



From the ALT-Members Forum

From: Diana Laurillard <D.Laurillard at IOE.AC.UK> 5:28 AM 19 Sep 2012
Re: **[ALT-MEMBERS] MOOCs**
To: A closed List for Members of the Association for Learning Technology

This is a useful critique from a long-suffering student <http://managinglearningtechnology.blogspot.fr/2012/09/how-to-build-moocs-that-fail.html>. [See *below*] It's important to be aware of how bad they can be - just as any form of teaching can be.

Are they the new VLE? No. They are free, so there is no business model for their improvement, or sustainability.

In what seems to be their most common format that I've come across so far they are presentational material of some kind with a discussion forum for students. That's the old technology equivalent of a textbook in a public library. There is no certification of achievement by the student, only of attendance, at best. So in that format it is not 'education', which is a useful term whose meaning should not be stretched too far, I feel.

MOOCs can be 'educational' in the way that TV programmes can be, and when we try them out, as I think we certainly should, we should be trying to extend the format to be more supportive of the learner, while respecting the 'Massive' aspect. But a genuine MOOC could never provide the kind of personal feedback to the learner that is the essence of education (along with useful certification of what they have learned). That is the labour-intensive variable cost of education that requires the teaching staff to be massive too. Automated intelligent personalised feedback to learners on the basis of their actions is one of the grand challenges that learning technologies have not yet stepped up to, sadly. I do believe there is potential for that. Then MOOCs could get closer to being a form of education.

Diana

Managing Learning Technology

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2012

How To Build MOOC's that Fail

ABOUT ME



e Edward O'Neill

Scholar, technologist,
photographer, runner,
writer--not in that order.

Having started a half dozen MOOC's in the recent months, I have found most of them tend to share a common trait. *Many MOOC's currently represent a sort of parody of higher education's worst practices, its most spectacular delusions about itself.*

And thus they tend to fail--some rather spectacularly.

(In the interest of protecting the guilty, I won't name specific courses. I have no interest in insulting people who are surely earnest and well-meaning in life--they just happen to be clueless about putting a course online, let alone a MOOC.)

For the sake of neatness, I'll organize my thoughts here on four's.

For the same of keeping the reader interested, I'll frame everything ironically: trying to articulate the unspoken assumptions which make so many MOOC's so very dreadful.

I'll start with the **Four Delusions of Higher Education**. These underwrite the **Four Rules for MOOC Failure**.

1. **Sink or Swim.** This is simple. *Provide no guidance.* Don't tell students where things are. Make the goal of the course as mysterious as possible. Give the students "freedom"--like plunking a traveler down in the middle of a strange city.
2. **The Heliotropic Professor.** The professor is the center of the learning universe. *Everything revolves around the professor.* The professor is the sun, and the students are tiny tiny planets--really cosmic dusk, basking in the glow of the professor's expertise.

Nothing happens without the professor's instigation. The professor must frame everything, explain everything. Students must do 'exploratory learning'--so they can then find out what the professor thinks, which of course is always right, since assumptions and standards can never be explained. (That would undermine the professor's mysterious sole access to True Knowledge.)

3. **Go Figure It Out.** No matter what is said, no matter what is asked for, no matter how unclear or obscure, *ultimately the student will just have to Go Figure It Out.* After all: they're learning, aren't they? We can't make it too easy for them--like explaining *what* they should be learning. Since in the end, we are all just lonely particles colliding against

each other randomly, why not just make the student responsible? Surely they will thank us later.

4. **The Piehole Illusion.** Anything that comes out of the professor's piehole can be learned. The professor can say " $2 + 2 = 4$ " and that will be learned--without the student needing to know if she is learning a fact, a rule, a concept, an allegory, etc. The student may have to listen again and again, and that is all to the good, because what the professor says is so very rewarding.

If you accept all four of these precepts, it will be very easy to make a MOOC that fails utterly.

Fails to help a thoughtful person learn anything--because nothing is specified in the way of learning: nothing about what is to be learned, to what standard, or how.

But if you need to operationalize this knowledge--and here I go further than almost any MOOC instructor does--you may follow four simple rules.

1. **Conceptualize your course as content.** Just imagine all the things you need to tell someone. Then record yourself saying them. That should be enough. If you then add some articles people can read, surely no more is necessary. You will then add a commentary 'explaining' everything--so students understand fully that the professor's view is always the right one.

A course, after all, is just a pile of facts & ideas. The student will just have to go figure out what it all means, how to fit it all together, and above all, how to learn it. (Helping the student learn can't possibly be the instructor's job! The instructor deigns to share his wisdom, and his job ends there. Teaching is like grace: you don't ask why.)

