App Review: Coursera (Mobile vs Desktop)

INTRODUCTION

In this review, I will be reviewing the iOS mobile application for **Coursera**, with reference to its desktop website.
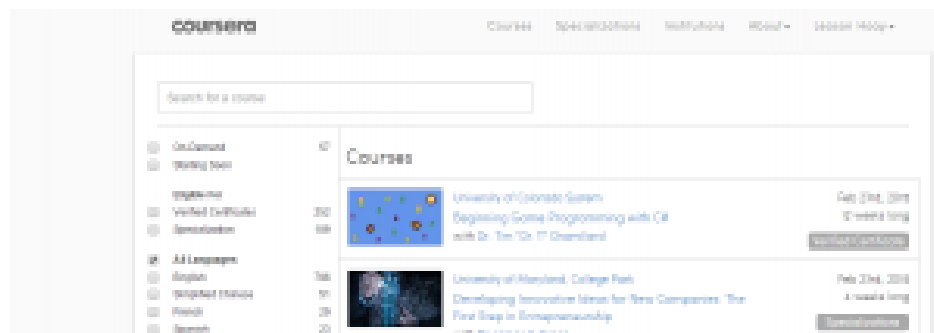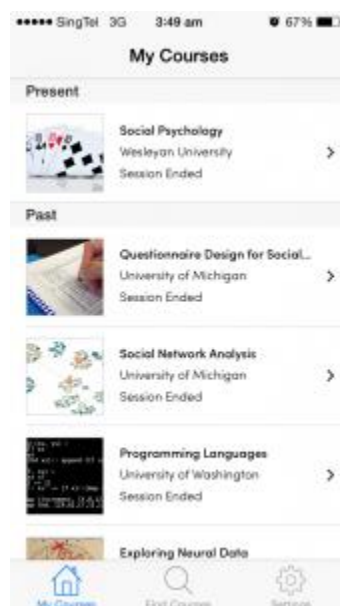

Figure 1: Website Course Page

Figure 2: Mobile App

Coursera is a widely successful MOOC (massive open online course) platform that collaborates with accredited universities around the world – including NUS – to offer e-learning courses spanning a wide range of university level disciplines. Some of these courses offer verified accreditation as long as a small fee is paid. The courses are delivered in an efficient e-learning format that makes use of the affordances

of the Coursera framework: A weekly video lecture structure along with multiple choice and open ended testing tools, and even the ability to integrate external plugins for courses that require a unique learning interface (e.g. interactive programming). However, are the good features of the site seamlessly ported onto the mobile application? Not all of them.

Why is an app required for Coursera?

Although modern smartphones can easily access and streamline most websites, mobile browsers are often too generic and suffer from many compatibility problems. Services ranging from Pinterest to Facebook have developed apps to take advantage of the ability to design a unique, smooth interface that highlights the services' most important functions to the user. Coursera is no exception, as seen in the screenshot above – the mobile app sends you directly to a clear list of your courses after you log in.

Also, incorporating the mobile element makes e-learning all the more efficient and ubiquitous. Listen to be individuals who have various other commitments or employments and have scarce time to set aside for studying. Gone are the long dreary commutes – finish a lecture on the way home from work!

Why would people need it? Why are people compelled to use/not use it?
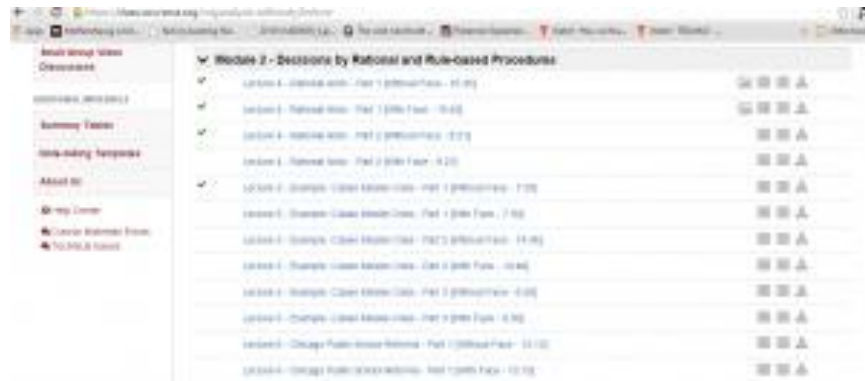
To elaborate on previous points, the website is a great platform, but may not be compatible or may be clunky to operate on mobile browsers. Some of the functions more difficult to use on the mobile browser are navigating to a specific course and watching lecture videos, for example. Hence, the app is needed to streamline these functions.

