

Shifting the focus from Learner Completion to Learner Perseverance: Evidences from a Teacher Professional Development MOOC

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Abstract: Most major Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) providers are focusing on design of xMOOCs. In these courses, a central course design team develops necessary learning content (in form of videos and/or documents), automated assessments and manages discussion forums to engage the participants in a structured manner. However the xMOOCs have been criticized for their cognitive-behaviourist pedagogic design, lower student engagement with discussion forums and lower completion rates that make it unsuitable for direct use in Teacher Professional Development (TPD). In this paper we introduce the idea of 'Learner Perseverance' that can be used as a better design goal for an xMOOC developed for TPD. The design principles of Immersivity and Pertinency were utilized in adapting the xMOOC components of videos, auto-graded assessment problems and discussion forums for a TPD MOOC (ET601Tx) to achieve learner perseverance. It was seen that there were 3447 active participants (67.5% of enrolled) in the course, i.e. people who have accessed courseware at least once. The data from the course logs show that 1201 (47.1%) active learners had participated in the discussion forum generating 5023 discussion threads generating 9861 comments (i.e. 4 threads and 8 comments per active learner who participated in the discussion forum). It was also seen that there is a completion rate of 36.58% (1261 learners) for ET601Tx, which is quite high compared to the average completion rates reported in xMOOCs (6-7%). The course completion survey indicated that these pedagogical designs were useful and relevant for the teachers in their own practice. Based on these findings we recommend use of a 'Learner Perseverance' based design for improving learner participation in xMOOCs that are used for TPD.

Keywords: Learner Perseverance, MOOC design, Teacher Professional Development, Immersivity, Pertinency

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have had exponential proliferation within the online education space (Nkuyubwatsi, 2013). With many MOOC providers partnering with higher education institutions (for example Coursera, edX, FutureLearn etc), the MOOC landscape is now broadening and caters to a wide variety of learners. Teacher professional development (TPD) is one of the crucial areas that can largely be benefited through MOOCs (Jobe, Ostlund, & Svensson, 2014; Laurillard, 2016). Based on the official records available with department of higher education, Government of India, there are 38,056 higher education institutions that cater to 33.2 million students and 1.4 million teachers (MHRD, 2015). MOOC based TPD programmes can become a possible solution to address the professional development needs of these large group of teachers in India.

MOOCs can be broadly divided into two based on the format of content and activities available inside it. The extension or transmissive MOOCs (xMOOCs) are the most popular category as these offers a highly centralized and linear in structure (Margaryan, Bianco, & Littlejohn, 2015). These typically contain well-curated multimedia content, automated and peer assessment mechanisms and discussion forums to engage the learner. The connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) on the other hand relies on networked learning is developed based on the connectivist philosophy. These MOOCs provide opportunity for participants to build community and provide opportunities for social

construction of knowledge (Mackness et. al., 2013).

Existing research on TPD points out the effective programmes/courses should be able to promote higher participant engagement with content, facilitate active learning among participants, encourage reflection on practice and promote participant collaboration (Desmione, 2009; Wells, 2007; Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006; Steinert et. al, 2006). Though there aren't many, current research on MOOC based TPD points out that a hybrid approach that permits pedagogic modifications of xMOOC to incorporate the networked learning aspect of cMOOC as a possible way ahead to ensure that the above goals are met (Jobe, Ostlund, & Svensson, 2014; Laurillard, 2016). In this paper, we discuss one such attempt and propose a TPD MOOC design that we term as 'MOOC design for Learner Perseverance'. The term 'Learner Perseverance' is adapted from the broader definition of 'Academic Perseverance' to denote the behaviour of being engaged, focused and persistent in pursuit of learning goals (Farrington et. al., 2012) within the MOOC setting. Perseverance can be increased directly by improving the academic mindset of the learner through mechanisms like increasing value of a task (McNight and Kashdan, 2009).

