
MOOCS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TRADITIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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This paper discusses MOOCs as a trend in higher education¹. It starts with a brief discussion of the history and role of MOOCs in changing the future of education. It then focuses on implications of online open courses on the traditional system of education in higher educational settings. The paper highlights a high student dropout rate on MOOCs, MOOCs' impact on new instructional practice and their role in student's independent learning with the tutor's little guidance. The paper concludes with providing a critical analysis of the question if MOOCs could supersede traditional classrooms of higher education institutions.

Introduction

A rapid change in technologies has altered the education paradigm as web-based instruction started to play a major role in the teaching-and-learning process. Enhanced technologies lead learners to participate in massive open online courses (MOOCs) through online educational platforms without attending traditional face-to-face classrooms. This leads university faculty to reconsider their roles and teaching-and-learning practices (Bell, 2010). Learning technologies have caused a dramatic increase of open online courses for diverse audiences as provided by different universities. These courses attract numerous people from different geographical locations (Tschofen and Mackness, 2012) to participate in collaborative learning in the online platforms by sharing ideas, expertise, distributing knowledge and obtaining new knowledge within the connected educational environment. Moreover, the courses are free or may require just a small amount of money for a certificate of accomplishment or credits. Consequently, there have been concerns that MOOC-based education may replace traditional classrooms and that universities may cease to exist (Brooks, 2012). I believe that despite the fact that these online courses provide learners with free online open courses, they may not substitute higher education settings since MOOCs have not answered some important questions such as high dropouts of students and the role of teacher's guidance in online education. This short paper will focus on the role of MOOCs in the current higher education sector by critically analyzing the question whether MOOCs supersede traditional universities or not (Zhussupbekov, 2015).

What is a MOOC?

Currently, learning and teaching have witnessed some changes from formal education to informal education due to the advancements in technologies. This might be explained by a wide usage of the Internet (Siemens and Weller, 2011). As a result, people can read, send and share information by breaking geographical boundaries between them. However, some technical skills and proficient language knowledge are required in order to participate in these online courses because they can share ideas in a large-scale learning environment (Bell, 2010). It is worth-noting that the first online course was offered by Siemens and Downes in 2008 (Toven-Lindsey, Rhoads and Lozano, 2015) and found continuation in 2012 when prestigious universities in the US (Longstaff, 2014) provided courses for free without any formal requirements which are usually needed when applicants enter traditional *bricks and*

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mortar institutions (Clarke, 2013). As a result, some universities have started to provide courses for free or for a little fee. Therefore, the number of students who participate in these courses has raised and the courses have become massively open for everyone who wants to study at internationally reputed universities. This resulted in suggesting the term MOOC (massive open online course) by Dave Cormier and Bryan Alexander (deWaard, Abajian, Gallagher, Hogue, Keskin, Koutropoulos and Rodriguez, 2011).

In order to develop a clearer understanding of the acronym 'MOOC', several scholars tried to explain the notion by focusing on the words *massive*, *open*, *online* and *course*. Clarke (2013) suggests that it is an online course that does not have entry requirements for a huge number of people of different ages and does not set any restriction for people who do not hold degree certificates or diplomas. McAuley, Stewart, Siemens and Cormier (2010) explain the phenomenon of MOOCs as an engagement of diverse students towards achieving a common learning goal by self-organizing their participation. It does not require admission process to register for the course. However, participants who do not hold some official degrees may not contribute to discussion or peer-evaluation. This creates a gap between degree holders and people who do not have any academic degrees. Cormier and Gillis (2010) assert that the MOOC is a platform where participants are involved in the learning process by sharing course information among themselves via connection and collaboration. Furthermore, Abeer and Miri (2014) state that the MOOCs provide meaningful learning for participants from diverse cultures and nationalities as they take part in different activities such as sharing knowledge in online discussions and peer assessment. Therefore, the MOOCs are online courses that offer an opportunity for people to obtain knowledge which is distributed online and to participate in discussions where they share course materials.

Yuan and Powell (2013) point out that MOOCs provide people with free higher education who are interested in flexible, available and inexpensive education which might be completed in a short period. Moreover, as proponents of MOOCs claim, these courses may offer free high-quality education (Abeer and Miri, 2014). Friedman (2013) views the future with online courses giving an opportunity for everyone who wants to take credits and obtain a college degree from reputed universities, being taught online by internationally recognized professors for a small amount of fee. Therefore, the physical location of the students becomes less important (Toven-Lindsey et al., 2015). This may make changes in the paradigm of people about campus life and perspectives of higher education (Longstaff, 2014). Despite the fact that MOOCs have been seen as a revolution in higher education, these courses may put the traditional system of higher education under the risk (Longstaff, 2014) and may disrupt the current models of higher education (Yuan and Powell, 2013). Moreover, Yuan and Powell (2013) point out that if MOOCs provide full degree courses and official qualifications for participants, this may influence student's enrolment rate at universities and force the universities to rethink their pedagogical processes by applying different creative and innovative teaching and learning practices and reorganizing business models (Gupta and Sambyal, 2013).

