

MOOC on MOOC

Script for video

‘Where did MOOCs come from and where should they take us?’

Sir John Daniel

It is a pleasure to contribute to this MOOC on MOOC organised by the Commonwealth of Learning and IIT Kanpur. I congratulate these two organisations on using MOOCs to advance the international development agenda.

This video asks the question: *where did MOOCs come from and where should they take us?*

I shall answer that question in two points. First, open, distance and online learning did not start with MOOCs or even with the Internet. Second, putting courses online does not automatically improve their quality. You can have good online courses and bad online courses, just as you can have good classroom courses and bad classroom courses.

What were the origins of online learning? They go back a long way. Some claim that the letters that Saint Paul sent on donkeys to the first Christian churches nearly 2,000 years ago were an early – and very successful – form of distance teaching and learning.

But modern open, distance and online learning is associated with two technological revolutions, the industrial revolution based on the steam engine and the information revolution based on the computer.

Chancellor Geoffrey Crowther summed this up well at the launch ceremony of the UK Open University 45 years ago. He said: *‘The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the industrial revolution of two centuries ago. Then the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second’.*

The steam engine gave the first great boost to open and distance learning by creating railways. Railways then created postal services in the mid-19th century and almost immediately Isaac Pitman took advantage of reliable mail delivery to teach shorthand by correspondence. This form of distance education developed strongly over the next hundred years, generating theories such as Holmberg’s notion of distance learning as a ‘guided didactic conversation’, which are just as relevant to online learning today.

The 1970s were next great milestone. As Crowther said, ‘the world was caught in a communications revolution’. This was the era of the mass media of radio and television. The Open University transformed correspondence education into multi-media distance

learning. It called it 'supported open learning' and ensured that every student had a tutor to help them.

As it developed over the next 40 years the Open University incorporated into its learning system the successive innovations spawned by the computer. It began teaching online in the 1980s and I took one of its first fully online courses as a student in the 1990s.

I've now just enrolled in my third MOOC from the Open University's FutureLearn consortium. MOOCs are a nice example of how computers and networks have increased the power and possibilities of open and distance learning. But, as you will be learning in this course, MOOCs often lack some of the vital ingredients of a good learning system. Many do not permit Holmberg's 'guided didactic conversations' between learners and teachers, and most do not include student assessment and certification.

That brings me to my second point. Putting a course online does not guarantee its quality. Some modern online courses are better than the multi-media distance learning courses of 20 years ago – but many are not as good.

Over the ten years between 1995 and 2004 the UK government assessed the quality of teaching in all its universities, discipline by discipline. This happened before the Open University went fully online: it was then operating a multi-media system of supported open learning with 200,000 students. Yet in these assessments of teaching quality the Open University ranked number 5 out of 100 universities, one place above Oxford University.

I make the point that achieving quality in open, distance and online learning is not just a matter of using the latest technology. Everything depends on designing the teaching and learning system around the students' needs.

That must be the next step in the development of MOOCs. MOOCs have taken advantage of advances in computer and telecommunications technologies to reach large numbers of people spread all over the world. But in most cases MOOCs are still simply information distribution systems. They make possible a one-way broadcast to learners just like I am doing now.

But technology can also allow us to include multi-directional communication between learners and teachers during the course and also to include rigorous assessments of student learning leading to qualifications. The open universities have been doing this for years and one reason that the UK Open University scored so well in the assessments of teaching quality was the excellence of its student assessment and certification system.

Why have MOOCs been so slow to tackle these challenges of interaction and assessment? It's because the universities that hit the headlines by launching the 2012 wave of MOOCs were selective and exclusive institutions. Harvard University has no

interest in diminishing its mystique and exclusiveness by making its degrees widely available.

But many of you watching me today are in the development business. You are interested in wide access to education, not savage selection; you want to create inclusiveness, not exclusiveness.

So I encourage you to work at taking MOOCs to the next stage – namely online learning at scale that can give students the support they need to succeed and then recognise their achievements with appropriate qualifications.

Only then will we be able to say that MOOCs have been a real milestone in bringing education to all!