

Open Access and MOOCs

Konrad M. Lawson

Our topic for this panel is Massive open online courses, open access, and the academic contract. I'd like to approach the challenge of contributing something meaningful at the intersection of these three topics by first pointing out the perhaps obvious reasons they might become part of the same conversation in an academic environment:

1. Together the rise of massively scalable classes online and open access represent creative forces with the potential to drive innovation in the ways we teach and learn on the one hand, and radically extend the reach of our scholarship and scale of our collaboration on the other.
2. At the same time they are just as often seen as no less than the barbarians at the gates, with the potential to wreak destructive havoc by virtue of their impact on the relationship between scholars and publishers, between instructors and students, between students and other students, and between all of these agents and the institution that is the university.

Open access and MOOCs are, of course, both of these things.

The main point I would like to leave you with today is that a discussion of them can be productively linked in another way: if open access has created new complications in long-standing relationships with publishers and in turn with funding agencies - issues I cannot address in detail here - then it has the potential to mitigate at least some of challenges in the formation of new relationships between educators and emerging MOOC platforms. Which brings me to the academic contract: what I would like to argue here is that as educators we should consider a much more proactive and collaborative approach in negotiating the ground rules for our interaction with MOOC providers and specifically that, whenever possible, we should ensure the "open" in MOOC is preserved - not merely out of an altruistic commitment but also a means to nurture a rich and varied ecology in higher education that we play an important role in.

— The MOOC Landscape Late 2013 —

The term MOOC, or "Massive Open Online Course" is a contested term that has been used to refer to a number of different things. Among open education advocates there has been a largely unsuccessful attempt to distinguish between a number of different kinds of online scalable courses that go by the term. In particular, open education supporters and supporters of the concept of "connectivist learning" which places a far higher emphasis on the power of networks in learning and the independence of learners within the learning process have attempted to reserve the term cMOOC for online courses which more closely resemble the vision of Dave Cormier, who first coined the term MOOC, and the similar approach of others such as Bonnie Stewart, George Siemens, and Stephen Downes. Separately, the term xMOOC has been used to refer, often pejoratively, to the massively scalable course aggregation platforms and learning management systems that have become synonymous with the term today. For better or worse, these distinctions have been drowned by the flood of articles and discussions which refer almost exclusively to the large scale xMOOC

platforms.

Having said that, it is the large scale and heavily funded platforms that will concern us the most. As of late 2013, the most significant international and national-based MOOC platforms that so far offer predominantly free online scalable courses on a variety of topics include:

- Coursera
- Udacity
- edX
- FutureLearn
- iVersity
- Open2Study
- OpenupEd
- France Université Numérique

Some of these, especially the newer additions to this list from outside the United States, have so far very little on offer, but are often heavily backed by governments or large-scale collaborations between universities.

I would like to emphasise that, from a learners perspective, these platforms for courses live within a much more varied and complex ecosystem of online education offerings that have been especially important in pre-university education, language education, and in training for skills within the world of computing and programming.

- CodeAcademy
- Khan Academy
- Babbel
- Duolingo
- iTunes University
- MIT Open Courseware

Other extremely important players in this larger ecosystem are online course platforms with hybrid methodologies offered by traditional distance education-focused institutions ranging from the non-profit Open University in the UK, the massive for-profit University of Phoenix in the United States, and hundreds of programs at universities around the world which offer fee-based online and hybrid courses such as offered by the Harvard Extension School. These programs are often left out of discussions on trends in massively scalable online education which I think is a serious mistake since they are often the most rich repositories of experience in terms of exploring the limits and potential of education that have explored differing ranges of scale and online interaction. [~6:00]

— The Major Critiques —

In terms of hype and the injection of funding, however, it is the large scale MOOC platforms that have dominated discourse on online education in the past two years. 2012 was the year of most explosive growth within the United States but also immediately gave rise to a large number of critiques and concerns. Let us briefly consider four of these categories of critique. I must emphasise that I am speaking mostly of the case of the United States so far, since that is where the debate over MOOCs has continued the longest. I suspect that

these debates will evolve to match the differing educational environments of countries in Europe and elsewhere going forward.

