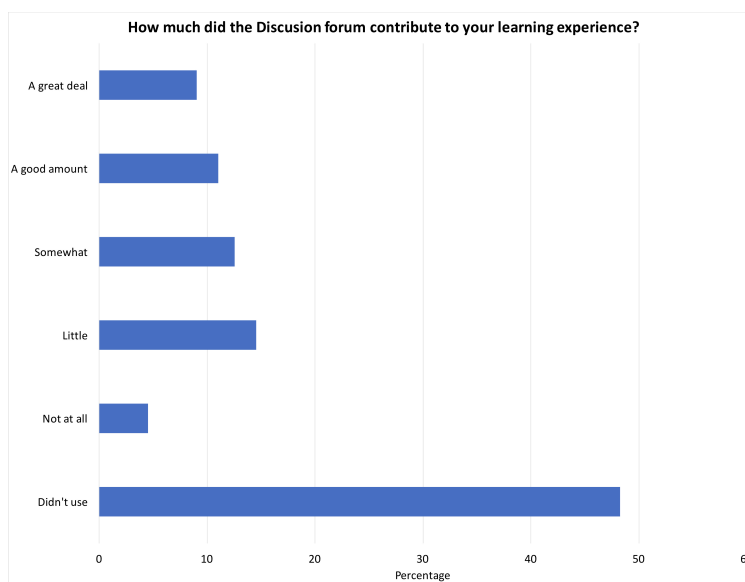


Figure 7. AP Italian (2019-2020): Discussion forum (AP exit survey)

²¹ Only tests were graded and recorded on the Progress report. Exercises, though ungraded, were important activities in preparation for the test.

²² We can infer that many learners contributed several entries. Unfortunately, edX analytics provides no data in this regard.

MOOCs have also often been criticized for being learning tools of privileged users, and for not attracting “the unemployed, women and participants from developing countries.”²³ Indeed, our data confirms that the majority of our learners possess a high level of education, and come from developed countries, such as the USA and Italy.²⁴ However, these studies do not take into account the “massive” nature of MOOCs: even if the percentage of learners from developing countries is low due to the economic and social inequality related to the “global digital divide,”²⁵ the absolute numbers of learners from developing countries are still very high (see Table 1). In these countries, AP Italian likely reached learners who would not have had otherwise any other means of achieving their educational goals.

Data presented above on learners’ profiles also shows a broad range of backgrounds, previous educational experiences, age, and primary activity or occupation. Curiously, a course that was designed for high schoolers, as its name clearly states²⁶ attracted learners who had intrinsic, rather than instrumental, goals, and who had a much older age, and consequently a much higher educational level than the typical high school student. Particularly, the course became a learning opportunity also for 65 and older (262, or 5% of those who provided a year of birth, according to edX analytics) and retirees (25.6% of respondents to our exit survey), as well as for other adults.

Learners who are 65 and older, and/or are retired have limited access to traditional opportunities to further their education for several reasons: educational institutions generally target younger learners, they may not be able to physically reach these institutions, or they may not be able to afford the required tuitions and registration fees. Consequently, MOOCs often represent the only available venue for retired or senior learners who want to keep mentally active and maintain meaningful, though virtual, social connections (Liyagunawardena 2016; Schmid 2015).

High schoolers (18 years old and younger) are also a significant group of AP Italian learners (592 learners or 10.7% of those who provided a year of birth), and an important target since most high schools do not offer Italian at the AP level,²⁷ and a MOOC may be the only available option for this age

²³ Although male and white learners represent only one third of MOOCs registrants (Ho et al 2014), many contributions have claimed that MOOCs in reality are learning tools for privileged users (Glass et. al 2016; Zhenghao et al. 2015; Christensen et al. 2013; Bartolomé, A. R. & Steffens, K. 2015). For a different position on this issue, see Schmid et al, 2015.

²⁴ This doesn’t necessarily mean that they are wealthy. We haven’t found any data on MOOC learners’ income.

²⁵ For solutions on how to bridge the global digital divide see Hillier (2018).

²⁶ AP, or Advanced Placement, is a designation only used for high school courses that are preparatory for college, and that have been approved by the College Board.

²⁷ In 2017-2018 there were 26,727 high schools in the USA, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (data retrieved online on June 29, 2020: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/education-statistics/index.html>).