2. **Don't plan any learning activities.** Since your course is just content, it can't possibly matter what the student does to learn. Learning is the student's job. So just give them a sandbox and say--go learn there. Don't tell them what to do, what they'll need to practice, nor how anything need be done. Throw up a discussion board and say "talk amongst yourselves!" Done!
3. **Don't consider pre-requisite knowledge.** There's no point in worrying if students are ready or not. It's all sink-or-swim, so just throw them in. No pre-tests. No lists of things they might need to know or be able to do. No expectations.

Assume everyone taking your course, no matter where she lives on the planet, is exactly like your current undergrads who pay tens of thousands of dollars for your institutions courses. Assume that nothing about the learner makes any difference.

In short: univeralize utterly your tiny corner of bourgeois North America. Whatever you do: don't reflect on social, national or cultural difference, nor on how well- or ill-prepared your learners might be.

- **Don't hire any instructional designers.** No good can come from carefully selecting and arranging carefully designed tasks in a sequence so that the learner is prepared to

succeed. (Remember, it's better for the learner to fail--since this proves how terribly complex the subject matter is.) In the 21st century *engineers* will solve all our problems--you know, like psychoanalysts did in the first half of the 20th century, and nuclear engineers did in the second half of the 20th century. *Humanity*, you see is not involved. *The mind* is just a bunch of wetware: so surely *engineers* know and can do everything that's needed.

Clearly the subtext here is: an effective learning experience, especially one mediated by time, distance and computer technology, really needs to be *designed*.

If you throw a bunch of content out and say "learn this," the learners will get out exactly as much effort as you put in--which is next to none.

So what you have in front of you now is a really **a plea for instructional design**. And I know that has issues.

When professionals get together, the thing they talk about is: how everyone needs them so terribly badly. Dentists wish everyone flossed. Doctors warn about germs. I once had a landlord who was a plumber: he insisted a drain should be cleared with *baking soda*--lest you harm the terribly delicate **lead** pipes.

Such is the definition of a "profession." It's a specialized kind of knowledge. And it has to value itself and therefore to devalue anyone who doesn't have its magical knowledge.

But if you really want to make a MOOC that makes a difference, if you actually want to share knowledge for others to learn it, not just to show how classy your institution is that it can give away courses (really meaning: lectures), **just do the opposite of what most MOOC's do**.

1. *Conceptualize your course as things people will be able to do afterwards--with standards attached*. A graded series of tasks and activities is even better. But a final demonstration, with lots of small steps leading up to it will suffice.
2. *Plan activities which will support learning*--which let the learner practice and get feedback. Be aware that not everyone will do these activities. Consider making them inherently interesting. Begin with tasks that can be done without specialized knowledge. Maybe even use tasks that have real-world implications--which people find intriguing. And be aware that the students can't possibly mentor each other, since their expertise has never been assessed.
3. *Help the learners discover if they are prepared to take the course*. You might use a pre-test or a checklist. If this material even links to preparatory activities, you can kill two birds with one stone.
4. *Consider hiring actual instructional designers*: not engineers, not programmers, not someone with a few education courses. Really take seriously that you are designing something. Plan. Make a proof-of-concept. Start small. Scale up. Do all the things that are considered "design thinking"--even if you are not a designer of any sort.

In short, consider that **plunking things on a web site is not design--any more than throwing furniture around a room is interior decorating.**

Or do what everyone else is doing: record a few lectures, throw up a discussion board, and break your arm patting yourself on the back.

--Edward R. O'Neill

Posted by Edward O'Neill at 9:16 AM



From the ALT-Members Forum

From: Dominik Lukes <DLukes@DYSLEXIAACTION.ORG.UK> 9/20/2012 10:15 AM

Subject: **Re: [ALT-MEMBERS] MOOCs**

To: A Closed list for members of the Association for Learning Technology

Hi Diana,

I think the post you link to as well as your comments give a rather skewed view of the MOOC universe.

I addressed some of those criticisms in <http://researchcity.net/2012/09/15/the-great-mooc-slander-realities-and-narratives-of-education-and-learning> and <http://researchcity.net/2012/07/29/debating-the-mooc-backlash-notes-from-a-primitive-screwhead> [See both below].

My main point was that the potential of MOOCs is in opening access to content and eventually certification. My other point was that while there are many pedagogic shortcomings, they are no more significant than those of mainstream higher education. In that I would agree with the post characterising MOOCs as representing “higher education's worst practices, its most spectacular delusions about itself”. But that is not true of all MOOCs and not of all MOOCs in the same way or to the same degree. I addressed that in this post on MOOC definitions: <http://researchcity.net/2012/08/14/what-is-and-what-is-not-a-mooc-a-picture-of-family-resemblance-working-undefinition-moocmooc/>.

