

LINC 2013

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Boston – 17 June 2013

Plenary Session: Four Perspectives on MOOCs

MOOCs: What lies beyond the trough of disillusionment?

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Abstract

With universities all over the world now gearing up to offer MOOCs we are reaching the ‘peak of inflated expectations’ that is followed, in the Technology Hype Cycle, by the ‘trough of disillusionment’. But what lies beyond that? Will MOOCs have any lasting impact on higher education? Will universities offering MOOCs ever climb the ‘slope of enlightenment’ and reach the ‘plateau of productivity’ that complete the cycle?

Introduction

Thank you for asking me to speak at this interesting meeting. Your invitation shows admirable broad-mindedness, because last year I wrote a paper, titled *Making Sense of MOOCs: Musings in a Maze of Myth, Paradox and Possibility*, that was critical of the MOOCs bandwagon. Six months later, despite the media’s feverish enthusiasm for MOOCs, I remain a sceptic.

But I have always singled out MIT as MOOCs’ good guys because, ever since you launched your OpenCourseware initiative in the late 1990s, MIT’s engagement with online learning has been part of a long-term strategy to master this potentially disruptive technology for the benefit of your campus students. That is a laudable. I’ll return to the bottom part of this slide later.

The flock of institutions that have followed MIT down the MOOCs route have not shown the same level of strategic thinking – for most it seems to be opportunism, me-too-ism or merely confusion about what online learning is. There is a herd instinct here and since the subject is MOOCs cows are more appropriately onomatopoeic than sheep!

My title is *MOOCs: What lies beyond the trough of disillusionment?* I shall explore four points.

First I shall recall a little history. That is tiresome because innovators always like to believe that theirs is the only map to the buried treasure, but on the other hand as George Santayana said, ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’ I began my MOOCs paper last year with the famous quote about Freudianism by psychologist Hans Eysenck: ‘What is new is not true and what is true is not new’.

Second, I shall explore two models that must be standard fare in undergraduate courses at MIT, namely Moore’s Technology Adoption Cycle and Gartner’s Technology Hype

Cycle. Few areas of human activity are more faddish than educational technology. The question is: where will MOOCs go after they slide down from the peak of inflated expectations?

Third, picking up on MIT's 15-year old assumption that online learning is a disruptive technology, I shall speculate about how universities will use online learning as a routine part of their teaching that includes student support and credible assessment for credit. Call this the plateau of productivity in the Technology Hype Cycle.

Finally, I shall ask whether traversing the MOOCs maze will lead us to this happy point. Might they be at best a distraction, or at worst a fad that will actually harm the cause of open and distance learning?

A little history: massive and open universities

So first, a little history! The older folk here will remember the first moon landing on 20 July 1969 and the famous line: 'that's one small step for a man; one giant leap for mankind'. You do not remember, because you were not aware, that three days later, on 23 July 1969, the Open University held its inaugural Charter ceremony. The Chancellor, Lord Geoffrey Crowther, articulated the University's mission that endures to this day: to be 'open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas'.

At the time this radical, large-scale innovation in higher education made the same kind of hit with the media that MOOCs are making now. Many countries soon jumped in, establishing open universities of their own, and new distance teaching universities are still being created today.

In the 1990s I wrote a book about those open universities that had achieved respectable scale, which I defined as over 100,000 active students taking degree-level programmes at a distance. There were 11 such universities in 1995 with an aggregate enrolment of nearly 3 million. Today there must be nearly 30 mega-universities with total enrolments of well over 10 million.

That count only includes the open universities. Today it is practically impossible to calculate the total number of students learning at a distance worldwide if you include distance courses offered by campus universities, but the number is very large. We know, for example, that one quarter of all university students in India are studying at a distance.

What are the key points from my history lesson? Just two.

First, attempts to take higher education to scale are not new. Moreover, unlike MOOCs, which are mostly study material and self-assessment quizzes, usually without access to degrees, the open universities offer full degree programmes with student support and institutionally controlled assessments. Some open universities do it better than others but those that do it well do it brilliantly.