Italian is taught in 840 high schools in the USA during the same year (data provided to the authors by the Italian Consulate in Boston), corresponding to 3.1% of all USA high schools.

group. Just like the group 65 years old and older, this group of young learners is large numerically though relatively small percentage wise.

Motivational factors for learners’ participation in MOOCs can be distinguished into professional benefit, educational benefit, and personal benefit (Semenova 2020). Our data shows that the majority of learners (67.61%) were pursuing “personal benefits” and their motivation for learning was intrinsic, i.e. they enrolled following a desire for personal enrichment or interest. This is not surprising since the course subject itself, Italian, is intrinsically less instrumental than other subjects, and may have relatively less impact or value as a tool for career advancements or change. Interestingly, the second highest group (8.5%) consists of teachers at the high school or college level using the AP Italian in their courses. A small portion of learners pursued professional or educational benefits, i.e. they had “instrumental” motives for learning Italian, i.e. high school students taking AP Italian in their school (4.86%) or preparing for the AP test (4.05%) or other learners preparing for a placement test (0.81%) or other adults wishing to advance their career (4.05%).

When asked to be more specific, learners who checked “Other” shared some interesting answers, that are also testimonies to the unpredictability and varied nature of MOOCs’ learners motivations. Here are a few:

“I am a high school Spanish teacher and i wanted to see how another course was done”

“I teach Italian at a Senior Center and wanted to review”

“Learning Italian during lockdown!”

“*Sto preparandomi per l’esame CELI (sono olandofono)*”²⁸

“Compensation for not being able to go to Italy due to corona”

In conclusion, an analysis of course contents and organization, as well as data collected through edX analytics and our exit survey, suggests that AP Italian presents both characteristics of an xMOOC and a cMOOC: on the one hand, course contents and structure were predetermined by the course team when AP Italian was created, and are unmodifiable by learners; also, learners cannot add or contribute their own learning tools to the platform. Therefore, the course presents itself to learners as a pre-designed and unchangeable learning tool and, in this regard, it meets the definition of an xMOOC. On the other hand, the self-paced nature of the course and the independence of each unit from the rest, combined with multiple presentations of the same content, allow for maximum flexibility and empowers learners to craft their learning path. In addition, we could observe that learners used online material in different and often unique ways to match their goals and background. For these reasons, the course challenges the setup of an xMOOC (i.e., the online version of a traditional university course). We would like to suggest that AP Italian fits a new type of MOOC, which could be described as “elastic,” or ELMOOC, an online tool that, while carry-

²⁸ I am preparing for the CELI (Certificate of knowledge of the Italian Language) (I speak Dutch).

ing a certain degree of structure and top-down teaching, is also adaptable to learners with different backgrounds, learning strategies and objectives.²⁹

Also, we would like to suggest that ELMOOC may be a viable model for other MOOCs, and that content creators could adopt a flexible organization for their MOOCs in order to maximize learners’ agency and self-direction. We recognize that many subjects must be taught sequentially and that teachers must exercise a certain level of top-down control. This is the case of many STEM subjects, for example, and of languages taught at the elementary level. However, even these subjects could accommodate a certain level of flexibility, and contents could be presented in multiple though parallel ways, so that learners may exercise more self-directedness in their studies. In other words, any MOOCs could allow for a certain level of learners’ control, if not on what they need to learn, at least on how they learn it. The multiple presentations of video interviews and readings, and the multiple ways of learning vocabulary, are examples of how this flexibility is achieved in AP Italian. For other subjects, the same level of flexibility may be achieved by offering video lessons (with and without embedded activities), as well as slide show presentations and downloadable pdf files, and/or audio files of the same content.

In the following sections we will discuss how the OOHs offered in conjunction with AP Italian provided yet another dimension to learners’ control of the learning process, adding important elements to the “connectivistic” nature of AP Italian. We will also explore how the fluid nature of AP Italian and its accompanying OOHs allowed for a quick adaptability of the learning experience during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

AP ITALIAN AND ITS ACCOMPANYING ONLINE OFFICE HOURS DURING COVID-19

OOHs opened for the first time in the academic year 2019-2020, and ran from October 7, 2019 until December 21, 2019 and from January 27, 2020 until May 9, 2020. All AP Italian learners, regardless of the amount of ma-