I disagree that there is no business model from which they could be made sustainable with continuous improvement. At best, I'd say we don't know whether they will become sustainable and improve. There are also different models for assessment. To just reduce them to educational TV programmes is to ignore the different ways in which support and interaction are afforded by the online space.

Having said all that, I think the MOOC we're offering, does address most of the concerns laid out in that post. I'd welcome any feedback on that: <http://load2learn.org.uk/training/onlinecourse>.

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The Great MOOC Slander? Realities and Narratives of Education and Learning [UPDATED]

September 15, 2012

Note on the title: I was pretty miffed when I started writing this post. And the title was the first thing that came to my mind. But as I was writing, much of the initial anger dissipated but I still like the title. So I added a questionmark to the main title and left it as it was. The subtitle is really what the post is about.

Why do so many progressive educators trash talk MOOCs?

I just don't get it. What do all of these educational progressives have against MOOCs? They all critique conventional education and try to innovate all the time. But when it comes to MOOCs, they behave as if the status quo was the best thing in the world.

The best explanation I can think of is the clash of ideology with personal privilege. I have noticed this in many areas where otherwise progressive people start saying “enough is enough” once the change they are espousing impinges on their privileges and requires some personal inconvenience. Black empowerment is great, but black power is going too far. Women rights are fine, but having to think about whether I can open the door for a woman or not is going too far. Protecting religious freedoms is fine, but not allowing anyone to insult anyone else's religion is going too far.

The MOOC backlash seems to me to follow the same scenario: Reforming instruction is fine, but removing the need for an instructor altogether is going too far. Reforming assessment is fine but removing rigor is going too far. Open collaboration is fine, but copying whole paragraphs is going too far. Opening up education to more people is fine, but having 100,000 people in a class is going too far. Drop out of 10-30% is fine and expected but having only 10% of students finish a free no-commitment course is going too far.

And in many of these scenarios, there are cases where some reform is going “too far” or is not “faithful to the original intentions”. But I would ask any of these “too far” critics to consider how that “too far” affects them personally. This personal impact could be in future job prospects, change of practice, change of how things look, change of how we talk about things. And all of these will cause some personal discomfort if only in the form of cognitive dissonance. And then consider how their criticism is colored by the personal impact. Maybe it isn't, or maybe it doesn't matter. But I would recommend spending a few minutes on this.

This post came to me while I was listening to the great fortnightly podcast Digital Campus with Digital Humanities luminaries Amanda French, Dan Cohen, Mills Kelly, Tom Scheinfeldt and

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guests Audrey Waters and Bryan Alexander. <http://digitalcampus.tv/2012/09/10/episode-90-back-to-school-special/>

I have long puzzled over why this podcast has been snide and largely inaccurate about MOOCs. I would have expected these people to embrace MOOCs and work as hard as possible to make them better, experiment with the format, open them up to new subjects and new audiences. Sure, it's annoying when something you support becomes a fad but the solution of "nobody goes there any more because it's too crowded" just doesn't seem to be the right one.

Show me the learning and the "education = learning" illusion

After some collective MOOC bashing (about which more below) Mills Kelly struck a conciliatory note when he advocated the motto "show me the learning" in the form of let's look at the participants a year from now. And then we can compare the results with traditional education. I'm all for that. But I think we can pretty confidently predict what the results of both will be. Awful. And make it 5 years later, too. What have the participants learned. On average: nothing. Many university lecturers have had that encounter with a star student years later in which they discover that all the student has retained is vague impressions and inaccurate snippets of lore. Unless they stayed in the field and continued their engagement with it, they won't have any meaningful foundation upon which to build. Some skills, some attitudes and some info, to be sure, but nowhere enough to pass the exam. In fact, I am convinced many professors could not pass some exams in their field set by their peers.

So I say let's do that. Let's do mass testing of student learning 1 year, 5 years and 10 years later and expose the great swindle that is higher education. Those students who took the MOOCs to learn actual skills like programming in Python will do great if they continued programming in Python or some other language and those who just took it out of vague interest or to fulfill some requirement will do really badly. Those students who took literature or history classes (MOOC or otherwise) and continued in that field will do great, those who just did them as part of some requirement will do badly. Will do the students who took the same classes in the traditional format do better? I doubt it. It will vary across classes and subjects but any difference you might see a year later will be negligible 5 years on and erased 10 years later. Nothing is nothing.