I take the example of the UK Open University, which now has a quarter of a million students. The Open University ranked number 5 in England's national assessments of teaching quality by discipline, one place above my *alma mater*, Oxford. This slide is dated simply because in 2004 the presidents of Britain's elite universities, who hated this type of ranking based on teaching, successfully petitioned prime minister Blair to stop it.

What did not stop is England's annual national assessment of how satisfied students are with their universities. This year the Open University came first and has never ranked lower than third. Like me, you must find it remarkable that a distance teaching university with 250,000 students can give its students a better experience than elite institutions claiming to offer tender, loving care on campus!

I conclude from this that the universities offering MOOCs are short on ambition. It is possible to offer degree study as scale and to do it well. Mass enrolments and quality degrees can go together.

My second historical point is that MOOCs are evolving in ways that may actually obstruct the development of open education. This is the view of George Siemens, who was involved in the world's first MOOC back in 2008. Once again, I exempt MIT from this criticism. MIT led the world into open courseware, leading directly to the UNESCO Forum in 2002. That forum coined the term Open Educational Resources for materials that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared.

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of that event a World Congress on Open Educational Resources was held in Paris last year. It approved by acclamation a Declaration that governments and others should encourage the development of OER in every way possible, which ended with a statement urging governments to encourage the open licensing of material produced with public funds.

The Congress also commissioned a survey on government policies on OER around the world and a text on the business case for OER. Thanks to MIT's pioneering work, OER are development nicely and governments are using them to widen access to education at lower cost. Just one example is my home province of British Columbia, which is offering students free online, open textbooks for the 40 most popular post-secondary courses.

Many people, I think, for instance of Martin Bean, Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, present MOOCs as one further step in the evolution of OER. But in his upcoming keynote to the International Council for Open and Distance Learning in China, George Siemens questions this.

Entitled *How MOOCs are derailing Open Education*, Siemens' speech points out that: 'the original MOOCs (like yours at MIT) were "open" in two respects. First, they were open enrolment to students outside the hosting university. That is open as in "open registration." Second, the materials of the course were licensed using Creative Commons licenses so their materials could be remixed and reused by others. That is open as in "open license".'

Siemens continues: 'The new cohort of MOOCs are distinct from the original MOOCs in that they are "open," thus far, in only one respect: they are open enrolment. The new MOOCs have not yet openly licensed their courses.' He adds: 'As MOOCs continue to develop course content and experiment with various business models, we think it's crucial that they consider adopting open licenses as a default on their digital education offerings. In general, the value proposition can be enhanced for the new MOOCs and their users if the MOOCs openly license their courses'.

Technology Adoption and Technology Hype cycles

I now turn to the Technology Adoption Cycle and the Technology Hype Cycle. These must be well known to you.

Regarding the Technology Adoption Cycle we can ask two questions about MOOCs. First, will there be a gap between the early adopters and the rest? We can't answer this question yet because there are 10,000 universities in the world and, so far, less than 100 are offering MOOCs. The second and more important question is: will most universities decide to offer MOOCs? Is this a must-have technology like mobile phones?

Which brings us to the hype cycle. To judge by the number of invitations that I receive to talk about MOOCs we are now sitting on the peak of inflated expectations. My friend and fellow panellist Professor Tony Bates thinks that we shall sit on this peak for the rest of 2013 before sliding into the trough of disillusionment as evaluations come in and even the institutions with the deepest pockets begin to ask what MOOCs are doing for their bottom line. But the important questions are how will the slope of enlightenment will lead us out of the trough and what a plateau of productivity for MOOCs will look like?

Online Teaching and Learning in Regular Programmes

Let me now shift focus and apply these cycles to online learning and teaching in regular degree programmes. In terms of the Technology Adoption Cycle we have seen a steady rise in the adoption of online teaching. It has been slow, and many online courses are mediocre, but there have been few hiccups or retreats – certainly no chasm.

In his yearly survey of scene Tony Bates considers that this is year when online learning comes of age. This maturation is helped along by the likelihood that nearly all institutions will gradually move much of their regular teaching online, either as purely online courses or as a hybrid of face-to-face and online.