²⁹ Our proposed model is different from the ahMOOC model described by Garcia-Peñalvo et al. (2020) and from the Dual-Layered MOOCs described by Crosslin et al. (2018) and Penstein Rosé et al. (2015). AP Italian’s unique characteristic is its flexibility, i.e the possibility to study the same contents using different learning tools. This type of elastic MOOC may be implemented on any of the existing platforms adopted by MOOC providers (edX, Coursera, etc.) because it simply requires the use of annotations in html, or the possibility to link to third party tools to implement a variety of activities that may not be offered directly by the platform: for example, embedded questions in videos via PlayPosit or H5P. On the other hand, ahMOOC may be offered only through specifically designed software designed for adaptive learning (the system automatically sets up a learning and assessment plan for each learner based on his/her stated interests and goals) and Dual-Layered MOOCs require the interface of edX with special software (see note 5 for more details).

Furthermore, although flexibility is one of the main features of ELMOOC, the flex-MOOC model as described by Pilli and Admiraal (2016) does not fit our course. A flex-MOOC is a learner-centered MOOC that allows learners to create learning paths aligned with their strengths, needs and preferences by selecting modules, but does not allow learners to study the same contents using different learning tools. For these reasons, we are proposing to use ELMOOC as another item in the MOOC taxonomy.

terial covered in the course, or their status (“auditor” or working towards a Verified Certificate of Completion), could register for this free program.

OOHs were offered for five hours per week: each hour was divided into two 30 minute slots for a total of 10 weekly slots. Each 30 minute slot could accommodate two participants (for a maximum of 20 learners per week). Learners registered online a week in advance, and could choose only one slot per week. While our weekly schedule didn’t change through the year, learners could enroll in different time slots each week, according to their availability: this way, we strived to address learners’ need for a flexible program.

Throughout the year, OOHs attracted a total of 112 different learners. After the OOHs were closed on May 9, 2020, a survey was designed and administered to the 112 participants, and we received a total of 40 valid responses. Questions were both quantitative (learners were asked to score several aspects of the OOHs) and qualitative (learners were asked to reflect on different aspects of their experience with a short paragraph).

Data regarding demographics shows that the majority of participants in OOHs belonged to the older age groups (45-55, 55-64 and 65 and older). This is in sharp contrast with learners in AP Italian at large who belonged for the most part to the 19-44 age range (see Fig. 8 for a comparison of data from OOHs’ exit survey and edX analytics).

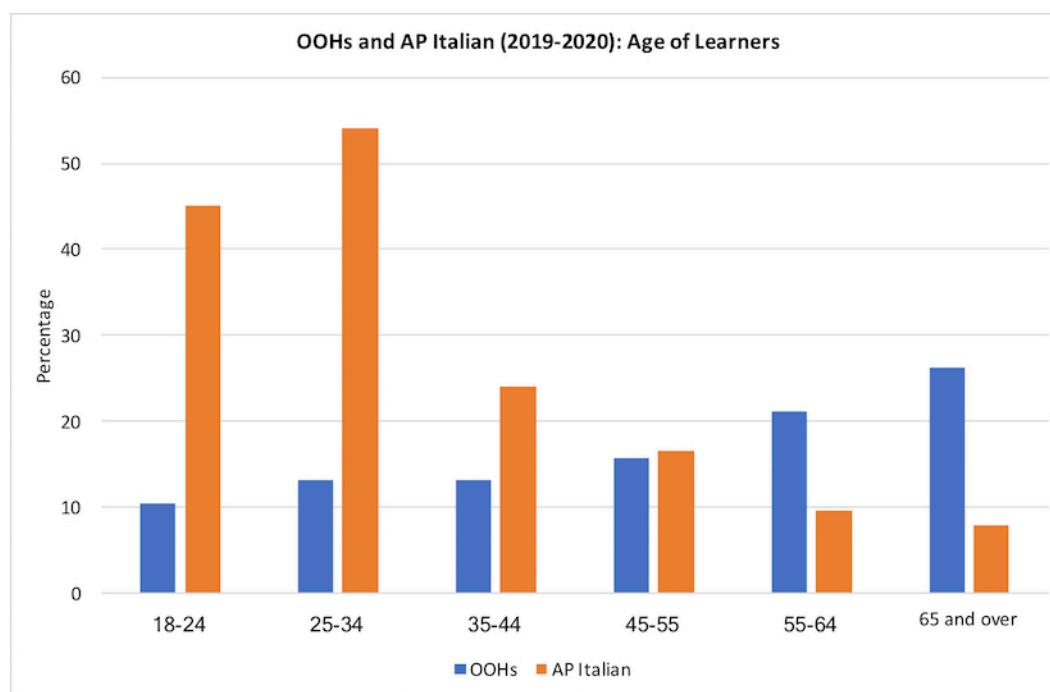


Figure 8. OOHs and AP Italian (2019-2020): Age (OOHs exit survey and edX analytics)