1. Back Door for For-Profit Education - The two earliest large scale MOOC providers, Coursera and Udacity are both ultimately for-profit institutions which, despite providing their courses for free, are increasingly looking for ways to grow revenue. As universities enter into partnership with for-profit platforms and become, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent upon them, this has generated the concern that MOOCs are a new way that for-profit institutions are disrupting the realm of higher education and, in turn, having an impact on the delicate balance of offerings of basic classes that provide the central funding for graduate students and professors, at least in the United States. The recent partnership between Coursera and Chegg, a book rental service to provide time-limited access to DRM security protected textbooks reveal the ways that new configurations of relationships are forming that can potentially change the balance of power between universities, educators, and for-profit institutions.
2. The Death of Diversity and the Triumph of Elite Universities - Another major critique to have emerged is concerned with the way in which MOOCs amplify the already considerable power of elite universities which not only have the star academics but also the very considerable resources required to assemble the materials needed for a massively scalable online course. Just yesterday (November 18, 2013) San Jose State University faculty senate was set to vote on whether or not severely limit the administration's freedom to sign agreements with major MOOC providers. This follows up an earlier episode in May (2013) in which San Jose State University philosophy department composed an open letter to Harvard Professor Michael Sandel pointing out the potential unintended consequences of their university adopting Sandel's MOOC version of his popular course on justice. "There is no pedagogical problem" this approach solved, argued the letter, and suggested that having the exact same course on the basics of ethics being taught in various philosophy departments using a "one-size-fits-all" approach as "downright scary."
3. The Death of the Classroom - A third important strand of critique has been more narrowly focused on the perceived shallowness of the MOOC experience and its low pedagogical efficacy. The decreased interaction between course facilitators or instructors with students that results from the potentially massive scale of these online courses is not compensated, argues this critique, by the potential benefits of adaptive learning exercises within the platform or the connectivist potentials of peer review evaluation and forum based discussions. The charismatic founder of Udacity and one of the most wildly optimistic proponents of MOOCs, Sebastian Thrun, appears to have come to this conclusion himself only last week when he announced, in a feature in Fast Company magazine that he wanted to pivot Udacity. He described the painful moment when he had to admit that "we don't educate people as others wished, or as I wished. We have a lousy product."
4. The Transformation of the Academic Profession - A critique closely connected to the pedagogical concerns about MOOCs is the anxiety and fears about what costs a transition to these new forms of education will have on academics who balance their roles as researchers and teachers. Will we surrender our materials to an online platform where it will live happily and independently where we are no longer needed? Will a new class of specialists in course design, management, and delivery largely replace university faculty? Will, as one recent Slate article provocatively suggested, charismatic actors and celebrities like Matt Damon be hired to deliver lectures to draw students and boost dismal completion rates? Will an army of volunteers or barely paid course specialists become the predominant point of contact for students in most classes of the future?

I can't go into much depth into the validity of each of these critiques, but I hope some of them will come up in our discussion today. I will say, however, that some of these criticisms problematically treat all MOOCs or potential online courses the same. They also occasionally underestimate the degree to which the same criticisms might be levelled at traditional educational offerings at universities offline, particularly in the case of complaining about the poor pedagogical value of these offerings. If we don't want Matt Damon giving our lectures, we might want to rethink the lecture, and more broadly, one-way content delivery, as the predominant way we contribute value to student education. If we don't want one-size-fits-all education then American educators, in particular, might want to visit the introductory classes at any number of large universities and see the self-contained plastic-wrapped package of textbooks, exercises, and teaching

materials often handed to the poorly-paid graduate students tasked with running these courses. [-5:30]

— How Can Open Access Help? —

The backlash against massively scalable courses has come from many sources but some of the most informed critiques have come from educators who have long been supporters of open education in the online world. The hype around MOOCs has easily overshadowed the work of educators who promote Open Courseware (OCW), that is syllabi and course materials that allow both other educators and students to directly learn and make use of existing courses provided at universities, and more broadly, Open Education Resources (OER), an umbrella term for open and generously licensed materials ranging from articles, contained course lesson plans, slides, lecture videos and other content.

Where OER has struggled the most in recent years is not the quantity of materials, indeed the web overflows with OER materials, but in two areas: 1) discoverability - the bewildering number of indexes and other places to find the materials make educators less likely to use them and 2) reusability - OER materials are naturally often designed for a particular course in a particular time and place. While this is perfectly understandable and materials should always be customised to work well within a given course, there are some relatively simple techniques which can significantly boost the potential for them to be used in other contexts. These include dividing video clips into smaller segments with good metadata describing their content, and providing texts in formats that can be easily edited and updated with new content for new contexts.

The significant energy behind MOOCs makes them a huge potential repository of high quality OER but not all of them have made this particular definition of "open" a priority. Coursera, for example, allows downloads only for personal use. By contrast OpenupEd has made support for OER a core element of their mission.

As educators and indirectly through our universities, I would urge you to look into the way in which the platforms you collaborate with handle content and facilitate their use beyond a single course. Platforms will rise and fall, but well-designed modular courses and their materials, especially when licensed under generous "libre" licences allowing others to change and adapt the materials, can ensure a longer life for our materials both inside and beyond the classrooms of the future.

Finally, it will be increasingly important for educators to recognize that the value of a course does not reside solely in its content, but rather in the various components of the "full stack" that constitutes an online learning management system. When we negotiate with MOOC platforms we must not merely consider the licensing of individual nuggets of content, but also to how open other aspects of the system are. Is the source code for the platform itself open source, as is true for the EdX platform, which hosts its code on GitHub.com, or closed? Is the wealth of metadata about courses kept only by the MOOC platform or made available to instructors on an ongoing basis, and student data downloadable by students themselves? Are forum archives retained or lost, kept by the platform or made available for download as a database for instructors? Do faculty and their collaborators have the ability to hack or modify the platform to innovate with individual classes or is the system static and unyielding to new innovations? Can classes easily jump ship to another platform or are they extremely difficult to migrate? Even as we continue to think critically about MOOCs and other educational innovations, the need for practical codes for engagement with these platforms is equally urgent.