Two categories of individuals who would be compelled to use this app are firstly those who seek self-improvement but are constrained by other commitments as mentioned above, and secondly passionate autodidacts who seek learning at every turn and wish to maximize their study time. The app compels use through its affordance of essential course functions – watching lectures, attempting quizzes, reading notes. However, as I will explore in the next section, not all of these functions are satisfactorily ported into the mobile app, and some core functions such as progress tracking seem to be missing.

INTERACTION

How do I feel when using the app, and does it react as I expect?

It is pleasing to use on first touch as the main page intuitively guides you to and sorts your courses. Upon tapping a specific course you are then brought to a list which links you to material based on the different units of the course curriculum. However, in the course page on the desktop website, a clear indicator (green ticks) can be seen as you complete quizzes and lectures, helping you track your progress. This indication, which I feel is quite essential, is not clear in the mobile application. If you want to go back to a course that you had paused for some time, it may be difficult for you to find out where you left off. Also, the lectures you complete in the mobile application sometimes do not sync their completed status to the online website. One improvement that can be made would definitely be to make progress tracking easier by streamlining the sync between the app and the responsive site, and also making progress indicators clearer (perhaps by using the same green ticks that the site uses).

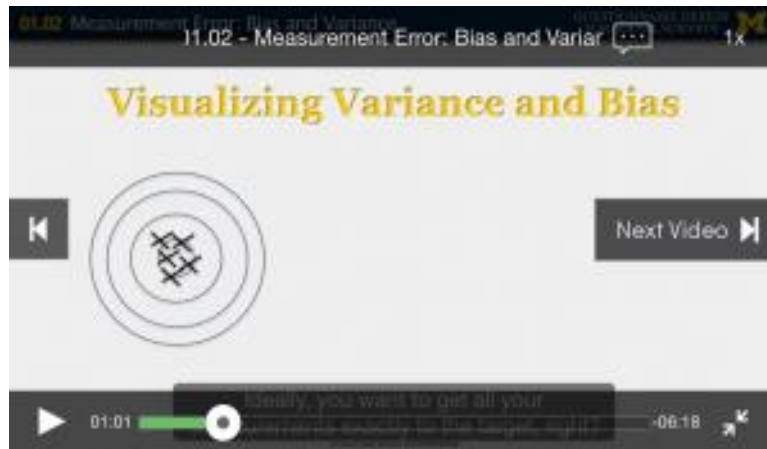**Figure 3: Green ticks to indicate completion on the responsive site**

Also, viewing my past records and achievements seem to be a feature that is unavailable on the app. While I can easily access my profile, certificates, completion records and grades on the responsive site, this part of the MOOC platform seems to be completely missing from the app – which does not have any sort of link to a profile page whatsoever. I feel that this feature is useful sometimes, such as when I wish to review my achievements or to share them with my peers, educators or future employers on the go, and should definitely be included as part of the app.

INTERFACE

Does it follow design patterns?

The Coursera mobile app follows a list design pattern for its tabs, similar to other MOOC apps out there such as Udemy. However, it opts for a more minimalist design, mostly themed in white and gray, which accentuates its functionality but could discredit it in terms of aesthetic appeal.

When watching lecture videos on the mobile app, the interface is typical of video streaming applications such as Crunchyroll or Youtube, where a small video is played alongside the menu screen if the phone is held vertically, and changes to full screen if held horizontally. This is intuitive and great. Also, the video streaming on the mobile app allows for subtitles, speed control and linking to the next video in the series. All these are useful, but suffer from some problems in execution. Video streaming is not the smoothest, and the subtitle function sometimes causes issues when activated – such as some subtitle languages not displaying properly, or even causing the video to completely freeze and require an app restart. Sometimes the video will alternate uncontrollably between different quality levels – which brings me to a suggestion. If possible, the app should include a function to toggle between specific video qualities (360p, 720p, etcetera), allowing the user to adjust for differing connectivity speeds.

Figure 4: A video lecture on the mobile app

Is the interface effective in communicating its functions?

Touch feedback is clear – any item on the list that I touch turns grey as I touch it before transporting me to the relevant screen. Also, the 3 tabs on the navigation bar are clearly labelled with text and intuitive icons, making it extremely simple to traverse the app's terrain. Referring once again to Figure 2, the courses themselves are also clearly labelled, with an textual indication of whether or not the session is ended or is still ongoing, as well as categorizing courses into those which have ended or have been completed and those still in progression in the present (Past and Present).

TO CONCLUDE

In conclusion, while the Coursera app is overall an easy to use and useful port of the responsive site, it is lacking in its delivery on some key areas such as progression tracking, record viewing and lecture streaming. The app in its current form can benefit the most from tweaks and improvements in functionality as well as the padding of more functions onto its rather sparse constellation of features.