Playing the numbers game: Students as assessors in a MOOC context

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With increasing focus on online platforms in learning and teaching, it is vital to examine how we can best assess students in the online context. The main rationale driving innovative assessment in MOOCs is the unprecedented scale of class sizes. While it may be logistically challenging for staff to mark/give feedback on the large number of student assignments, peers are plentiful. Assessment and feedback must therefore come either from automated processes, like MCQ quizzes or from other students i.e. peer review (PR). PR is an excellent example of active student participation, however its effectiveness must be carefully evaluated.

Our study was based on data from the 6-week MOOC ‘Cancer in the 21st Century: The Genomic Revolution’ on which there were >7000 students enrolled. Over 200 students took part in a PR task as part of the MOOC. The aim of our research was to investigate the quality of the PRs produced, what factors influence this and the students’ experience of the PR process.

Demographic data (age, gender, previous level of education, whether students are currently employed and field of employment) was collected and linked to 79 students who had participated. Peer reviews were compared with staff marking of the written task and the demographic data was analysed in relation to both written task and peer review performance. Qualitative comments were also gathered from various forums and thematic analysis was carried out on these.

Overall, many high quality reviews were generated, and students identified specific benefits to both receiving and giving reviews, including promoting deeper learning. We also found that while several demographic factors may influence both participation in, and quality of initial written task itself, they do not appear to have a marked effect on the quality of the peer review which an individual is able to give.

We will discuss the implications of these results for use of PR in both online and offline environments.

References