But of course, there's a fundamental flaw in this approach. It assumes that we can meaningfully measure learning across cohorts and that cohort results tell a good story about the individuals and vice versa. Academics are well aware of this flaw which is why they engage in the narratives of "learning to think", "acquiring study skills", "getting foundations for further learning" or even the odious "becoming a rounded individual" which mostly means "becoming like me and mine". But none of these can be measured in a consistent way (though I have proposed a Turing test of education) so we have to rely on anecdotes and vague impressions that are irretrievably polluted by the prevailing narratives.

But the truth is the actual learning is largely irrelevant. Higher education has never been primarily about learning actual things or actual skills. It has always been (and I mean all the way to the first universities) about peer acceptance for the graduates and meeting the requirements of the institution for the students. That's not to say that a lot of people don't learn lots of useful things while attending university. But if that was enough lawyers wouldn't need the bar, doctors

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From researchcity.net/2012/09/15/the-great-mooc-slander-realities-and-narratives-of-education-and-learning/

wouldn't need their residency and university teachers would not have to learn everything all over again when they start teaching a new subject.

Mills continued his conciliance by saying that he is skeptical about a lot of university instruction. But I think that is the wrong approach to take. University instruction has always been just abominable. The vast majority of classes most university students have attended throughout history were taught by drones more or less competent in their subject sometimes reading out of a textbook sometimes cracking a joke. If that really mattered how would have we ever gotten to where we are now? Massive innovation and erudition as far as the eye can see. Even those we disagree with (like the neocons and creationists for me) cannot really be accused of a lack of intelligence or erudition. We talk about the need for better historical education but some of the worst political decisions have been taken by people who studied history meticulously (and it's no good saying "if they had only read that one paper I wrote on that issue"). We talk about the need for better science education but some of the best innovations have come out of school drop outs who flunked the foundational STEM subjects. Why on earth would we think tinkering around with instruction would make a dent in any of that?

Access over instructional purity: The case for MOOCs

So why do I care about MOOCs? Well, first, even though I think instructional reform is of marginal importance in the overall scheme of things, I still prefer an engaging lecturer over a boring one, and a motivating activity over a dull exercise. Both as a teacher and a student. And it's absolutely true that in individual cases, there are ways to help people learn particular things more easily (they just don't make as much of a difference in aggregate as we pretend). And MOOCs offer a lot of opportunities for instructional innovation and even where they are traditional like presenting videos, they are likely to present the better of the traditional instructional approaches out there.

But most importantly MOOCs expand access to knowledge and hopefully with time also to certification. They expand it socially as well as globally. They still need to do a better job in expanding the social networks that are such an important part of attending university but they do a good enough job in some formats and are looking to expand this some more.

Why do good researchers ignore good research practice when talking about policy affecting their own practice?

For some reasons, there is a lot of bad information about MOOCs out there. People who are taking them to write about them generally do it with agendas a mile long and I have yet to see a write up that wasn't colored by the writer's own professional wishes. I am not aware of any non-anecdotal research on MOOCs that would investigate them by talking to students and teachers following the best ethnographic research practices.

[UPDATE: The day after, I posted this, I was watching this video on teaching by the Harvard physicist Eric Mazur who said [about 18 minutes in to the video]: "It's very important to have data in education. I often go to faculty meetings where my colleagues and I talk about teaching and there are quite a Nobel laureates around me. And it is always surprising to me how whenever the discussion shifts from teaching to education, people, even the most reputable scientists,

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completely abandon the scientific method. All of a sudden the discussion is about anecdotes: ‘My students learn better whenever...’, or ‘My students like it when I do this...’, as if liking equates learning. Data are important.” Now, I think I would strongly disagree with Mazur on the kind of data that is important or the scope of what constitutes the scientific method, but we would have no quarrel in that whatever underpins policy debates about education is not it.]

Whose controversy?

The podcast that got me so riled up started with saying that there were a lot of MOOCs over the summer and a lot of controversy around them. And perhaps if we look at the blogs about them, we could say that a lot of them were critical about the MOOCs. But the controversy was entirely generated by the same people who now refer to it as “the controversy”. A much more accurate statement would have been, “there were a lot of MOOCs over the summer and a lot of people like us were writing about how we all don’t like them”.

Plagiarism

Another reference that gave me pause was an offhand comment about the “rampant plagiarism” in MOOCs as if that was in any way a proven thing. There was some evidence of plagiarism but how “rampant” it actually is would require careful and conscientious research rather than skimming a few biased and alarmist blog posts. I was struck that nobody on the podcast (full of excellent humanities scholars) asked what is the evidence of the plagiarism? No one raised the question of the “discourse of plagiarism”, or even suggested that “plagiarism” is equally “rampant” in traditional schooling. But even the article referred to only talks about “dozens” of reported cases of plagiarism in a course taken by tens of thousands. Surely, this is pretty good going percentage wise.

