

MOOCs and Educational Sustainability? An educational developer's perspective

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Introduction

This article explores the author's views and open questions on the potential use of different open educational approaches to promote educational and professional sustainability. The debate is contextualised around my personal experience in relation to open structured non-accredited education opportunities for continuous professional development. This offers a contrast between open education models that focus on scalability versus those that focus on community and connections.

Towards open pedagogies

Education for Sustainable Development is about enabling us to constructively and creatively address present and future global challenges and create more sustainable and resilient societies (UNESCO¹). In order to address this challenge, promoting educational sustainability is crucial. This requires consideration of open pedagogies, our legacy as teachers, our engagement with communities and society, and lifelong learning (including digital capacity). In this sense, the concept of 'lifewideness'^{2:1}, offers interesting insights into how a 'lifewide education could enhance a university's ability to recognise and value learning and personal development that is essential for survival, success and personal fulfilment in a complex modern world'. As we consider the challenge to provide educational opportunities that are based on personalisation, collaboration and informal learning, open education raises to the forefront. In 'The Future of Learning is Lifelong, Lifewide and Open'³, Christine Redecker reminds of the massive power shift from institutions to the learners that we are currently witnessing. This in turn poses several challenges including: unbundling institutional functions and practices relating to the provision of educational opportunities; opening up curricula, by concentrating more holistically on competences, instead of knowledge; and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

This article aims to offer some insights into the experience of an educational developer approaching open educational opportunities for continuous professional development, and the role that different models of open courses can potentially play around this. In order open the debate, I go on to discuss here a small personal experience in relation to open structured non-accredited education opportunities for continuous professional development. This offers a contrast between open education models that focus on scalability (as Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs) versus those that focus on community and connections.

eMOOCs vs Creative HE

The headline grabbing explosion of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in the last few years have provided much inspiration around their possibilities for providing open educational opportunities for all. The online course model seems obsolete in many ways in comparison with the MOOC, as in table 1.

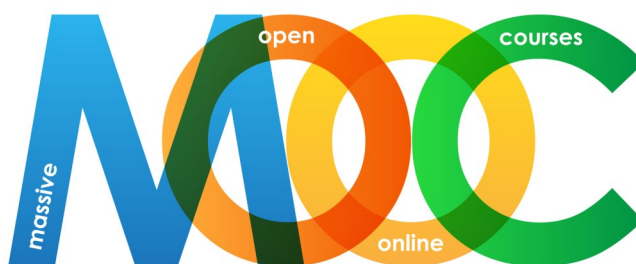
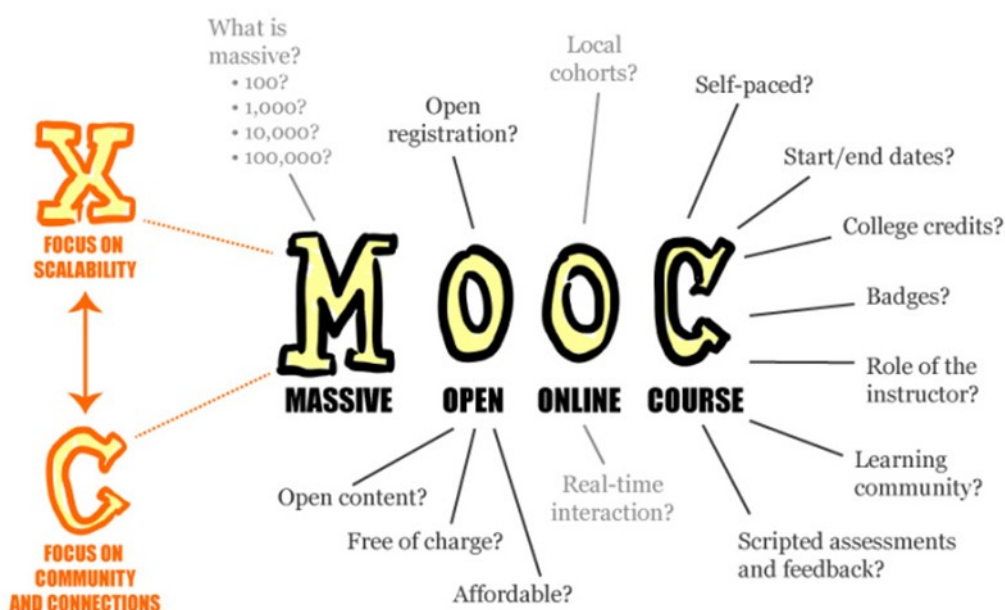