Why will they do this? Four important reasons are that the student body is changing, that students are choosing online learning in ever larger numbers, and that institutions threatened by reduced state grants and the bursting of the tuition fees bubble simply have to get their costs down. Finally and most importantly: when we finally master it, online learning may prove more effective than lecturing.

If we imagine a hype cycle for online learning it would be unlike the one we had earlier. It might look more like this. There were certainly inflated expectations, although nothing like MOOCs, but in this case there is a sense in the academy that there is no alternative, so institutions, students and faculty are climbing a steeper slope of enlightenment with determination. The plateau of productivity is still in the distance, but institutions realize that they must reach it.

Which way out of the MOOCs maze?

So the key question is which way should we head through the MOOCs maze? Will the current expansion of MOOCs offerings help the development of online learning as a routine method of offering undergraduate and graduate degree programmes, or will it cause the image and the reality of open, distance and online learning to regress?

It is too early to say, but let us look at the factors in play? There is good news and bad news on several fronts.

The first potentially good news is that the excited press coverage of MOOCs has created greater public awareness of open, distance and online learning, at least among people with an interest in higher education. If Harvard and London are going online it must be OK! However, this could become bad news as people discover that very few people complete MOOCs successfully and that even those who succeed do not get credit.

Further possible good news is that we finally have a new pedagogy in higher education to augment or replace the millennial tradition of lecturing. But this requires that faculty doing MOOCs work at refining their online pedagogy as a mainstream activity rather than a public relations sideline. Cynics see the little videos that are a standard feature of many MOOCs as massage for faculty megalomania rather than as a serious aid to student learning.

Institutions that make a serious commitment to MOOCs will, of course improve their performance, which is good news. However, while the commercial interests that help institutions offer MOOCs have a business model, there is no obvious business model for institutions themselves and attempts to monetize Internet activity usually degrade the user experience. Copyrighting MOOCs content rather than making it available as Open Education Resources is a good example.

These upsides and downsides bring us back to the fundamental contradiction of MOOCs, which is the tension between offering courses openly and recruiting regular students selectively.

To use a final farmyard analogy from my late colleague Dan Coldeway, elite universities admit students on the venerable principle of ‘good little piggies in, make good bacon out’. The key to getting a degree from elite institutions – and I went to two of them – is to get admitted. Call it a system of ‘difficult in, easy out’. For such institutions to adopt the opposite open university principle, ‘easy in, difficult out’, and to bend their efforts to helping large numbers of their MOOCs students to get credit would require a tremendous paradigm shift.

Conclusion

I conclude that offering MOOCs is not the best route to developing an institutional capacity to offer regular degree programmes online with student support and assessment for credit. That is a separate challenge and must be tackled as such. MOOCs will not bring you to that destination.

Here I declare an interest. Just as various companies such as Coursera, edX and Futurelearn are helping institutions offer MOOCs, others are assisting institutions with the wider challenge of offering regular programmes online. I am a senior advisor to one of them, Academic Partnerships, which has enjoyed considerable success here in the US and is now spreading its wings abroad.

The company’s aim is to help their partner universities ‘to lead students into online award-bearing programmes and have them graduate at rates at least as good as those of their fellow students on campus’

Academic Partnerships offers institutions a range of services in pursuit of this goal: help with course conversion, provision of a technology platform as required, student recruitment, and the organisation of student support.

As a service to all those contemplating offering regular programmes online – or doing so already – Academic Partnerships published last week, in both English and Chinese, a *Guide to Quality in Online Learning*. It was issued under a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA license and hard copies are available free at this conference.

I was proud to part of the international team that developed this Guide, which draws on examples of online learning practice from all over the world. Structured as 16 Frequently Asked Questions, it summarizes the key quality issues in online education in a concise and accessible manner, with an annotated reading list and an extensive bibliography to help you to pursue particular topics further.

My title was *MOOCs: What lies beyond the trough of disillusionment?* My hope is that we can climb the slope of enlightenment in online learning and reach a plateau of productivity where millions of students, all over the world, are highly satisfied with their online degree programmes and institutions have stopped complaining about lack of resources because they have a viable business model again!