Massive Open Online Courses: opportunities and challenges from a student perspective

Núria Molas-Castells

nmolascastells@ub.edu

Universitat de Barcelona, Spain

Book review:

Haber, J. (2014) *MOOCS*. Massachusetts: MIT Series.

This book is based on an experiment carried out by the author with the aim of analyze and explore trends and experiences on MOOC development. Despite the intention of the author to initiate a discussion in which massive open online courses were neither a panacea to the crisis in education nor the terrifying threat condemned by doomsayers, his point of view is generally optimistic and favourable about the expansion of MOOC. It has to be said that in spite of this opinion, discussion around MOOCs is open and there are clear controversial positions.

The author experiment started to complete the same number of courses one would take to obtain a four-year liberal arts degree in just twelve months using only MOOCs and other forms of free learning.

In the introduction of the book the author exposes that probably MOOC starts when in the summer of 2011 Stanford University decided to open up web-based versions of some of its most popular computer science courses to the world. It was the emergence of companies like Udacity, Coursera, and edX, whose technologies could facilitate classes taken by tens of thousands, that triggered a MOOC movement that had previously been relegated to theoretical frameworks or experimental courses. These companies show a type of technological utopianism which say, for example, that in ten fifty years there would be only ten institutions in the world delivering higher education.

As the author expound, from the beginning boosters and critics of MOOCs could use data to support their pro and anti-MOOC arguments. For critics, high attrition rates were an easy target, given that fewer than 10 percent of people who signed up for a MOOC tended to take it to completion. From teacher point of view, the amount of work involved and the challenges inherent in trying to teach tens of thousands of students simultaneously became the basis for a new set of concerns. Moreover, with no clear way to ensure that a student enrolled in a MOOC was the one actually doing the work, it was difficult to claim that any massive open course constitute the equivalent of a traditional semester-long college class. On the other side, and as the author exposed, it's difficult to argue that no good can come out for the world's most successful colleges and universities making classes taught by skilled and enthusiastic professors to share their knowledge available to anyone with an Internet connection.

The second chapter of the book attempts to place MOOCs into a broader context of trends in traditional and online learning. When looking for precedents, one could go back to the protestant reformation in XVIth century Europe when the painting press or to correspondence courses first popularized in the 1840s. Broadcast media, first radio in the 1920s and then television in the 1950s also created opportunities. Most recently, the first course in 2008 to earn the title of a

MOOC was "connectivism and connective knowledge" taught by Stephen Downes and George Siemens. This connectivist model sees knowledge and learning through the lens of how information becomes incorporated into the brain. Moreover all material generated by the professors was optional, with students free to use what they liked, create and share their own curriculum materials. The term MOOC was created by David Cormier who helped facilitate Downe's and Siemens's connective learning project and coined the term during an EdTechTalk interview. People involved with some of the earlier experiments in online learning use the term xMOOC to distinguish the newer massive courses from the connectivist MOOCs (now referred to as cMOOCs) that came before.

In the third chapter the author take a look at all of the parts of a course and how they fit together in order to answer the question of what constitutes a MOOC.

- When the content of a class will be consumed by thousands of students of differing abilities the rules that define meaning when these elements are linked together in a traditional classroom may no longer apply.

- Regarding lectures, research based on evidence of performance might demonstrate the effectiveness of the lecture format; MOOC developers have taken to heart the importance of breaking lecture material into shorter segments.

- The other issue that MOOC creators have had to contend with is the notion of openness, like intellectual property rules. Professors have been experimenting with different methods to make required part of their courses in ways that do not leave institutions vulnerable to copyright-related lawsuits and most easily applied in courses where reading material is already publically available in legal or free formats such as offering students time-limited electronic editions of textbooks, for example.

- Another component of the MOOC courses is the online discussion. MOOC developers have tried a number of methods to support community formation, for example most courses kick off with a forum, online conferencing, discussion forums, "office hour" videos or "learning" hubs". Beside these examples, there is a general consensus that MOOCs still need to find the means to create intimacy within classes taken by thousands of students.

- Regarding assessment, it often consists of short quizzes, multiple-choice form, automatically scored exams. All these techniques are created with the assumption that classes consisting of tens of thousands of students require evaluation to be performed by someone other than a professor. In this sense, most assessment of subjective material is done via the mechanism of peer grading. As a final comment of the reflection, the author maintains that until challenging assessments designed to verify and reinforce learning become a higher priority, MOOCs may continue to be perceived as a lighter alternative to what currently takes place in the less massively enrolled physical classroom.