Non-native speakers

Another question raised was that of “non-native speakers” in one of the literature MOOCs. But nobody mentioned the fact (which I believe was discussed on the same podcast about a year ago) that lots of students in traditional US universities are exposed to non-native speaker TAs and lecturers. Nobody suggested that new disciplines often constitute a foreign language to “native speakers”. The one suggestion was that people could write and grade papers in their “native” languages but nobody suggested that the “native” English speakers try to get over it and learn how to interpret the English of non-native speakers and give good feedback. Surely all the humanities scholars on that podcast must be aware of the difficulties surrounding language skill and language politics. Nobody mentioned that often “native” speakers write appallingly and “non-native” speakers are quite good writers (if plagued by difficulties with idioms). I once graded 10 papers from a small class with one Chinese students whose spoken English was very hard to follow but I couldn’t pick out her essay out of the lot. This was in part because her written English was not marked by accent and the pressure of conversation and in part because the some of the “natives” couldn’t string together a coherent written sentence in English. We should get used to the fact that written English has elements of a foreign language to it.

Peer assessment

There was also this vague notion that “peer assessment” was somehow suspect. Luckily there were some dissenting voices on this. But nobody mentioned how variable the level of feedback students receive from their instructors and TAs in traditional universities is. I’ve had to moderate a lot of feedback by experts and I have no illusions about its quality.

I took the first 2 weeks of the same Coursera course mentioned as beyond redemption on the podcast and the feedback I received was of entirely sufficient quality. There were a few duff ones but since every assignment received at least 5 pieces of feedback, in aggregate this would lead to improvement. Sure, there would be ways to improve this system, like tracking the quality of feedback, rating “helpfulness” or requesting moderation in cases of disagreement but those are just tweaks not fundamental issues.

“Training is not education”: The spaces in between

Towards the end of the MOOC discussion one of the hosts (I believe to was Tom Scheinfeldt) summarized his unease about the MOOCs as the difference between education and training. MOOCs, he claimed, lack the spaces in between. Even if the acquisition of knowledge is the same, the students don’t get to chat to the professor during the break afterwards and get random snippets of wisdom. It was curious that he chose as an example “being told that it is not OK to copy Wikipedia” which seems to me to be so trivial that a it could be delivered over Twitter and also something that should probably not be left to a random hallway conversation.

But the bigger problem is that this description of higher education (or any education) is completely illusory. There is masses of ethnographic research replicated pretty much every decade since the 1960s that has shown (beyond doubt, I would say) that nothing like that happens in the “spaces in between”. Most of the conversations students have with each other about their classes is about how to pass them, not what they about. And almost no students ever talk to the professor personally or in a way that can justify \$20,000 a year. (See References section below.)

But even if we were to accept that such serendipitous encounters are important and they are certainly narratively salient (see below), there would be numerous ways of replicating them in a MOOC. We would just have to ask the critics to promise not to take the few inevitable bad examples and present them as evidence of MOOCs being broken.

This wouldn’t work in a MOOC or what do we do when we teach?

There seems to be a small subgenre of MOOC criticism that has to do with their online nature. These critics are accepting that MOOCs are what they are but keep listing subjects (typically their own) of which they are convinced that they could not be taught via an online course, let alone a MOOC. I used to think the same about my subjects but every time I have I was shown the error of my ways. Now I think that essentially, if somebody can perform a surgery on themselves with online instructions, you can pretty much learn anything online. That doesn’t mean that personal contact is often not a useful shortcut or that a particular kind of feedback is not more effective in person. But is the lab, seminar, or the office hour the only alternative? I was thinking about some of these when I was thinking about the flipped school year.

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I was struck by the reference to “people teaching on a MOOC” by one of the podcast discussants. I have long been puzzled by the references to “teaching” by educators. It first came when I was attending a seminar over 20 years ago, the phone rang and the professor said, “sorry, can’t talk now, I’m teaching”. But it didn’t feel to me like he was teaching. He was sitting there and telling us things. Was that it? Was that what teaching was? What do educators mean when they look at their schedules and say “I’m teaching on Monday from 10 to 11”? And isn’t saying “I’m teaching on a MOOC” referring to something completely different? Perhaps MOOCs are so disturbing to many “teachERS” because they don’t get to “teach” any more, or at least not in any recognizable form?

