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MOOCs: A first-hand experience on EDC MOOC and a speculation of their future impact in Higher Education

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1. Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) – a term coined by Dave Cormier back in 2008 when the first experimental MOOC ran - came to prominence in 2012 with the launch of Coursera, EdX and Udacity platforms in the United States. Most often MOOCs are short courses with duration varied between a couple of weeks to a couple of months, and at the moment, they do not provide academic credit, but some do provide a certificate of completion or statement of accomplishment.

MOOCs are currently free for participants and are funded by public and/or private sources. However, there is speculation that in the near future, Universities involved may profit by providing certification to successful participants and by building hybrid courses around MOOCs that carry academic credit (Lederman 2013, Young 2012).

This article summarises my personal reflections from participating in a MOOC and provides a brief evaluation of the connectivist MOOC (cMOOC) learning design. Following that, MOOCs' future sustainability in general is discussed and a speculation of their future impact in HE is attempted. In lieu of a conclusion, important questions raised by MOOCs and the ways they may impact Higher Education are provided, with an aim to open up the discussion around MOOCs to include their socio-political dimension alongside its pedagogical one.

2. A MOOC Experience - E-Learning and Digital Cultures MOOC (edcmooc) delivered by the University of Edinburgh on Coursera

As I work in Higher Education and my specialism lies in learning technologies, I was inclined to take part on a MOOC to gain some first-hand experience. I was looking for something really massive – not just an open course; I was also looking for something interesting and, due to time limitations, not too demanding or heavy. So, when a colleague mentioned the 'E-Learning & Digital Cultures' MOOC (edcmooc), it ticked all the boxes: the subject sounded interesting, the duration neither too long nor too short - five weeks - and I could have a look at the Coursera platform, which at the time of writing is the largest MOOC hosting platform with more than three million enrolments.

My decision was to commit a few hours per week and read/watch the course content and participate in discussions about it. This led me to discussion forums on the Coursera site, but I also followed and participated in the #edcmooc chat on twitter as well as the edcmooc group on Facebook. On top of that, I participated in a couple of live, hour-long twitter chats that were taking place on a Saturday evening in UK time. I also watched the first hangout meeting which was streamed live from Edinburgh via Google Hangouts and YouTube. As part of the optional formative activity I created a picture during week three; in the end of week five, I submitted my 'digital artefact' for assessment, which was a three-minute video debate on MOOCs, and took part in the peer assessment activity, assessing the work of

three other participants. This was done so that I would get the full picture of the activities that took place throughout the five-week course.

2.1 Tutors' Role – Presence on MOOCs

The tutors of the edcmooc did a good job in setting the scene, creating multiple channels for student communication and moderating every now and then some of the forum threads. Tutor time spent for the edcmooc was estimated to be approximately 30 days in preparing the course, which was mostly based on openly available content. A minimum of another 30 days of tutors' time was spent during the delivery of the course, as each tutor devoted one day per week on it, according to the edcmooc second Google hangout. Another source suggests that the edcmooc's cost may be about £30,000 from development to delivery (Parr 2013).

The Coursera edcmooc site was well laid out, with clear navigation and nicely laid out resources. The site itself was not overloaded; resources were kept to a minimum of one or two short articles and a few short videos per week. The discussion forums were mostly not moderated by the instructors, but this is to be expected in a MOOC where the staff-to-student ratio is 1:8,000. In some cases, the instructors initiated a conversation and attempted to summarise some of the posts, but due to the volume of the postings, this could not possibly be done consistently or systematically. In order to set realistic student expectations, instructors had made it clear in advance that they would only read and reply to posts sporadically. Taking into account that this was a MOOC, there is nothing wrong with that and I anticipated that this would be the case from the beginning. The instructions on assessment and peer feedback were clear; however, as the task was designed to allow for flexibility in both presentation and content, some participants were still confused about what they had to do and requested further explanations and examples.