- In reference to the course organization, there are two approaches to scheduling, with courses put on a calendar in which students engage with the same material each week until a fixed deadline is reached or the "on demand" courses, in which students can start the course whenever they like, with no fixed deadline for completing the material.

- Regarding the certification and payment, especially in those MOOCs carried out by universities is another controversial issue. In the case of Standford University, the institution and the course author came to an agreement that allowed the university's name to appear on a carefully worded certificate of completion stating explicitly that the online course should not be considered equivalent to an actual paid-for Stanford for-credit course.

All this variability needs to be taken into account when entering the fiery debate over whether or not MOOCs should be treated as the equivalent of traditional college courses.

In the fourth chapter the author explores the issues and controversies related with MOOCs. Although MOOC supporters rarely mention them, dropout rates in these courses are about 90 percent. And this opens a question: online sign-ups should be treated as representing the same

level of commitment as enrolling a traditional college course? The author of the book explains that MOOCs are free and the process for signing up for one involves little more than providing an e-mail address and password. Regarding this, Coursera's statistics make differences in between: number of enrolled users, number of unique students who logged into the site at least one after sign-up and active students last week.

While providing younger students access to MOOCs remains an important goal for MOOC creators, as the data exposed in the book shows, the natural audience for MOOCs seems to be an older and more educated cohort interested in advancing their learning. As the author suggests, maybe those data change if students could obtain something with genuine "cash value" in the educational marketplace for completing a MOOC class, such as formally recognized college credit. In this sense, the author highlights that the wide variation in level of demand emphasizes the importance of independent accreditation when determining formal college course equivalence for a MOOC.

The fifth chapter is focused on the research and experimentation taking place within individual massive classes and what such a culture of experimentation might contribute to the overall MOOC project. The first research is related with statistical data on how many students are enrolled, what actions students do or how much time they spend doing different activities in the MOOC platform. Other research is related with the demographics surrounding the student body of a MOOC course. In addition to these descriptive studies, researches are also looking at new ways of defining educational behavior based on the unique environments of large-scale. As the author concludes, most of the research into MOOC has delivered what MOOC supporters would categorize as good news. But other researches demonstrated, for example, failure rates much higher in MOOC based courses than in conventional classes on the same subjects.

Another question MOOC developers are trying to answer through experimentation is about the business model of this courses and how to get these free learning tools to turn a profit. Apart from providers such as Udacity, Coursera or edX there are other economic players with a stake in the success or failure of MOOCs, notably the colleges and universities who create the courses. Moreover, new platforms providers or LMS providers explore how to open up courses on their system to the world.

As Haber explains, much of the discussion of MOOCs as a potential substitute for a traditional college education grows out of concerns that colleges and universities are pricing themselves out of a market and will need to be replaced with different, less-expensive alternatives. The MOOC phenomenon is also analyzed as an alternative for the spiraling problem of colleges and universities related with a debt bubble that looms as the next great financial crisis

Regarding the pedagogical experiments, the final results are likely to demonstrate that massive open learning is good in some situations and bad in others, the academic drive for answers combined with the scientist's readiness to accept and even celebrate negative results should be used to guide MOOCs to the point where they can have the greatest positive impact.

Finally, the sixth chapter explores the future of MOOCs. As the author concludes, there is continuing and legitimate concern over how far MOOCs or any other technology-based educational solution should be allowed to impinge on existing educational structures.
Moreover, despite the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley the real debate about the efficacy of massive open learning is taking place within the academy. A number of commentators clearly saw them as an alternative to traditional colleges and universities that were becoming increasingly expensive and decreasingly demanding. However, the author qualifies as understandable that educators have expressed concerns over the quality, consistency, and academic rigor of the growing number of alternatives to institution-based classroom learning, pointing out how uncontrolled diversification could end up watering down the educational and economic values of a diploma.

Talking about "nontraditional learners" Heber notes that when MOOCs are implemented in atypical learning environments, they are often part of a blended learning environments when students watch videos together in the same physical location and then spend the rest of class discussing the content. This "atypical environments" are usually rural areas, areas with few hours of electricity, etc.

In the closure of the book, the author explains in detail their aim to achieve a philosophical grade only completing MOOCs. After this experience, Heber suggests that if a program allowed him to complete that many courses in one year rather than four, the online courses he took must be easier than the ones someone would go through in a traditional four-year program. Beside this, he recognizes that after this experience he has now enough knowledge on modern philosophical concepts to use them in the analysis of this book. And "might it be fair to consider myself the equivalent of a graduating senior with a BA in philosophy who is now capable of applying important philosophical principles to different subjects and different aspects of life?" The discussion is open

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