I have noticed that a lot of people (including me) who are very skeptical about lectures as a medium of instructions actually like lecturing. The ritual of standing up in front of a group of people and telling them things is just exhilarating for some teachers. The challenge of formulating the content in a way that will lead people to learning, posing the right questions, coming up with the right analogy, seeing the “whites of their eyes”. But lectures are also a performance of teaching in the ethnographic sense. Both the lecturer and the student play a role they feel is required for them to describe their activities as teaching. Giving and attending lectures is fulfilling a ritual duty that is hard to overcome. I personally also like preparing lectures because they let me think about the subject in more organized ways. And I think others do too. Feynman famously told his colleagues in pure research that they should do some “teaching”. I suspect this is what he had in mind.

The same goes for looking over students’ shoulders and giving them expert advice. One feels so useful when one can point out a little error, share one’s accumulated wisdom. Isn’t that what being a teacher is after all?

But even that is just so much voodoo. How much do we actually learn from this feedback? I have observed hundreds of lessons and dozens of lesson observers. I have seen people give feedback and receive feedback. And I am highly skeptical about its effectiveness. There’s just too much going on. Too many things to focus on. Repetition and incremental improvement are the norm. Not comprehensive and exhaustive feedback on every minutiae of someone’s performance. Now, there’s lots of research on the importance of targeted coaching for skill acquisition. But that’s hardly what goes on in a typical section seminar.

We can all think of stories where just the right kind of feedback at the right time made all the difference. Just the right analogy or illustration chosen in a lecture or presentation made things previously muddied crystal clear. But if we look at the complex thing that is our current expertise, can we really see a clear and unequivocal pattern of instruction? I suspect not. So why are we so hell bent on recreating it for others?

Improving MOOCs

Do MOOCs need improvement? Absolutely, I can think of a dozen ways in which to improve MOOCs. Some of these improvements are along the lines of improving higher education in general and some of them are to do with the format. But I would argue that we do not actually yet know what the real problems with MOOCs are. Which is why I am so puzzled by the backlash (see also here).

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Will MOOCs be the salvation of higher education? Probably not. Will they cause the downfall of traditional higher education institutions? One can always hope but it is highly unlikely.

The most likely future of MOOCs is opening some new avenues of access and making available some content. They are likely to be co-opted by traditional institutions that will use them as advertising or loss leaders. And with that the MOOCs will become more and more traditional. But at the same time, they will leave their mark and higher education will not be quite the same as it was before. Kind of like with all “revolutions”.

So there’s a lot of hype about MOOCs, but there’s just as much hype about universities. The massive fee inflation and variable quality should give us just as much pause as any deficiencies (real or imagined) in MOOCs that are still only on the periphery of this oligopolistic industry.

Instead I would recommend to the progressive educators (among whose numbers I count myself) to examine how much of their opposition is driven by the challenge MOOCs provide to their status as innovators and their mass awareness raising success when compared to their own decades-long and admirable records. I am not for a moment accusing anybody of small mindedness or petty jealousy, just the normal human biases that we often ignore in academia. But maybe it’s just me and their epistemological consciences are as pure as the driven snow. In which case, I apologize.

References: Research on the student experiences of higher education

These are the references for research about what actually happens in higher education. There have been pretty consistent results in this field since the 1960s but seem to have made pretty small impact on how academics (even those inclined to consider this kind of evidence) think about higher education.

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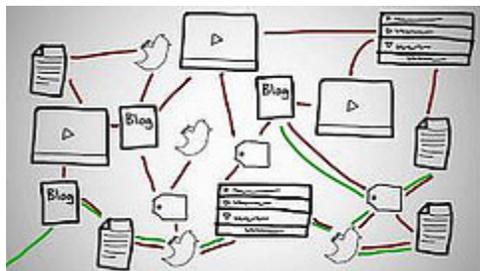
What is and what is not a MOOC: A picture of family resemblance (working undefinition) #moocmooc

August 14, 2012

Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs for short, have been getting a lot of attention recently. There have been several high profile posts (see here for a summary) complaining about the lack of clarity about what constitutes a MOOC (and I think this resulted in a more generalized MOOC backlash). This is an attempt to draw up a picture of what MOOCs look like and what they don't look like. It is not a definition in the traditional sense (an undefinition, perhaps) but I think it captures the idea.

MOOC: A portrait of family resemblance



What is a MOOC? – YouTube <http://t.co/8OyH68wP> Filmpje met heel duidelijke uitleg over wat een Massive Open Online Course nu eigenlijk is! (Photo credit: Trendmatcher)

Let's consider some features of online education that could be candidates for MOOChood and group them according to how useful indicators of MOOCness they are. This will make it possible to judge how well a given MOOC candidate resembles other MOOCs.