Our design for learner perseverance utilizes the design principles of Pertinency and Immersivity (Warriem, Murthy, & Iyer) for designing a TPD MOOC, ET601Tx (Educational Technology for Engineering Teachers). Within the existing xMOOC structure we incorporated slight pedagogic modifications on the videos, assessment activities and discussion forums to create Learning Dialogue (LeD) Videos linked with Learning by Doing activities (LbDs) and Practice focused Discussion Forums respectively. Each of these components was complemented with graded quizzes to provide an explicit connection to the long-term goal of course completion.

The course had an overall enrolment of 5267 students, of which 1261 students (23.9%) successfully completed the course. The course logs show that only 3447 (65.4%) were active in the course, which increases the effective completion rate to (36.6%). The course also saw 1201 participants post 14884 posts in the course discussion forum, thus providing an average of 12.39 posts per active participant. An end of course perception survey response indicated that the LeD videos, LbD activities and Discussion forums were the top 3 reasons for participants to persevere in the course.

Our experience of ET601Tx course shows that Learner Perseverance is a greater goal to target in TPD MOOCs. This has also shown that bringing in learner perseverance positively affects the existing MOOC metrics of completion rate. ET601Tx also provides an instance of validating the use of design principles of Pertinency and Immersivity in a MOOC setting.

2. Related Work

Scaling up teacher professional development has always been a challenge within the academic community – both in terms of cost involved and also in terms of quality (Jobe, Ostlund, & Svensson, 2014). Some of the existing solutions that target the issue scaling are Communities of Practice (Triggs & John, 2004) and blended online TPDs (Murthy, Iyer, & Warriem, 2016). With the increased access to Internet among teaching community, the emergence of MOOCs provides a viable alternative to scale TPD efforts.

MOOCs are broadly divided into two main categories – transmissive/extension MOOCs (xMOOCs) and connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs), based on their structure and format. The xMOOCs, have a more centralized, content-based and linear course structure (Margaryan, Bianco, & Littlejohn, 2015) and are more widely used. These use the cognitive-behaviourist pedagogy with a lot of focus around modularized video lectures, automated assessments and peer assessments (Jobe, Ostlund, & Svensson, 2014). cMOOCs on the other hand have a less formal structure and is developed based on the philosophy of connectivism and networking (Daniel, 2012). These use distributed platforms for learning and focus on social construction of knowledge, which might become difficult and disorienting for beginners (Mackness et. al., 2013). The current research points out that the MOOC designers need to focus on the pedagogy of MOOCs, especially xMOOCs, and also look at the problems of low completion rates (Bayne and Ross, 2014; Gasevic et. al, 2014; Margaryan, Bianco, & Littlejohn, 2015) to increase their effectiveness.

The available scant research on MOOC based TPD points to the need for pedagogic modification within both xMOOC and cMOOC settings (Jobe, Ostlund, & Svensson, 2014;

Laurillard, 2016). Vivian et. al's (2014) effort of using a MOOC for TPD of Computer Science educators focused on imparting better content knowledge and stronger links to existing curriculum. This MOOC was primarily developed in Google Course Builder platform and had more than one tool to facilitate participant collaboration (like Twitter, Pinterest, Google+ etc). This approach of having multiple technologies for various transactions is typical of a cMOOC and requires the mentorship of experienced veterans of cMOOCs to provide an effective learning experience (Mackness et. al, 2013). Laurillard (2014, 2016) provides an example of adaptation of pedagogic design to facilitate co-learning in a TPD MOOC for promotion of use of ICT in primary education (using Coursera). The pedagogy of this course utilized curated digital resources along with orchestrated peer collaboration through issue focused discussion forums. The current work builds on both of the above works by looking at broader design principles that can provide guidance to TPD MOOC designers in developing courses in xMOOC platforms. We identify our approach as 'MOOC design for Learner Perseverance', which utilizes the design principles of Pertinency and Immersivity (Warriem, Murthy, & Iyer, 2015) and constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996).