We were also interested in learning about participants’ experience in interacting with a very diverse group of learners. We capture this element with two questions:

“Did you share any OOHs with a learner from a different country and/or cultural background?": Yes: 80%, No: 20%

“Did you share any OOHs with a learner who had a different level of language proficiency than yours?": Yes: 45%, No: 55%

Learners' comments following these questions will be discussed in the section below titled “Discussion of OOHs: from a Q&A forum to a healing space during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Participants in the OOHs reside in the following countries:

Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, France, Italy, Iran, Ireland, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Norway, Poland, Spain, UK, USA.

and indicate the following as their first language:

Brazilian Portuguese, English, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Persian, Polish.

Data from this survey aligns with data collected in the AP Italian exit survey in confirming the exceptional diversity of the AP Italian online community.

Through learners' responses we could capture cases of multiculturalism and multilingualism, a condition that is becoming increasingly common (Kramsch & Hua, 2020). Specifically, thirteen learners speak a first language that is different from the official language spoken in their country of residency (Table 3).

First language spoken	Country of residency
English	Italy
English	Greece
French	USA
German	Brazil
German	Italy
German	Norway
Greek	UK
Hungarian	Austria
Polish	France
Portuguese	Spain

Russian	France
Russian	USA
Spanish	USA

Table 3. Multilingualism in OOHs’ participants (OOHs exit survey)

Finally, data from the survey shows that learners’ main goal was improving their skills in conversational Italian. Therefore, the original purpose of the OOHs (offering a space for learners to ask questions) did not coincide with participants’ motivations or needs (see Fig. 9)

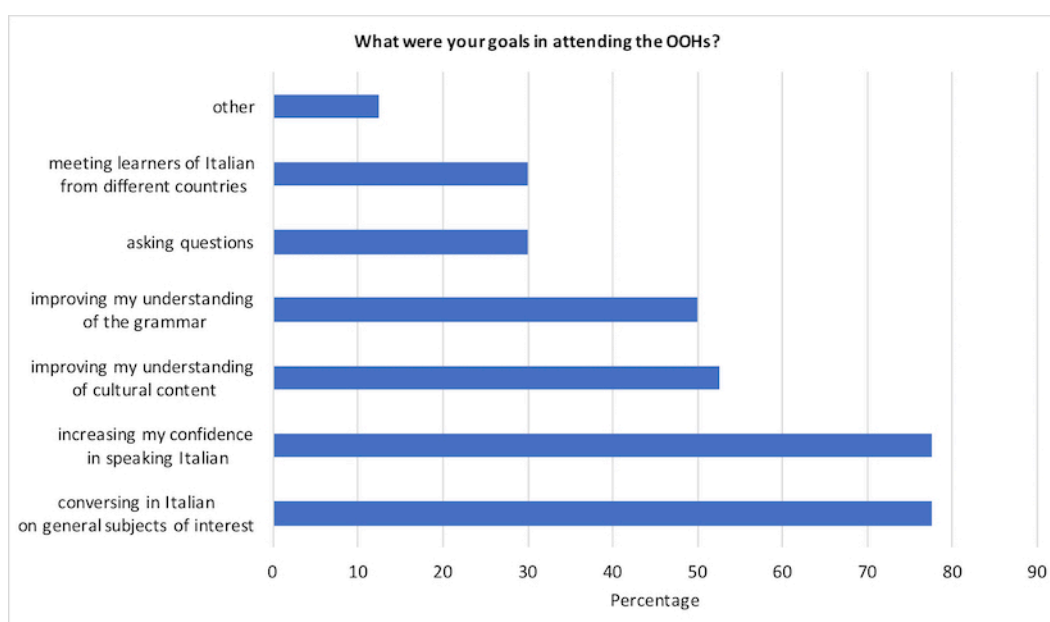


Figure 9. OOHs: Goals (OOHs exit survey)

Learners’ satisfaction level is captured with three questions. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) learners gave a median score of 4.57 to the following statement: “The OOHs I attended helped me achieve my goals.”