Table 1. Differences between a MOOC and an Online Course Adapted from Chattopadhyay⁴

Online course	MOOC
Focuses on content	Focus on context. Good content is a prerequisite to creating a MOOC but what keeps it going is dynamic building up of context around the content.
Close ended with static context	Not static, evolves dynamically through learner participation, creation of user-generated content and collaboration.
Assigned to learners, typically by the organization they work in. Sometimes, learners will sign up voluntarily for a degree or a diploma.	Learners come together voluntarily to form cohorts and groups. MOOCs have the potential to give rise to Communities of Practices or enhance the learning within an already existing CoP.
Either bought off-the shelf or custom built.	MOOCs do not always require custom-built content to set up unless the need is very specific. MOOCs on various topics can be set up using OERs and other available content from the net. The content can be replaced/updated quickly because a well-designed MOOC should ideally be based on the principles of micro-learning
Designed by learning designers and disseminated to the learners.	Flatten the world of learning by bringing everyone on the same plane. A learner can become a facilitator and vice versa. The roles blur making learning a democratic process rather than a hierarchical one.
Do not require digital skills beyond the ability to take the course online and attempt multiple-choice questions.	Require online collaboration and facilitation skills. Participating in a MOOC is a two-way process—participants are consumers as well as creators.
Take place within the boundaries of a classroom	Enable building of personal learning networks that fosters “weak ties” among unlikely individuals opening the door to innovation and learning.
Built around pre-defined objectives and may or may not cater to just-in-time learning.	Build on the principle of just-in-time, “pull” learning empowering the learners and treating adult learners—well, like adults.

Since the most prestigious US universities joined the MOOC movement around 2012, these have received a huge amount of attention, paired with equal expectations that they would radically transform higher education as we know it. Five years on, it is obvious that the revolution has not materialised, and the practice of MOOCs has developed in diverse directions. One of the main divergences stems from the focus on the ‘M’ bit: is the course geared to taking over the world through scalability (these have come to be known as xMOOCs) or on the contrary, is the focus placed on a social learning, requiring (obviously) a level of human interaction (cMOOCs)?



MOOC poster April 4, 2013 by Mathieu Plourde licensed CC-BY on Flickr, explores the meaning of “Massive Open Online Courses” aka MOOCs.

I really buy in the idea of dynamic user-generated content, so in principle yes, I want to consider the potential of MOOCs within my own professional development and my teaching (potentially asking my participants to engage with it as part of a flipped classroom approach), so I am willing to be convinced about their potential for contributing to educational sustainability. When I realised that the 2017 International MOOC summit (where the CEOs of the main MOOC platforms were to meet) was to be hosted in my native hometown, a bare 10 minutes walk from where I grew up, I decided that it was a sign of destiny (ok, the perspective of my mum's cooking may, only may, have also had something to do it!).

While planning to attend to this conference, I was in discussion with Prof Norman Jackson, who was leading our Contemporary Issues in Higher Education summer module (#TL5003) in our academic development programme. Norman has a vast experience in creative pedagogics, lifewide learning and, amongst many other endeavours, leads #CreativeHE (in collaboration with Chrissi Nerantzi and other like-minded colleagues), a community of creative academics which (they might not agree with this) could be somewhat categorised as the cMOOC type. The next iteration of the course, which was aimed at promoting creative pedagogical approaches in our educational practice, was running during the same week, so I signed for the experience in the interest of authenticity and why not, a bit of fun CPD.