The term 'Learner Perseverance' is adapted from the broader definition of 'Academic Perseverance' to denote the behaviour of being engaged, focused and persistent in pursuit of learning goals (Farrington et. al., 2012) within the MOOC setting. Thus in the MOOC setting learner perseverance is demonstrated through sustained engagement and persistence with the various activities inside the course that ultimately results in achievement of a larger goal (like certificate, transferring the knowledge into practice etc.). Review of literature on academic perseverance points to the direct effect of academic mindset of learners on academic perseverance. The academic mindset includes sense of belonging to the community (Cohen & Garcia, 2008), belief on growing ability with increased effort (Cury et. al, 2006), self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986) and inherent value attached with a task (McNight and Kashdan, 2009).

The design principle of pertinency talks of immediate relevance of the TPD in the participant's practice (Warriem, Murthy & Iyer, 2015). Thus by designing the content and activities for increased Pertinency, we are actually increasing the value of the TPD experience to the learner. The design principle of Immersivity (Warriem, Murthy & Iyer, 2015) defines the increased level of engagement of learners with the TPD content. The increased engagement is designed to promote belief on growing ability with increased effort. The combined effect of Pertinency and Immersivity will allow participants to experience their increased ability in their day-to-day tasks and will thus result in increased self-efficacy. Constructive alignment was used to align the course objectives with the instructional strategies and assessment strategies. In the next section we will detail the process of MOOC design to achieve learner perseverance.

3. ET601Tx and Design for promoting Learner Perseverance

3.1 ET601Tx – The MOOC

The MOOC "Educational Technology for Engineering Teachers" (ET601Tx) is a 9-week TPD MOOC offered through IITBombayX (IITBombayX, 2016) platform (xMOOC platform), from 7-January to 7-March, 2016. The course goal was to train engineering faculty in learner-centered pedagogy and constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) that are found to enable effective technology integration (Howland, Jonassen & Marra, 2012) in classroom. Though the course primarily targeted the engineering college instructors, it was kept open for learners interested in effective classroom technology integration practices. The demography of the learners is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demography of ET601Tx participants

Gender	Male = 3459	Female = 1893	Not provided = 2				
Educational Qualification	School = 57	Bachelors = 406	Masters = 4120	Doctorate = 736	Others = 15	No Schooling = 18	NP = 2
Age	Under 18 = 0	18 to 25 = 505	25 to 40 = 3814	40 to 50 = 739	50 – 60 = 180	Above 60 = 24	NP = 2

The course had an initial enrolment of 3456 participants that increased to 5513 across the total duration. There were a total of 159 unenrolments in the course during the same time period. A brief description of the course is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Description of ET601Tx MOOC

Sl. No	Features of Course	Description
1	Course Goals	Train Engineering College instructors in constructive alignment practices for effective integration of technology in their classrooms.
2	Course Duration	07-January, 2016 to 07-March-2016 (8 weeks)
3	Course Format & Content	Weekly Release of contents with due dates on 2 nd , 4 th and 8 th week. The contents include – Learning Objectives, Active Learning Strategies (Think-Pair-Share, Peer Instruction), Assessment Strategies, Integration of Visualizations, Digital Blooms Taxonomy and Lesson Planning. 4 th and 7 th week were catch-up weeks, with only practice activities and discussions
4	Course Components (in each week)	Learning Dialogue (LeD) Videos for content coverage, Learning by Doing (LbD) Activities for concept reinforcement, Learning eXTension Resources (LxT) for extending learning, Resource Creation Assignments (RCA) for practice (except 1 st , 4 th and 7 th week)
5	Estimated Weekly Effort	5-7 hours
6	Certificate Policy	Pass percentage – 50% overall Only Honour Code Certificates
7	Evaluation Criteria	Automated Assessment – Best 19 out of 22 Quizzes, that are further divided into Knowledge Quiz – Best 9 out of 11 Nos, having 60% weightage Reflection Quiz – 6 Nos, having 10% weightage Resource Creation Quiz – Best 4 out of 5 Nos, having 30% weightage

To ensure constructive alignment and promote learner perseverance, each of the course components is linked to an assessment strategy that will be counted towards the final evaluation (as seen from row 7 of Table 1).