In addition, the statement “Please rate your overall experience with OOHs” received a median score of 4.6 on the following scale: 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Finally, 97.5% of participants wrote that they are likely to attend OOHs if they are offered again.

The final weeks of AP Italian and its accompanying OOHs coincided with the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world.³⁰ In the following section we analyze the role of OOHs within the context of AP Italian, and we discuss how this online learning tool evolved overtime to address learners’ needs, particularly in coincidence with the onset of the pandemic.

³⁰ AP Italian was archived on May 31, and the OOHs ended the week of May 9, 2020.

DISCUSSION OF OOHs:

FROM A Q&A FORUM TO A “HEALING SPACE” DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The OOHs were initially conceived as a virtual space where learners of AP Italian could ask questions about topics covered in the course. Our initial goal was to simply reproduce online the “office hours” as they are offered in an academic setting, where students drop in to ask questions.

However, soon teachers had to adapt to rapidly changing learners’ goals. OOHs were becoming much more than office hours: they soon morphed into a virtual space that responded to learners’ need to converse in Italian on general subjects and become more confident in speaking the language - the latter being two of the learning goals chosen by 77.5 % of respondents to our survey (Fig. 9). Even though each OOH slot lasted for only 30 minutes, this program managed to fill a gap in language MOOCs, i.e. the absence of a space to practice the newly acquired language skills in a stress-free online live environment. As learners pointed out in the survey:³¹

“It was nice to be able to *converse* with others in small groups. One of the biggest pitfalls of online courses is *facilitating speaking* and this did that.”

“I was able to improve my knowledge of Italian language through *conversation* and *interaction* with native Italian teachers.”

Helping learners attain a certain level of self-efficacy³² is also another important result of OOHs. We can glean this from the following learners’ comments:

“We can really measure our grammar level, pronunciation, increase our *confidence*...”

“I learned, had fun and increased my *confidence*.”

“Having the opportunity to attend the Online Office hours allowed me to improve my speaking skills and to gain more *confidence*. Speaking in Italian becomes natural to me thanks to the classes [...]”.

“My main goal was to become more *comfortable speaking* Italian. My own *anxiety* and *perfectionism* get in the way sometimes. Both instructors I worked with were good at putting me *at ease*.”

Sharing one’s own personal interests was a motivating factor for many learners. For example, some shared books they had read, movies, articles, and others would ask them more information about where to find these items or their level of difficulty. Some even shared their writings in Italian. Here are some learners’ testimonies:

“I was also able to get some guidance to learn about the *social differences between Northern and Southern Italy* and about important

³¹ All highlights are ours.

³² For a discussion of self-efficacy in MOOCs, see Agonács (2019) articles (1) and (2).

events such as the Moro affair. I also read some interesting *Italian books* such as *Il Nuovo Mao* by Gennaro Sangiuliano, *Gomorra* by Roberto Saviano and some books by Oriana Fallaci.”

“[I enjoyed finding out] what *Italian books* they've read, *Italian movies* they've seen, etc....”

In addition, learners were also able to share their learning strategies³³ and tools. Whenever learners didn't suggest any discussion topics, teachers would stimulate the conversation with open questions, such as “*Che cosa hai fatto per praticare l'italiano questa settimana?*”³⁴ This initiated very productive conversations about learning styles and strategies, as this learner pointed out:

“Also I enjoyed finding out why others are studying Italian, how they *approach studying and learning*, and what their *learning experiences* have been.”

OOHs slowly turned into a virtual space where teachers were moderators while participants, despite the limitation of the online environment (absence of a common physical experience and body language) enjoyed the experience of collaborative learning as Siemens (2005) describes it, i.e. the learning process that takes place in a community of people who are interested in a specific subject. Participants' motivation increased as they considered other learners' perspectives, as shown in these comments:

“It was motivating to see someone from a *different background working towards the same goal* as I am.”

“We tried to find a *common ground* and we succeeded.”

“On two occasions I was with students who had just begun the course and who were asking many questions to get a foothold on the program. On both occasions the students were eager and wanting to learn. This was a stimulus for me to *increase my own commitment*.”