Toven-Lindsey et al. (2015) claim that education that is provided by traditional universities may not meet requirements on the labor market and may not equip students with appropriate skills. Consequently, the MOOCs provide an opportunity for learners to choose online courses whichever and whenever they want to complete. Additionally, Siemens (2005) asserts that it has become vital when learners distinguish information which is important or unimportant to them because they do not spend time for information which is not necessary. As a

result, learners become independent when they manage their own learning by choosing a particular online course among numerous opportunities. They also make social connections with people. Kop (2011) suggests that course participants become responsible for the activities such as providing information, managing time, and organizing learning goals with the help of the MOOCs because these activities were under traditional universities' control. It is believed that if the number of participants increases in online courses year by year, this may disrupt some modules that traditional universities offer. Subsequently, the MOOCs may replace some traditional courses or even traditional institutions themselves. However, this proposition has not been proved yet, and students still need some aspects of the traditional universities that cannot be replaced by the MOOCs.

Can MOOCs supersede traditional classrooms at higher education institutions?

I believe that there are several factors of why traditional universities cannot be substituted by MOOCs. The first one is participants' motivation. The participants are driven by intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to take courses. Research by Littlejohn et al. (2015) concludes that people who are interested and eager to gain new knowledge were persons who were intrinsically motivated whereas some participants stated that they were taking the courses with the purpose of receiving a certificate of completion. In the latter case, external factors have influenced the participants' decisions. This might decrease the seriousness of the participants' intentions to complete the online courses that might result in high dropout rates. Therefore, these courses might be suggested as courses for people who want to improve their skills and gain new knowledge. In another relevant study, Fini (2009) found that the majority of people who participated in online courses were learners aged 28 and 69. This category of people would typically hold college degrees. They value online courses as they may prepare them for future career development (Siemens and Weller, 2011). Moreover, Siemens and Weller (2011) claim that informal learners who did not expect to obtain certificates had a lack of motivation and so were due to drop out. Also, if participants do not have English language competency and do not have sufficient ICT skills, they may lose their motivation to study on MOOCs and this may impede active engagement of the learners in the online courses (Kop, 2011).

The second factor of MOOCs' incapacity to replace a traditional classroom is the lack of quality pedagogy in online courses. Since teaching happens online, it requires new teaching approaches and methods which are tailored to teach and assess people online at the same time. For instance, Stacey (2014) states that lecture-based teaching is mastered for many years in traditional universities that might not be appropriate in online courses since participants might become bored by watching online lecture videos and this might provoke them to drop out. As Kay, Reimann, Diebold and Kummerfeld (2013) maintain, teachers have to design and organize their courses so that participants can actively engage in online learning. Experienced teachers of *bricks and mortar institutions* may not transfer their teaching experience from traditional universities to online courses (Kay et al., 2013) because it requires different set of skills, particularly technical skills. Consequently, the development of online courses requires faculty members who have good technical skills in order to design interesting online courses where traditional formative assessment and face-to-face tutoring are challenged by online teaching platforms.

The third reason why online learning platforms cannot supersede traditional universities is the tutors' insufficient engagement with course participants (Kop and Hill, 2008). It is believed that tutors may provide a student with formative feedback and have a personal approach to every student. For example, some researchers found that learners seek guidance from the instructors or advisors because they feel lost (Clarà & Barberà, 2013). Kop's (2011) research concludes that some MOOCs participants need more coordination and direction towards the completion of assignments. As more people engage with online courses, it becomes more difficult to manage them within the courses and provide them with formative feedback. Consequently, online learners may become passive receivers of information since they may barely contribute to the learning process. If online students have some training experience, it may help them to complete successfully an online course (Morris et al., 2005).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the role of MOOCs in mainstream educational settings. It has attempted to provide an answer to the question of why MOOCs cannot replace traditional universities. Although MOOCs provide an online platform to gain knowledge for free or for a small fee, they cannot replace traditional institutions because they provide students with constructive face-to-face guidance on the part of faculty. People with established professional and academic interests may be strongly motivated to take and complete MOOCs for the sake of their continuing professional development. Beginning learners or novice students without their initial undergraduate degrees or diplomas, may need a closer face-to-face guidance and feedback for their future career development. Despite the increasing trend of designing a great variety of MOOCs in different subjects and fields, traditional face-to-face classrooms and universities are here to stay.

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