3.2 Design Principles considered for Learner Perseverance in ET601Tx

The design principles considered for ET601Tx MOOC helps the course designers to take decisions related to:

- Course Content of the MOOC
- Features offered by MOOC platform (IITBombayX) getting mapped to the above course content
- Pedagogic strategies aligned with both features of platform and the course content.

Thus there were 3 broad design principles that were utilized for the design of ET601Tx course – Pertinency, Immersivity and Constructive Alignment.

3.2.1 Pertinency in ET601Tx

Pertinency of teacher training content is defined as the training participant's perception of degree to which the given content is applicable for his/her teaching immediately after the training (Warriem, Murthy & Iyer, 2015). We ensured pertinency of the MOOC content by:

- Ensuring that the course duration largely coincided with the regular academic semester of participating teachers, thereby allowing them to perform lesson design for their own course.

- Providing extensive examples from participants' own domain while discussing contents of the course. For e.g. providing examples of well-constructed Learning objectives from multiple domains while discussing the topic of Learning Objectives.
- By asking participants to work on assignments on a topic that they plan to teach in the current semester.
- Linking discussion forum activities with their actual practice. For e.g. encouraging them to practice the Think-Pair-Share in the class and share their experiences.

3.2.2 Immersivity in ET601Tx

Immersivity is a feature of the training environment that enables participants to undertake meaningful activities as a learner before practicing it as a teacher (Warriem, Murthy & Iyer, 2015). We introduced Immersivity in the MOOC environment by:

- Providing points of reflection (pause points) within Learning Dialogue videos
- Providing detailed feedback in the practice exercises
- Using learner-centered strategies with available visualizations prior to explaining how visualizations can be made effective with these strategies.

3.3 Constructive Alignment in ET601Tx

Constructive Alignment ensures that the instructional practices and assessments are aligned to the intended student learning outcomes of the course (Biggs, 1996). We ensured that the instructional strategies used (LeD Videos, LbD activities, Practice focused Discussion Forums) and assessment strategies were aligned to the learning objectives designed at the start of the workshop.

3.4 Pedagogical Design Modifications

3.4.1 Learning Dialogue Videos and Learning by Doing Activities

Each week will contain a set of Learning Dialogue (LeD) videos to provide information to the participants about the concepts being discussed in the respective week. The LeD videos have 'pause points' (Reflection Spot) within it that required participants to pause the video and think about a question posed at that moment (See fig below). The participants can write the answer in their own notebooks/text document, but they are expected to proceed only after doing this reflection.

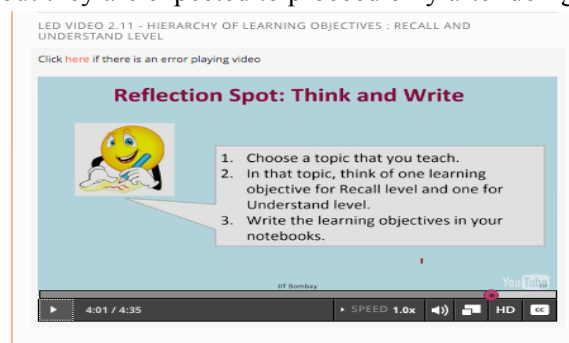


Figure 1. Reflection Spot in an LeD Video

Every LeD video is always followed by at least one 'Learning by Doing' (LbD) activity. These are short conceptual practice questions with detailed feedback (see fig 2). They are aimed at reinforcing the concepts that are discussed within the LeD videos and the detailed feedback acts as a proxy for instructor-learner interaction within the MOOC. Typically an LbD question might target