Minimal feature requirements for MOOChood

These features describe all MOOCs. A course has to pretty much meet all of these to be considered for a MOOC.

- To satisfy the label of **massive**: Give access to a larger group of students than a single class or institution could (this could be a small absolute number in case of very specialised subjects)
- To satisfy the label of **open**: Are open access in the sense of not requiring a test of prior knowledge (though such may be recommended) or enrollment in a larger course of study in an institution (though this may be possible, see below)

- To satisfy the label of **open**: Do not require payment just for access to content and peers. But payments for other things (like tutor support, assessment, participation in ancillary events) may not be free.
- To satisfy the label of **online**: Use an online method of delivery making the most of what the web medium has to offer. Ideally utilising multiple modes of delivering content (video, audio, text, animation). This could be pre-recorded, live or a combination of the two.
- To satisfy the label of **course**: Follow a course of **study** with time-sensitive elements towards a specified learning outcome or a set of outcomes.
- To satisfy the label of **online course**: Facilitate asynchronous interaction between as many participants as possible. This can be done via course-specific forums (ideally with some curation facility such as voting up and down) or via generalized platforms such as Twitter or Blogs and comments.

I think all courses that are called a MOOC, these days, will meet these criteria.

Salient but optional MOOC features

These features are typical of some MOOCs with a broader interpretation of openness. Some people consider these to be essential.

- Define **open** and **online** in such a way that it does away with the constraints of the VLE and having students use the open web
- Extend definition of **open** by relying on open content in the strict sense (openly licensed, as well as free)
- Take advantage of **online** by providing opportunities for **openness** by encouraging the creation of new content by participants and/or curation of existing content as part of the learning process
- Extending the definition of **open** by encouraging the creation of Personal Learning Networks by participants that break outside the typical walled-gardens of a course

Most connectivist MOOCs (or cMOOCs) will meet these criteria, but most xMOOCs by Coursera, Udacity and edX will not.

Edge features of a MOOC

These features break or bend one of the minimal requirements but might still qualify as a MOOC in some instances if the overall shape is sufficiently MOOC-like. Individual will vary in their willingness to accept something with these features as a MOOC.

- Untimed learning communities working towards a learning outcome break the **course** criterion of time-boundedness. This could be because, there are no paced

activities – e.g. weekly focus, or no specified end. But with sufficient family resemblance a “course” like this could still be considered a MOOC.

- Accredited online courses allied with a specific institution may not fully comply with the criterion of **open** but if they allow outsiders, they will still qualify as a MOOC.
- Events without any specified learning outcomes might still be considered MOOCs if they specify learning experiences, instead.

Disqualifying properties for a MOOC

These things might have some limited properties of a MOOC but not enough to be considered one. They generally do not have the “look of a MOOC” but are sometimes listed in the same context.

- Collection of freely accessible learning materials (Khan Academy, iTunes U, Open Courseware) are massive, online and open but not a course.
- Lecture series without an outcome (LSE public lectures, New Books Network) are online and open but not a course and may not be massive.
- A continuous generalized Personal Learning Network is online and open but neither massive nor a course.
- An online learning or study support community is online but it’s not a course and may not be either massive nor open.
- Large scale live online lectures/webinars (Michael Sandel, Reith Lectures) are massive and may have some course-like properties but offer limited interaction between participants. But do not have a family resemblance to a MOOC.

Conclusion

Despite much handwringing about how difficult it is to define a MOOC, I think it’s actually not that difficult after all. As with all cases of family resemblance, this picture will evolve over time and will vary with individual perceptions and perspectives. But I think it provides a fairly accurate overview.

I am, of course, looking forward to corrections, clarifications, and howls of protest, in the comments.

Background

This blog post is a result of my involvement in a collaborative writing exercise as part of the MOOC MOOC. As happens on Wikipedia, the actual writing and editing happened by a few people with onlookers pitching in the odd typo correction or a nitpicking point. My contribution was an outline and a table of contents for the doc but when I tried to edit the actual content, I felt, I couldn’t contribute without imposing my perspective on others without an opportunity for an

argumentative back and forth. This does not mean, that this is not a good model for creating content but that it requires more time to build a community that can start generating a consensus (like Wikipedia).