2.2 Formal and Informal platforms used; the medium does dictate the message.

The course utilised various platforms for communication among its participants; Facebook was used mostly for posting links to images, articles and videos among participants who sometimes 'liked' each others' postings and, occasionally also left brief comments. In the Coursera forums, the discussions varied widely from brief comments to long multi-paragraph postings, with many offering factual information, an opinion or a reflection, or a combination of those. The more in depth, reflective postings took place in some participants' individual blogs and were disseminated via twitter and Facebook, by circulating the links to the respective source. Many of those participants' blogposts were also aggregated in a Newsletter.

2.3 The student experience

Some participants mentioned that they found the experience overwhelming. My view is that content–wise this was not the case, as the materials provided each week – a few short videos and one or two papers - could easily be covered in a couple of hours. On top of that, participants were encouraged to participate in the forum discussions by reading and posting on the Coursera platform, which would take some more time depending on the effort put into the activity. Trying to catch up with everything that takes place on a MOOC course however, is where it can all go wrong time-wise. With so many platforms available for informal learning

– Facebook, Twitter, Google Hangouts – it is not difficult to get carried away; there is always one more link to click onto an interesting article, picture or video; time management skills are therefore hugely important when participating in a MOOC. The edcmooc offered an unprecedented opportunity for networked learning so, understandably, some participants felt overwhelmed by it. That said, my impression is that those who became overwhelmed, they did so due to the never-ending interactions and discussions that created a feeling that there is constantly something interesting going on in the MOOC, rather than the content itself. If one was disciplined enough not to get too much carried away by the never-ending conversations on the various platforms, then they could actively participate and successfully finish the course by just spending a couple of hours a week.

3. Connectivist MOOCs' (cMOOCs) Learning Design and Assessment

This section takes a closer look at the learning design employed by connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) and highlights some of the issues around assessment and quality assurance.

3.1 cMOOCs' Inclusive - connectivist Pedagogy – Limitations

MOOCs can offer inclusivity by opening access to everyone with internet access. A significant number of MOOCs are built around connectivist principles. Connectivists move beyond the traditional argument of previously established learning theories and claim that learning can also reside outside us, in non-human actants. According to Siemens (2004)

> Connectivism is the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self organization theories. Learning is a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements – not entirely under the control of the individual. Learning (defined as actionable knowledge) can reside outside ourselves (within an organization or a database), is focused on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing.

Therefore, 'the pipe is more important than the content within the pipe', according to connectivism (Siemens 2004). This theory has been uncritically adopted by cMOOC evangelists, however, as Bell (2011) rightly points out, it is still contested whether connectivism is a 'learning theory' and not simply a 'phenomenon' and, as connectivism is very new, it is yet untested and unproven. Furthermore, while connectivism may work for well-resourced professionals, it is still questionable whether it has any value for those who need nurturing and guidance in order to avoid getting lost and drowned in an ocean of content and opinions. Due to their very nature, MOOCs may be particularly useful to those motivated, independent learners who have learned how to learn and are seeking some further personal development in their own time. These learners are likely to be early or mid career professionals. On the other hand, those learners that MOOCs are supposed to be targeted to – 'widening participation' students - are likely to need tutor guidance, as otherwise they may get confused or lost in the vastness and the multiple mediums utilised, unable to make choices in using their time effectively and struggling with the broadly defined assessment tasks and assessment criteria.

Another limitation of MOOCs is that they are one-size-fits-all, which prevents them from accommodating the diverse needs of the students. The way MOOC platforms are trying to

address that is by utilising learning analytics, which collate a huge amount of data from early MOOCs, including participants' preferred individual pathways, for the benefit of future MOOCs. Learning analytics combined with adaptive learning may enable future MOOCs to provide individual learning experiences (Carr 2012), however, the pedagogical benefits of such approaches are yet to be proven. Some of MOOCs' affordances and limitations have also been described in two three-minute long animated videos, which are available on youtube (Almpanis 2013a, 2013b).

3.2 Assessment Tasks and Peer Assessment

Due to the vast number of participants, assessments in MOOCs are opting for one of the following two practices:

a) automated assessments via quizzes or
b) peer assessment of coursework, which may be a short written article or other type of coursework, such as a digital artefact. (An example of some of the digital artefacts submitted for peer assessment as part of the EDCMOOC can be found on Padlet at http://padlet.com/wall/edcmooc_artefact).