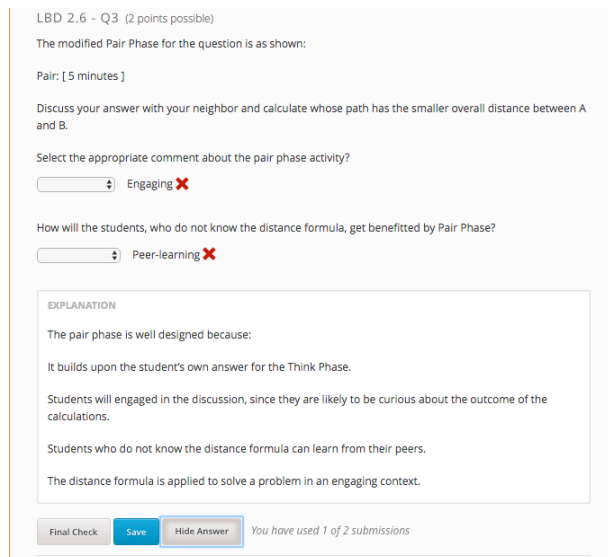


Figure 2. Learning by Doing activity (with detailed feedback)

lower order cognitive levels, however if required these can be designed for assessing higher order cognitive levels.

3.4.2 Practice focused Discussion Forums and Reflection Quiz

Each week of the course will contain at least one discussion forum that is focused and guided towards the practice of the concept/skill being discussed in that week. To participate in these discussion forums, the participants have to first perform an activity connected to the core concept being discussed in that week. They are then encouraged to share their experiences with the community through this discussion forum. For e.g. in Week 2, the Active Learning Strategy of Think-Pair-Share is being detailed. The Practice focused discussion forum in Week 2 now requires participants to do one TPS activity in their class and share their experiences of design and implementation with the community.

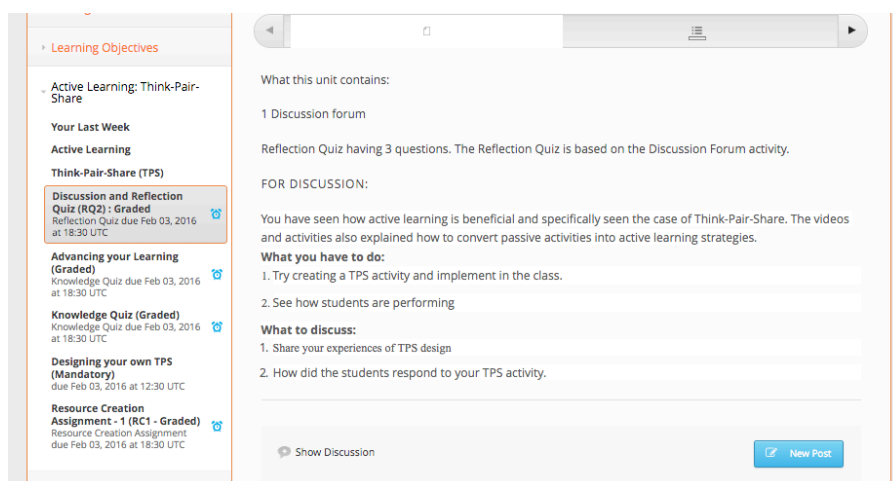


Figure 3. Practice focused discussion Forum

These discussion forums are followed by graded reflection quizzes that are based on the discussion forum. The grades associated with these reflection quizzes are not very high, but sufficient enough for a participant to persevere in the discussion forum (10%).

4. Evaluation of ET601Tx MOOC

The evaluation of ET601Tx MOOC will validate the design decisions that are adopted for increasing learner perseverance. At the broad level the research question that will be interesting to explore is:-

“How effective was ET601Tx in creating Learner Perseverance?” This can be further broken down into two sub research questions:

RQ1: How effective was ET601Tx in the existing MOOC metrics of completion rate, learner retention and engagement?

RQ2: What is the learner perception about usefulness and relevance of the activities in ET601Tx?

RQ3: What was the learner perception of Perseverance in ET601Tx?

Table 3 below details the data analysis procedure to answer the above RQs.

Table 3: Instruments and Data Analysis for Research Questions

Research Question	Data Source	Instrument Used	Analysis Technique
RQ1	Course User Activity Logs in database User grading data from database	This Data is provided by the MIS system associated with the platform.	Frequency analysis of activity logs and course grades.
RQ2	Responses to course end survey	Questionnaire Survey (5-point Likert Scale)	Frequency analysis of responses related to usefulness
RQ3		Questionnaire Survey (10 point scale)	Frequency analysis of Ranking

Example survey question related to usefulness is – “I found the LeD Videos useful” with the options being Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The survey also required the participants to rank the 7 different activities in the course based on their perceived usefulness. The survey also asked participants to provide a 10-point rating for their own perseverance in the course with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. The survey received 688 responses.

