

Practice Paper

For fact's sake: thoughts towards researching MOOCs

Andrew Wright¹ (*Birmingham University*)

Copyright © 2015 Andrew Wright. This is an open access journal article distributed under the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits the unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Abstract

As an instructional designer, I have spent much of the last 18 months working closely with academics to develop Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) for the University of Birmingham in partnership with FutureLearn. My involvement in these projects (and exposure to all the debate and hyperbole that surrounds them) has made me curious to explore the nature of MOOCs, and whether or not they justify the grand claims that have been made in terms of their disruptive potential. To this end I am setting out to research and explore educators' thoughts and perspectives on their experiences of MOOC design, development and delivery. I hope to discover how these recent experiences compare to their prior experiences of learning and teaching in higher education, what educators consider 'successful' delivery (and therefore the purpose) of MOOCs to be, and what implications this might have for future educational practice and strategy in higher education. As I prepare my research proposal I am reflecting on what this might mean and where I stand on this. These are my preliminary and reflective thoughts.

Keywords: *MOOC; instructional design; higher education; philanthropy; factpacking*

Introduction

As long as Universities have been around, they have existed to serve their local community by disseminating knowledge, providing skills, creating jobs and generally 'improving people's lot'. These days, we live in a shrinking world, and the concept of 'local' is evolving. In a world where people can communicate instantly from different sides of the planet or travel anywhere within a day or so, where economies and labour markets become ever more

¹ Corresponding author email address: a.wright.2@bham.ac.uk

globalized, and where national borders are losing some of their significance, we are seeing an inevitable shift in the scope of the higher education institution's social remit (Daniel, 2012).

We are beginning to see evidence of this shift all the time, not least with the steady increase in the numbers of students that now choose to study outside their country of citizenship (rose worldwide from 0.8 million in 1975 to nearly 4.3 million by 2011), but also with the arrival of more and more globally accessible, online courses such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and distance-learning degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

The universities of today now have the opportunity (Caswell et al., 2008), and I believe (perhaps more controversially) the *responsibility*, to think in terms of 'improving people's lot' on a global scale, as the local communities of the past rapidly assimilate to form the 'Global Village' foreseen by popular Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan in the 1960's (McLuhan et al., 1968). MOOCs in particular are a really exciting way for Universities to engage in this transformation.

At time of writing MOOCs is still a relatively novel phenomenon. As such, there is only a small amount of existing literature that deals specifically with the possible long term influence of this new mode of delivery on the Higher Education (HE) sector, though some commentators have highlighted and discussed the potential of the MOOC model to be a disruptive innovation (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Conole, 2013).

Thoughts and reflections on knowing stuff

Wikipedia's global impact proved two things; firstly, that people all over the world constantly and consistently want to know stuff, and secondly, that it is possible to provide people with easy access to knowledge through websites at little to no cost to them, though this can largely depend on voluntary donations to the non-profit organisations that administer them.

So, surprise surprise ... people like knowing stuff; and I think we can all agree that, as a rule, people are pretty keen on free stuff too. With MOOCs you are getting 'high-level' learning (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956; Krathwohl, 2002) for free. It's as simple as that.

On top of that, whereas Wikipedia, invaluable though it may be, is a sprawling repository of anything that anyone cares to put in there (moderated of course), MOOCs are put together in a more pedagogically rigorous way (Siemens, 2005; McAuley et al., 2010; Daradoumis et al.,

2013; Guàrdia et al., 2013; Bali, 2014), that ‘softly’ guides the learner along a particular pathway to gain not just factual knowledge, but deeper understanding of the subject. Basically, if you want to learn, and have an interest that is catered for, it’s a no-brainer.

Inevitably, people have already started talking about various business models for capitalising on the commercial potential of these courses, and though I think that’s a bit of a shame, I do understand the appeal of maximum brand visibility to an institution in a globalised and highly competitive market (Rovai & Downey, 2010). I can also see that for some people, spending several hours on a course is something that needs to provide a tangible real-world benefit like increased employability, for example. However, I hope to show that MOOCs can also be significant and exciting for a reason that has nothing to do with money.

People have been travelling the world for generations, to experience other cultures and broaden their horizons, and this behaviour is, seemingly, universally enjoyed and applauded. Broadening one’s horizons, then, is generally perceived as being ‘worthwhile’. But why is this exactly? Travelling doesn’t help you find work. It doesn’t make you rich (quite the opposite in my experience!). In fact, it wouldn’t appear to be ‘worthwhile’ measured against any established economic criteria. So what is the appeal?

The perceived appeal of MOOCs

For me, it’s this: travelling abroad is a great way of broadening and deepening your understanding and awareness of the environment you live in and the people who live in it with you. We humans enjoy learning about the world around us, and we enjoy learning about each other. It is one of the reasons that we have evolved to be the dominant species that we now consider ourselves to be, and may well be a pivotal factor in successful social cohesion and a happy life.

I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that I don’t see any reason why doing a MOOC should be treated any differently. You’ve heard of Backpacking? Of course you have. Well this is a new phenomenon, and it’s called ‘*Factpacking*’!

Now, I’m not suggesting for a minute that you would learn as much about the culture of Brazil, for example, by doing a 4-week online course about it, rather than physically getting on a plane and going there yourself. Obviously, you’re not going to learn as much, or as quickly, online as you would by experiencing first-hand the day to day happenings in a favela,

or hearing Portuguese spoken by native speakers in your hotel, or shaking your derriere at Rio Carnival. The online offering is simply not a like-for-like replacement.