DAY 1 & 2 International MOOC summit

Expectations were high for the main keynotes in Day 1 and 2. Sir Timothy O'Shea, principal in University of Edinburgh, opened the conference keynote and offered some interesting insights. Many were on the positive side: despite evangelists having said that the MOOC would be the end of textbooks, they have actually been a driver for more textbooks being produced in his institution. This was counterbalance with the stark statistic that completion rates of (their extremely expensive) MOOCs are only around 6%. FutureLearn claims to be a catalyst of the digitisation efforts of universities, and one way of doing this is through online degrees with open pathways. As an example, the platform has partnered with Deakin to pioneer a full MA degree through Futurelearn, some of it paid and some through MOOCs. In other cases, MOOCs are compensated with university credits. In order to facilitate flipped classroom blended approaches, they are currently piloting a space which looks pretty much like a standard learning management system... A more complete overview of the themes was curated in the #EMOOC2017 twitter feed, but in general, I got the clear picture that after the MOOC hype, economic sustainability of these platforms and return on investment is the major elephant in the room. Rick Yale from Coursera claimed in his keynote that 'the future of the university will happen in an ecosystem of lifelong learning', but it remains to be seen if MOOCs will effectively survive to be a part of it.



Simon Nelson from [FutureLearn](#) quoted [Inside HE \(2017\)](#): 'Gone are the promises about revolutionizing HE or driving most colleges and universities out of business. In their place is a pledge to work with colleges on how to offer education online and internationally'.

Day 1 of #CreativeHE

In the meantime, [Day 1 of #CreativeHE](#) had started. I found Google + (where the community is hosted) to be very confusing to use at first. I attempted to engage with the tasks, which invited us to produce creative artefacts to answer to specific challenges, but I found that I was 'piggybacking' in others' creativity (with pictures of murals on the streets) rather than challenging myself with my own, but nevertheless, appetite was opening and I was slowly moving from the internal talk of 'I don't really have time for this', to one of interest and engagement.

I found the themes that emerged in my real (i.e conference attending mode) and online world (in #CreativeHE) fed into each other nicely (lifelong and lifewide education, the sustainability of the current educational model, and creativity as a 'must' for survival, rather than a 'nice' addition). The fact that the conference was hosted so close to home (this is, the one where you revert to your teenage bad habits) helped to contextualise things for me in the building where I used to sneak in to find a place to study while being an undergrad, I walked back home to my mum's lovely cooking and to spend time with my family and friends, and in turn, I found that progressively, I could incorporate discussions and memories into my creative endeavours for the #creativeHE tasks. It was all a nice experience, 'in the moment' integration of living and learning on the go.

Resources shared in #CreativeHE also informed my growing understanding of the MOOC phenomenon. I was also deepening my critical lenses into this world through posts such as Alan Levine's 'The future will not be powerpoint (ed), neither MOOCed', and finding reassurance in my remit of power as educational developer and citizen in this world...

DAY 3 International MOOC summit

On Wednesday I targeted the discussion panel on social inclusion and MOOCs chaired by @vincentzimmer, which highlights digital exclusion, and where Wi-Fi was (arguably) referred to as a 'human right'. The starting point was that, while MOOCs have been argued as a means for democratising access to education, experience to date has shown that it tends to be used by those with a good level of educational attainment for CPD purposes, rather than those most in need. As a response, the EU has developed a catalogue of initiatives in MOOCs that facilitate digital inclusion (<http://moocs4inclusion.org/>). This research has revealed that we know very little about the real impact of MOOC initiatives on digital integration. This is not to take away from the potential advantages provided by this model of education. For example, interesting insights followed into gender access. Vincent Zimmer reported their experience breaking cultural barriers to female education in refugee families, where at home MOOC education is making it socially acceptable. Of interest was also the discussion that followed about 'educational colonisation' of MOOC platforms based on the northern hemisphere, and the call for partnership approaches as an alternative. The argument is that there are many people that are taking MOOCs now that would not have access to education at all otherwise. The flip side (as argued by Tim O'Shea) is that the progressive reliance on online education poses a greater digital divide in many populations. In conclusion, I left with the feeling that refugees were indeed a focal point through the event, but were somewhat opportunistically used to justify the social value of MOOCs in tokenistic ways, while CEOs of Coursera, FutureLearn and Edx presented their (increasingly excluding) business models in order to sustain the MOOC movement.