5. Results

- *67.4% Active Participants and 36.58% completion rates*

The course had a total enrolment of 5264 student enrolments along its duration and 159 unenrolments. Of this only six unenrolments happened after the start of the course. Hence for all calculations we take the number of enrolled students to be 5111. Of these only 3447 students (67.44%) accessed the course at least once and hence can be considered as active learners. The completion rates are calculated both on the basis of overall enrolment and active enrolments. It is seen that 1261 students were certified in the course making the completion rate to be 24.67% of overall enrolment and 36.58% of active enrolments.

- *5023 Threads started and 9861 comments by participants across 8 week*

The discussion forums were highly active throughout the course with at least one ‘Practice focused discussion’ being created every week. There were a total of 32 discussion forums created across the 8 weeks of the course. It was seen that 1201 participants (34.8% of active enrolments) were active in the discussion forum contributing 5023 Threads and 9861 comments. This would mean that on an average there were 4 Threads and 8 discussion comments per active participant in the discussion and 465 posts per forum. Comparing to some of the existing courses it is seen that this number is a good representation of an active discussion forum. ‘ICT in Primary Education MOOC’, which was a 6 week course, reports an average of 327 posts for the discussion forums (Laurillard, 2014).

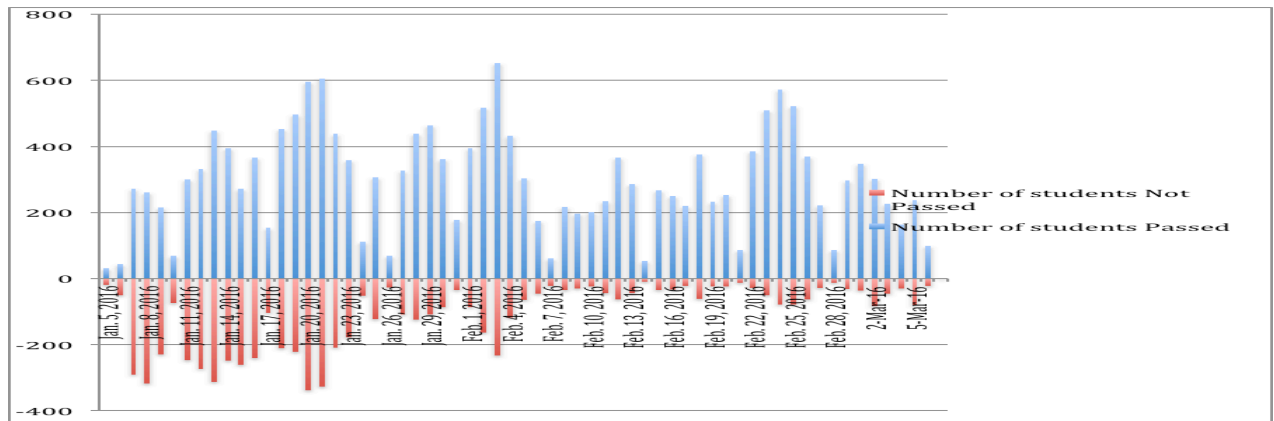


Figure 4. Daily user participation in ET601Tx

- *An average of 399 participants accessed the course daily*

While looking across the daily access log we see a response as shown in figure 4. Here the blue upward bars indicate the participants who were successful in getting a certificate and the red downward bars indicate those who didn't. It is seen that, on an average 292 certified participants accessed the course, while only 106 non-certified participants logged into the course daily. However the averages of the non-certified participants drop sharply around mid-point of the course (4-weeks).

- *High relevance and usefulness for LeD Videos, LbD Activities and Discussion Forums*

On analyzing the responses to the end of course survey, it is seen that more than 80% of the respondents find the LeD Videos, LbD activities and Discussion forums relevant for their practice and useful (see Table 3).