Both practices have their limitations, but their biggest advantage is that they are time efficient from the tutors' point of view, as they require no tutor intervention. Some of the limitations of such methods include fitness for purpose, inconsistent marking but also any type of academic misconduct, including false identity, plagiarism and collusion. These issues become of crucial importance for the quality of such courses, and need to be resolved before MOOCs can be considered to offer academic credit.

4. MOOCs future sustainability – Speculation of their future impact in HEIs

If the idea that MOOCs will transform Higher Education is overly ambitious and optimistic, the idea that MOOCs are philanthropic is simply naive. Two of the three biggest USA based platforms are for profit – Coursera and Udacity - and they are backed up by venture capitalists who have invested millions following a Silicon Valley start up mentality, 'build fast and worry about it later' (Young 2012). Unfortunately, as Shullenberger (2013) points out, 'much of the global policy elite treats the major Silicon Valley corporations as if they were humanitarian organizations rather than profit-seeking enterprises'.

MOOCs currently work as marketing for Universities' paid for courses. There is speculation that in the near future MOOCs will be monetised in one of two ways; giving the course for free but charging for certification and assessment, or by offering follow-up, short campus-based courses where upon completion of a series of MOOCs, students come to pay and get certified (Korn 2013, Lederman 2013, Young 2012).

4.1 MOOCs' emerging monopolies

The MOOC phenomenon was started by Ivy League universities in the United States. There is a danger that most universities globally may be eventually excluded as MOOCs require a significant upfront investment and platform hosting. Aggressive politics around MOOCs may lead to educational imperialism in which few Universities dictate the curricula (Shullenberger

2013) and smaller Universities and colleges are eventually forced to adapt their own courses around these in order to survive.

4.2 MOOC global developments and the UK's approach

Futurelearn is the UK's response to the USA MOOC platforms; Futurelearn was announced on the 14th of December 2012 with a website and a press release and the first FutureLearn MOOCs are planned to be delivered in Autumn 2013. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the world, Open2Study was launched in March the 21st 2013 as the main Australian MOOC platform, while in Europe, OpenupEd was announced on the 23rd of Apr 2013.

Futurelearn has been warmly welcomed by the UK government. The Minister for Universities and Science responsible for higher education in England, David Willetts, said:

> The UK must be at the forefront of developments in education technology. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) present an opportunity for us to widen access to, and meet the global demand for, higher education. This is growing rapidly in emerging economies like Brazil, India and China (The Open University, 2012).

However, most main MOOC platforms, including the UK's FutureLearn, have been criticised for elitism (Almpanis 2013a, Rivard 2013) as they are very selective in their recruiting policy and demonstrate a strong preference for highly ranked Universities to join their platforms.

5. Questions raised by MOOCs

MOOCs are an interesting experiment in progress; their evangelists claim that MOOCs will transform HE while the sceptics fear that they will destroy it. While both these opinions are extreme, one needs to recognise that MOOCs are a phenomenon not to be ignored, and which raises many questions for Higher Education globally. Some of those questions are listed below. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to attempt to answer them and they are offered as food for thought and as a starting point for an ongoing discussion that needs to be held by those interested in and involved with Higher Education. MOOCs after all, are still a work-in progress experiment.

1) What do Universities stand for in the 21st century?

2) How can learning in MOOCs be measured?

3) Can we trust the future of HE to venture capitalists?

4) Are the employers globally going to become interested in MOOC statements of completion?

5) If recorded video lectures are as effective as face-to-face lectures, how is this going to affect learning on campus? Will MOOCs enforce traditional Universities to focus more on seminars, small group and individual tutoring, coaching and high quality feedback on fit-for-purpose assessments?

6) Are MOOCs going to create a 'global localisation' where participants study a series of global MOOCs, then come to a nearby campus to 'top up' their learning, get assessed and certified?

7) What is going to be the impact of MOOCs on the paid for, generic, online distance learning courses?

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EdX https://www.edx.org/

Udacity https://www.udacity.com/

FutureLearn http://futurelearn.com/

OpenupEd http://www.openuped.eu/

Open2Study https://www.open2study.com

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