Day 3 #creativeHE

In the meantime, in #CreativeHE provided a catch-up day, it coincided with the tragic events of the terrorist attack in Manchester which left everyone with no desire for creativity or fun. As recommended though, I read Browns (2009) typology of adult learners, which pretty much validates ANY type of activity that we love as valuable learning play. We were also invited to join the relevant #LHETchat which happened to deal with the issue of creativity in HE later that evening.

DAY 4 International MOOC summit

On Thursday, I attended a MOOC design session that resonated strongly with the experience that I underwent through the Epigeum Blended Learning course design: reinforcing the delivery of information, video production and knowledge testing (strongly relying in T&Qs). There was not much scope really for flexibility or creativity that I could see... reinforcing this view of MOOCs (at least the 'x' type) as relying in structured content dissemination. While sitting right next to an expert on MOOC production, I really tried my best to introduce the agenda of creativity and scope for other pedagogical approaches. He gave me a look that made it obvious that his neurological pathways were too settled in a certain direction...

Video posted in my blog (<https://angelicarisqueiz.wordpress.com/2017/06/14/emoocs-vs-creative-he/>)

My candid concerns

On the way back home I reflected on this pretty intense CPD experience. It was certainly interesting to go through both experiences (#CreativeHE and the eMOOCs conference) at the same time as my understanding progressively formed in multi-layered dichotomies: directional (bottom-up creativity VS top-down content delivery); economical (free and 'do-it-yourself' community in Google + compared to exclusive powerful platforms for a selected few).

Angelica Risquez



+Sheila MacNeill That blog post is very interesting and reassuring, as the pedagogical practice described by Alan Levine resonates with some of my own... funny enough I write this from the EU MOOCs summit in Madrid where I feel like a fish out of the water, and it is not only because my fellow Spaniards are talking in broken English which feels utterly surreal... a session on social inclusion is on the way and they are talking how MOOCs were promoted as a way to democratise education, but indeed they are mostly used by highly educated people for CPD purposes. Constant mention to refugees, while the CEOs of Coursera, Futurelearn and Edx pitch for their increasingly closed and exclusive business models...

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My first concern is how open and reusable MOOCs actually are. There is a large body of literature in the marketization of higher education, which advocates for democratization of education and the need for making it more available and accessible to the global population. The big headline-grabbing digital 'story' in recent years around MOOCs has muddied the waters somewhat in relation to the 'open' project, leading to despondency among originators about the reinterpretation of 'open' as 'free' or 'online' without some of the 'reuse' possibilities originally envisaged. The subject is explored by Martin Weller in his book, 'The Battle for Open'. Weller^{5:3} states: *It seems that the narrative around openness is being usurped by others, and the consequences of this may not be very open at all.* That is not to say that MOOCs are not reusable. Potentially, there may be some MOOCs that can be taken apart and broken down into their constituents, thus adding significantly to the design of teaching. However, this is something that I have never done or seen done. MOOCs are not a reference source that I tend to dip in when looking for resources to prepare my teaching. This seems to be pretty much the case for my fellow educators: in a study I carried Risquez et al⁶, online courses/MOOCs/Slideshare accounted only for 6% of the sources used to look for open educational resources to reuse. So the question for discussion is how reusable MOOCs actually are, so they can effectively contribute to sustaining education.

My second concern is about flexibility. At this point, let me hold my hands up and admit that I have enrolled on several MOOCs, only to drop out without completing a single assignment. Personally, the biggest issue I have with MOOCs is the fact that I have no say about when and how they run. Sadly, no longer a student and not quite at retirement age, I struggle to find the time to take part in a MOOC which demands several hours of my attention each week, or run at highly inconvenient times of the academic year. Obviously, my fellow academics are equally stripped for time, so the second question is how to accommodate an externally running MOOC within the timing of an academic program.

Finally, I hold a fundamental concern which challenges the freedom of completing the process in which MOOCs are based. Chattopadhyay actually states that this is perhaps one of the fundamental reasons why MOOCs have seen such popularity: It is immaterial whether everyone is completing all the MOOCs they attend or not. The fact is people are signing up, voluntarily, and taking what they need. The power is back in the hands of the learners. The final message from my CPD experience was one of empowerment and freedom: no hype will ultimately decide what kind of educator we will be in the future, the future of education is in our hands (I hope so).



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