“I shared Online Office Hours both with students who were more advanced and with students who were less advanced than I. Both situations were enriching because we can *learn by listening to other learners*.”

In addition, OOHs helped foster what Kramsch has defined as “intercultural communication,” which “is no longer communication across national borders, but participation in fluctuating networks of individual experiences, memories,

³³ In their study of self-determined learning in Language MOOCs, (2) Agonács et al. (2019) recommend creating a space (virtual or in person) where MOOC learners can share their learning strategies, and their stories of successes and failures.

³⁴ “What have you done to practice Italian this past week?”

and fantasies, multiple allegiances and legitimations, that are expressed and shared mostly, though not exclusively, through language.” (Kramsch, 2020). As our learners observed in the survey, OOHs resulted in a community as “a connection-forming space” (Siemens 2005) where it was possible to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts through the communication venue they shared: the Italian language and the Italian culture. One learner pointed out: “I think the most interesting thing was to talk a little about the culture of another country, through the union of the Italian language.” Another one added: “We enjoyed interchanging Italian language experiences with persons from Australia, Norway, Mexico, Brazil and the USA. We also talked about our different backgrounds, but always related to our common interest in Italian culture.”

As data shows, OOHs brought together learners from 16 different countries, with cases of multilingualism and multiculturalism. An outstanding 80% gave positive feedback when considering their experience of sharing a learning online space with others from different countries and backgrounds using Italian to bridge the gap. Even if only 30% of learners declared that their initial goal in attending OOHs was to meet other learners of Italian from different countries (Fig. 9), the intrinsic heterogeneity of OOHs is repeatedly mentioned and valued in learners’ comments:

“[The most valuable aspect was] *Sharing different viewpoints and perspectives and discovering a different culture.*”

“We enjoyed interchanging Italian language experiences with persons from Australia, Norway, Mexico, Brazil and the USA. We also talked about our *different backgrounds*, but always related to our common interest in Italian culture.”

“I adored [...] being able to connect with students from *completely different parts of the world*. Stupendous.”

“[...] Italian can unite us all. I had fellow students from Iran to Ireland and the US. *From experienced people to young students*. So nice.”

“I love the idea of bringing *people from different parts of the world together.*”

“The necessity of communicating only in Italian took on more importance, I could not fall back into English and be understood by the other students. In addition, just being with another student with a *different culture and a different perspective* from mine was a good learning experience for me.”

“There was one student with whom I shared Office Hours several times, maybe six or seven times. Once we knew a little about each other's basic life circumstances, we were able to discuss issues such as *shared professional interests and challenges* [...]”

The nature of OOHs as a virtual space of meaningful learning and cultural exchanges was already established when, starting in mid-March 2020, the pandemic quickly spread around the globe.

During the same period, we noticed a considerable spike in AP Italian numbers. Enrollment rose 8x in March-May 2020, if compared to the same period in 2019 (a greater growth than edX courses overall, which grew 5x for the same period).³⁵ Between March 12 and April 19, 2020, we also observed a substantial increase in learners’ active participation in online activities: 1,110 learners were active online in the week ending April 19, 2020, compared to 474 in the week ending March 1, 2020, an increase of 131% (Fig. 10).³⁶

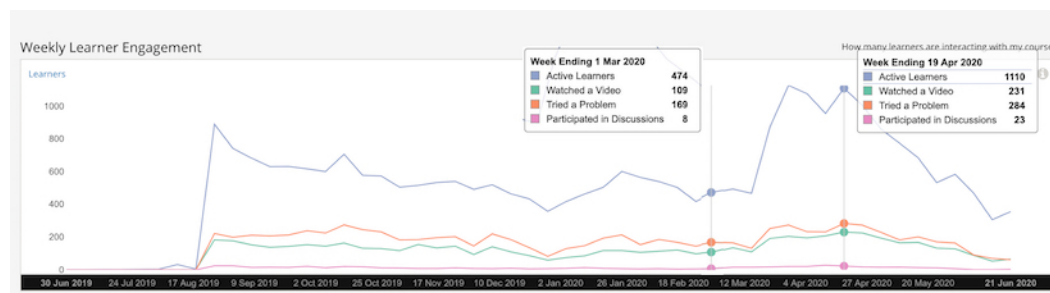


Figure 10. AP Italian (2019-2020): Changes in Learner Engagement

We observed a similar trend in our OOHs during the same period (around mid-March 2020): whereas before mid-March 2020, our OOHs slots took a few days to fill, and occasionally some slots remained unclaimed, starting on that date and through the end of the program (May 9, 2020), slots filled within a few hours from the time they were published, and many learners who could not sign up contacted us via email with the request to open additional slots. A waitlist was created for those who could not book a slot. Following learners’ demand, we extended OOHs one week beyond the time they were scheduled to close.