Table 3: Relevance and Usefulness of LeD Videos, LbD activities and Discussion Forum

N=688	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Relevance of LeD	11	13	54	254	359
Usefulness of LeD	10	8	45	247	381
Usefulness of LbD	8	8	41	234	400
Relevance of Discussion Forum	7	28	100	266	290
Usefulness of Discussion Forum	4	31	111	258	287

Also it is seen (figure 5) that the mean perseverance perceived by the participants is 7.92 and the median was 8.

On a scale of 1-10, how do you rate your "Perseverance" within ET601Tx

(691 responses)

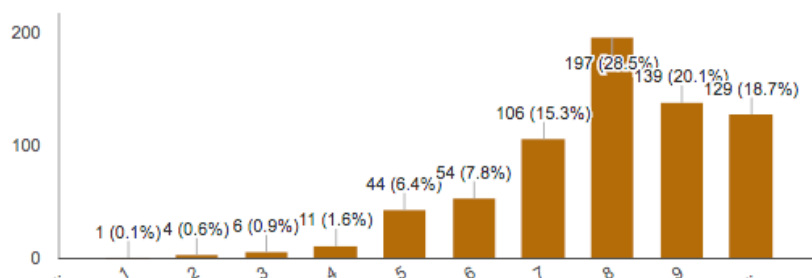


Figure 5. Participants perception of Perseverance in ET601Tx

6. Discussion and Conclusion

To answer RQ1, we need to look at first 3 results reported in the previous section. From the results it is seen that the completion rates (36.58%) reported in ET601Tx is high compared to the other TPD MOOCs. While 'ICT in primary education MOOC' reported 11% completion (Laurillard, 2016), 'Australian F-10 PD MOOC' reported 7% completion rates. The engagement rates of ET601Tx discussion forums (34.8% active and 465 posts per forum) are comparable with 'ICT in Primary Education MOOCs' rates of 39% and 327 posts/forum. The results also show that there is an average daily activity of 292 certified and 106 non-certified users in the course. Though the activity of non-certified users drastically reduces after 4 week, this is a good number. Based on all these we can conclude that ET601Tx was highly effective in terms of standard MOOC metrics of completion, engagement and retention.

More than 80% of the end of course survey respondents indicated high agreement to the usefulness and relevance of the LeD Videos, LbD activities and Discussion Forums. While 88.8% found the LeD Videos to be relevant, 80.5% found the discussion forums relevant for their practice. These figures are comparable with usefulness and relevance found in an earlier blended model of TPD (Warriem, Murthy, & Iyer, 2015) within the Indian context. Thus to answer RQ2, we can conclude that the activities in ET601Tx were highly useful and relevant for the participants. To answer RQ3, we look at the final result that indicates an average perseverance rating of 7.92 (out of 10). This helps us conclude that participants in ET601Tx had a high perception of perseverance.

The flexibility offered by the xMOOC platform coupled with our design features had allowed participants to blend both learning and practice throughout the duration of course. Results of high perception of relevance and usefulness of the designed activities (LeD Videos, LbD activities and Discussion Forum) are indicative of the Pertinency of the course content (Warriem, Murthy & Iyer, 2015). The higher engagement of participants (Average daily users = 398, Average posts per forum = 465) is a combined effect of Immersivity in the learning environment and Pertinency of course content. Since the course was coinciding with the regular academic semester of many of the participants, they were able to implement their learning from TPD in their own classrooms and were using the discussion forums to share their experiences with their peers. Such high engagements in discussion forums can be attributed to sense of belonging to the community (Cohen & Garcia, 2008) and belief of growing ability (Curry et. al., 2006) that the participants felt during ET601Tx. Both these are essential to ensure perseverance (Farthington et. al., 2012) that further leads to course completion.

A major limitation of this study is that we have not performed a detailed analysis of forum posts and response to understand the quality of posts and social networks that gets generated in such a discussion forum. This is crucial in developing reflection on practice and a collaborative community that are essential characteristics of a TPD (Desmione, 2009; Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006).

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