On the other hand, a month in Brazil will almost definitely cost you significantly more than the month's broadband required to do my imaginary Brazilian Culture MOOC, if, in fact, you can afford to travel at all.

Either way (and this is the key point) you're bound to know *significantly more* about the culture of Brazil after doing the MOOC, than you would have if you'd never actually been there *and* had not taken the free course.

Being aware socially and pedagogically

If being more aware can have a positive impact, whether socially or personally, then it follows that doing a short course about Muslims in Britain, or Climate Change, or the Causes of War, and the cultural, ethical, environmental or political awareness that this may bring about, must also have the potential for a positive change in attitudes in those respective areas. An obvious example being that if more people are aware of the dangers of climate change, more people are likely to do something about it.

I think it's worth quickly mentioning that in the first tranche of courses released by new UK venture FutureLearn (www.futurelearn.com), from which I take the examples above, a large proportion of them had a distinctly philanthropic feel. Make of that what you will.

With MOOCs, universities have a never before seen opportunity to offer people all around the world the chance to be knowledge tourists (Dennis, 2012), exploring their interests and deepening their awareness. Who knows, perhaps we are seeing the beginnings of a world in which the internet lives up to its potential for positive social transformation; where all people can be better informed, more understanding, and more fulfilled. How's that for a mission statement!?

Epilogue: what next?

In April 2015 I completed my research proposal and was allocated my supervisor. I have chosen an exploratory case study (Yin, 1981; 2003). I will use a mixed approach of mainly qualitative methods, supported by some quantitative data. The study will consist of three

phases. These phases will be used to structure the analysis in order that the key research questions can be answered.

Phase 1 – Establish Context (Qualitative): Semi-structured interviews with four lead educators and a thematic analysis of data informing further phases.

Phase 2 – Examine practice (Quantitative): Analysis of specific FutureLearn course data based on thematic analysis of Phase 1 responses, to inform phase 3.

Phase 3 – Reflect & Discuss (Qualitative): Semi-structured interviews with three educators, to include discussion of data analyses from Phases 1 & 2.

I am reviewing the literature on methodology and this reading will give me the tools required for me to construct a coherent case study, based on established theory and practice. Literature on teaching practice in HE and related issues such as quality assurance and pedagogy will help me establish a context and inform any comparisons I make between MOOCs and other modes of teaching delivery in Higher Education in terms of both practical and pedagogical aspects. This understanding will then inform later discussion on the implications of MOOCs on future teaching practice. Most importantly, key reading on MOOCs and other empirical studies will situate my research (and any conclusions I may draw) within the appropriate practical/professional context, taking into account existing discussions and research around MOOCs, specifically in terms of pedagogy, success criteria and disruptive impact. What claims are made for and about MOOCs? What evidence is there that they are any good?

My research questions therefore will be:

How: What do teachers perceive the key pedagogical considerations in MOOC design and delivery to be?

Why: What are educators' perceptions of success in the context of MOOCs?

Implications: Do MOOCs have the potential to disrupt delivery of Higher Education?

Wish me luck!

Acknowledgements

This practice paper is based in part on an opinion article originally published by Andy Wright at <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/moocs.aspx> on 7th February 2014.

References

- Bali, M. (2014). MOOC pedagogy: gleaning good practice from existing MOOCs. *MERLOT. Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(1), 44-56.
- Bloom, B. S., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain.
- Bower, J. L., & Christensen, C. M. (1995). *Disruptive technologies: catching the wave* (pp. 506-20). Harvard Business Review Video.
- Caswell, T., Henson, S., Jensen, M., & Wiley, D. (2008). Open content and open educational resources: Enabling universal education. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 9(1).
- Conole, G. (2013). MOOCs as disruptive technologies: strategies for enhancing the learner experience and quality of MOOCs. *Revista de Educación a Distancia*, 39, 1-17.
- Daniel, J. (2012). Making sense of MOOCs: Musings in a maze of myth, paradox and possibility. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2012(3), Art-18.
- Daradoumis, T., Bassi, R., Xhafa, F., & Caballé, S. (2013, October). A review on massive e-learning (MOOC) design, delivery and assessment. In P2P, Parallel, Grid, Cloud and Internet Computing (3PGCIC), 2013 Eighth International Conference on (pp. 208-213).
- Dennis, M. (2012). The Impact of MOOCs on Higher Education. *College and university*, 88(2), 24-30.
- Guàrdia, L., Maina, M., & Sangrà, A. (2013). MOOC design principles. A pedagogical approach from the learner's perspective. *J. eLearning Papers*, 33.
- Krathwohl, D. R. (2002). A revision of Bloom's taxonomy: An overview. *Theory into practice*, 41(4), 212-218.
- McAuley, A., Stewart, B., Siemens, G., & Cormier, D. (2010). The MOOC model for digital practice [online at www.davecormier.com/edblog/wp-content/uploads/MOOC_Final.pdf visited 19/4/15]
- McLuhan, M., Fiore, Q., & Agel, J. (1968). *War and peace in the global village* (Vol. 127). New York: Bantam books.
- Rovai, A. P., & Downey, J. R. (2010). Why some distance education programs fail while others succeed in a global environment. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(3), 141-147.
- Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age. *International journal of instructional technology and distance learning*, 2(1), 3-10
- Yin, R. K. (1981). The case study as a serious research strategy. *Science Communication*, 3(1), 97-114.

Yin, R. K. (2003). Case study research design and methods third edition. Applied social research methods series, 5.