At a time when people needed to practice “physical distancing,” OOHs proved to be a virtual space that allowed learners to remain socially close in an online live community. The pandemic also disclosed how the “tangible benefit” of learning a foreign language and the “emotional need” of making connections became deeply connected in such a peculiar and challenging situation. The increased number of enrolled learners in OOHs, on one hand, talks about the “tangible benefit” of practicing Italian for free once all the traditional opportunities to learn a language were closed down in many countries of the world. On the other, and perhaps more interestingly, it talks about learners’ negative emotions channeled into a virtual “live” community while pursuing their mutual interests and learning goals.

³⁵ Email communication by edX program coordinator to the authors.

³⁶ Several major MOOC providers besides edX (such as Coursera and FutureLearn) reported considerable increases in enrollment in their online courses (Shah, 2020).

The role of emotions in the learning process has received increasing attention in recent years. Siemens (2006) emphasized the importance of emotions in connectivism since “cognition, emotion, perception, and beliefs are knowledge creation and knowledge navigation enablers.” Even negative emotions, according to Connectivism, force learners “to search for answers, to ask help, to seek for patterns and, in other words, to form connections” (Aldahdoh et al., 2015). Although most research has focused on anxiety, the wider spectrum of negative emotions such as sadness, grief, boredom and anger has been explored lately. During the so called “third phase of Positive Psychology (PP),” also known as Positive and Negative Emotions Phase, SLA researchers recognized that positive and negative classroom emotions interact in complex way, and are both important components of learners’ well-being and learning outcomes (Dewaele & MacIntyre 2016; MacIntyre 2016; Jiang & Li 2017; Dewaele & Li 2018). In addition, according to Control-value theory, emotions influence learners’ learning process in a variety of ways (Pekrun, Goetz, Perry, 2002): negative activating emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety and/or shame experienced by learners when facing, for example, a course assessment) may have a positive impact on learners’ performance and help learners achieve their goals, whereas negative deactivating emotions (e.g., hopelessness and/or boredom experienced by learners with certain course material) may affect negatively their entire learning process (Pekrun and Perry, 2014). Both our experience teaching OOHs and our survey results support the Control-value theory by showing how negative emotions (anxiety, sense of isolation, anger aroused by the pandemic, rather than related to the course itself as in the study by Pekrun, Goetz, Perry, 2002), can have a positive “activating” effect.

A question in the exit survey asked what was the most valuable aspect of sharing the OOHs with a learner from a different country and/or different background, and some answers make specific reference to the pandemic.

“Different perspectives and experiences relating to the virus.”

“Learning more about their country/culture, especially during the coronavirus.”

Other learners’ answers to the same question, show how “activating negative emotions” became “knowledge creation” (Siemens 2006):

“[...] we were able to discuss issues such as shared professional interests and challenges, and more recently, we were able to share how the pandemic has been affecting each of us.”

“Because of the world situation right now, it was interesting to hear what was happening with the virus in other countries first hand.”

In addition, one student’s suggestion (via email) to create a group of learners interested in continuing, in an informal way, the OOHs experience is a further indication that “negative emotions” activated learners’ motivations

and their desire to make connections. Another learner wrote this comment in the survey:

“During the sessions we had, I met very interesting people from different countries, with similar levels of Italian language knowledge and I would enjoy continuing to be in contact with some of them.”

“Negative emotions” generated by the pandemic and the lockdown activated learners’ emotional needs to connect and see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts. This process had three results:

1. Learners were able to channel these “negative emotions” to improve their knowledge of the Italian language and culture.
2. “Negative emotions” triggered their curiosity and eagerness to learn about others’ cultural contexts and experiences, and
3. encouraged them to find out how the pandemic was affecting the rest of the world.