My problem with the essay that emerged was that it was too biased towards a normative description of a MOOC. Viz, what it should be, rather than what it is. I am all for a normative account but, I think, it's worth taking a more descriptive approach first (must be the anti-prescriptivist linguist in me). So, the above, is my fork of that work. (BTW: I think forking and remixing should be an integral part of collaborative writing. A single product of dozens of people writing together will always be too watered down to suit everyone and thus not quite suiting anyone.)

The other problem here (as with so much in the academia) is working with an outdated notion of what a definition should look like, i.e. a minimal and exhaustive description that will exclude or include all possible candidates in a binary fashion. But the world is not like that and trying to define it like that can only lead to needless confusion. We have had a credible alternative for fifty years, so I think it's time to own up to it and start a movement of undefinitions. Down with Occam, long live Wittgenstein! NOTE: Although, I use the more familiar term "family resemblance", the analysis above was inspired by George Lakoff's concept of radial categories from *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*.



Written by Dominik Lukeš

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From: Diana Laurillard <D. Laurillard@ICE.AC.UK> 21/9/2012 3:27 AM
Subject: **Re:[ALT-MEMBERS] MOOCS**
To: A closed list for members of the Association for Learning Technology

You could be right about the skewed view of the MOOC universe, Dominik, because I find it hard to know it all. So I did qualify my comments as what 'I've come across so far', well aware that I don't know all its galaxies. But the universe in which I aim for balance is the commentariat/policy constellations that go into panic mode overdrive with the advent of new formats once they catch up with them. We've just had the launch of a partnership with Coursera, referring to 'high quality education', as if that were a property of the MOOC form. You're absolutely right that the criticisms of some MOOCs do not apply to all. The same is true of higher education's delusions – we can accept the criticism, well aware that it's not true of all HE.

You gave us a link to your new MOOC and that looks like a very well planned and very useful set of materials and exercises. But I think it reflects my description of the essence of the MOOC because (i) you have an interesting way of dealing with the labour intensive variable cost of supporting students – you give feedback to a small selection, and (ii) the 'free' concept is time-limited, in other words the MOOC is the loss leader PR that attracts customers to your product. That's fine, and I've no doubt we'll aim to do the same. And the process gets us all thinking much more productively and imaginatively about making that showcase look good, and doing better with the design of online learning.

But the 'support and interaction offered in online space' is still whatever the participants are prepared to do for each other, so in that sense it's still like the coffee bar or public library or reading group. If a 'community of practice' forms around the materials, it could well take off with knowledgeable participants assisting each other, which is importantly and usefully different from a certificated course that assures the student they have learned something.

It's interesting, though, that your MOOC example does look as if it could be a way in which the boundaries between formal and informal education begin to blur, which I've been a bit sceptical about because it's a phrase used a lot but not explicated. What you have done, I think, is to use the knowledge and expertise you have in the field to assemble what might be studied, for who might be interested, with advice on how they might study it – beginning in the way we do in formal education. And then the participants take it from there – which takes it into informal learning territory, where they may move into other curriculum topics, using their own criteria for what counts as good or useful, and engaging as and when they wish. A very good model for professional learning communities, who do not need certification, or expert evaluation of what they do. But still without a business model for the original design.

So sorry about length – am I breaking a rule here? - it's just such a rich and interesting issue just now!

Diana



From: Seb Schmoller

21/9/2012 7:5 4AM

Subject: **Re:ALT-MEMBERS]MOOCS**

To: A closed list for members of the Association for Learning Technology

Last year I enrolled as a student in a "Stanford" MOOC and there is a piece in ALT News Online about my initial reactions <http://goo.gl/dLKPC>. I also wrote short weekly reports on my experiences <http://fm.schmoller.net/ai-course/>. The reports themselves are some way down on that link - the two I particularly recommend are Guest Contributions by fellow students on the AI course - Rob Rambusch and Gundega Dekena.

I think several things are going on at once.

1. There is a bubble, in that lots of organisations are thinking that they "have to get on board with MOOCs or be left behind".

2. The term MOOC is very broad and covers chalk and cheese. I think that "What is necessary and what is contingent in MOOC design?" by George Roberts, Marion Waite, Jenny Mackness, and Elizabeth has a good early section differentiating 2 broad classes:
<http://www.slideshare.net/georgeroberts/what-is-necessary-and-what-is-contingent-in-mooc-design>

3. For the Stanford AI course style MOOCs (now exemplified by courses offered by Udacity Inc.) there is a particular paradox which is that from the point of view of a learner it feels - at least some of the time - as if you are getting 1:1 tutoring, when nothing could be further from the truth.

I think a great deal now hinges on the answer to the research question - crudely expressed - "If it feels like 1:1 tutoring is it (or can it be) as effective as 1:1 tutoring?"

Seb

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