Learners brought to OOHs their reflections on the pandemic, their questions about the Italian situation — Italy was at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic mid-March to late April — and expressed a sincere interest for other learners’ current predicament, and an emotional need to be connected and to find a supportive community during those challenging times.

OOHs became a co-constructed “healing space” where instructors and learners helped each other to face the social, psychological, and emotional challenges posed by the global pandemic. Oftentimes, OOHs were learners’ only weekly “moment of leisure” during the lockdown. Learners found relief in stepping outside their “discomfort zone”: speaking Italian allowed them to overcome COVID restrictions. As one learner comments: “These meetings [have been] something I always looked forward to all week long.”

In conclusion, during the lockdown, OOHs allowed learners to overcome physical borders and interact with people from all over the world. Learners’ powerful and insightful testimonies show that online courses can also become a way to satisfy learners’ emotional needs, and provide much-needed support and motivation during challenging times: in short, a sort of psychological and emotional “survival kit.” While we recognize that OOHs are hardly scalable, our experience shows that online learning doesn’t have to happen in isolation, but can become a powerful venue to construct social networks of learning and support.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper discusses a new type of MOOC using AP Italian and its accompanying OOHs as case studies: because of its flexible and nonlinear design, and the variety of choices offered to learners both in terms of contents and method, AP Italian straddles the territory between xMOOCs and cMOOCs. We propose the creation of the new category of “elastic” or “ELMOOC” to

describe online experiences similar to AP Italian. An ELMOOC, unlike hybrid and/or adaptive MOOCs (Garcia-Peñalvo et al., 2020) and Dual-Layered MOOCs (Crosslin et al., 2018; Penstein Rosé et al., 2015) doesn’t require any special or additional software, and can be created on any existing MOOC platform.

This new definition may be useful as a guiding principle to MOOC creators, especially Language MOOCs: designing and teaching a MOOC that combines a relatively rigid and pre-determined structure with elements of flexibility both in content and design, and with spaces for live interactions among its users, might prove to be a productive and viable solution for those MOOC creators who aim at offering an academically challenging online experience while addressing learners’ call for connectivity, as well as learners’ need to exert a certain level of control over their learning process. Further lines of research in this direction is needed to create a theoretical model for this type of MOOC.

Moreover, we have discussed how, by combining AP Italian with OOHs we created an online “live” community of learners, another relevant feature of connectivity that was added to the elastic online learning experience of AP Italian.³⁷ This element of connectivity was further enhanced by the unique challenge presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, and by learners’ pressing needs to use OOHs as an open forum to share the different yet parallel challenges they were facing around the world. The community thus proved to be just as strong and relevant to learners (and certainly more accessible) as communities based in face-to-face classes. We would like to use Downes (2015) words to describe our OOHs: “based on connection rather than content” and “more like an online community than a course.”

Finally, we would like to suggest that the creation of a wider and diverse learning communities carries the potential of enriching the experience of campus students as well, not only in continuing education programs but in traditional residential colleges, universities, and high schools³⁸ as well: first, by opening up our curriculum to “massive” numbers of learners, we also create a global lab to test our teaching with massive data and feedback from the larger learning and teaching communities. Secondly, material created with world learners in mind will have to take into account their diverse needs and learning strategies, with obvious advantages for the increasingly diverse campus students as well, and important advancements in creating a more inclusive learning environment. Opening up our campus to online learning and involving the world community might even represent a solution to the untenable rise of tuition, especially in private universities and colleges (Taparia, 2020).

³⁷ Research has shown that offering MOOC learners a place to interact, network and develop a sense of belonging has given positive result in terms of retention, completion and satisfaction rates (Safdar et al., 2020).

³⁸Research has shown that MOOCs have a positive impact on K12 students. Through MOOCs, students can vary their modality of study, engage in new learning experiences and receive supplementary tutoring. Furthermore, it has been shown that, by using MOOCs, students can improve their scores (Koutsakas et al., 2020).

Our contribution has some limitations: it considers only one MOOC, and data collected in both surveys come from a relatively small poll of participants. However, we believe that our paper represents a valuable contribution to the field of Language MOOC and the theory of connectivity, as well as a blueprint for a psychological and emotional “survival kit” during times of crisis like the current pandemic. Any MOOC can become a space to find and construct those relations and communities that have been suddenly disrupted through a common interest and goal: in our case, the study of the Italian language and culture.

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