Title
Massive Open Online Courses: The MOOC Revolution Edited by Paul Kim

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/66k2v39p

Journal
InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 11(2)

Author
Chtena, Natascha

Publication Date
2015

DOI
10.5070/D4112027189

Copyright Information

Massive Open Online Courses: The MOOC Revolution edited by Paul Kim. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014. 166 pp. ISBN-13 978-0415733090.

Proponents of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) had big dreams. After Stanford professor Sebastian Thrun launched an online class in 2011 on Artificial Intelligence that managed to attract 160,000 students of diverse ages and nationalities (Chafkin, 2013), many believed that this new technology would democratize education, improve its quality, and ensure universal accessibility. The most enthusiastic advocates of MOOCs were convinced that the free courses would provide a high-caliber education to anyone with Internet access and a willingness to learn. But critics, many of whom were university professors, were concerned about the impact MOOCs would have on the future of non-elite postsecondary institutions and the achievement of disadvantaged students. Their fears seemed to be confirmed when in the summer of 2013, a high-profile experiment to use MOOCs at San Jose State University backfired (Rivard, 2013). Citing disappointing student performance as the reason, the university pulled out of their partnership with provider Udacity, shortly thereafter, Thrun abandoned higher education to focus on corporate training (Chafkin, 2013). Skepticism started building around MOOCs, as it became increasingly clear that they would not live up to their initial promise of democratizing education for everyone.

Nevertheless, MOOCs did not go away, disproving those eager to dismiss them as merely another overhyped technology. Experimentation by providers has continued, as has research by academics and practitioners seeking to better understand MOOCs' potential and limitations. Amidst changing times, Paul Kim's edited volume, M*assive Open Online Courses: The MOOC Revolution* makes a significant contribution toward understanding the present and –in particular – future of the MOOC movement. In an effort to speak to a wide audience of educators, administrators, developers, and entrepreneurs, Kim brings together experts from the industry and the academic world to help address the challenges of a rapidly evolving marketplace and research field.

As Chief Technology Officer and Assistant Dean of Innovation at Stanford's Graduate School of Education, Kim certainly has unique insights into the area of technology-focused innovation in teaching and learning. It is thus surprising and a little disappointing that *Massive Open Online Courses: The MOOC Revolution* only features a brief introduction penned by the editor of the volume. In his note, Kim identifies pedagogy as a major, but as yet underexplored issue in relation to MOOCs. While much has been said about the technological aspect of MOOCs and their institutional implications, very little work has emerged that explores issues around instruction and teacher's professional development.

Kim does not attempt to offer a proper corrective here, and in a meager 156 pages, he likely would not be able to. He does, however, seek to start the conversation by including a series of essays that address the issue of pedagogy from different perspectives and in a multiplicity of ways. The volume is divided into nine chapters. In the first chapter, Jane E. Klobas, Bruce Mackintosh, and Jamie Murphy provide an introduction to the MOOC landscape and describe each of the main actors in the MOOC ecosystem: the providers, platforms, teachers, and learners. In the second chapter, Sian Bayne and Jen Ross provide an overview of current pedagogical debates concerning MOOCs, arguing against the popular belief that the platform dictates the pedagogical approach. At the center of this discussion is the question of participation and learning analytics, which the authors hope will provide insights into retention, feedback and teaching in these environments. Zooming out of the virtual classroom, Jeff Haywood and Hamish Macleod draw attention to the larger ecosystem within which MOOCs operate. These authors devote the third chapter to a discussion of the university's point of view (in terms of motivation, coordination, and decision-making), and provide specific insight into the University of Edinburgh's approach. They conclude with some predictions on the future of MOOCs, suggesting, among other things, that MOOC providers will likely abandon ideas of global expansion by increasingly targeting local markets.

In the fourth chapter, Larry Johnson and Samantha Adams Becker approach locality or localization from a different angle. They discuss what have been termed "anti-MOOCs," efforts driven by disenchantment with traditional, much larger MOOCs. The authors provide various examples of these "anti-MOOCs," which are adaptations of MOOCs applied to smaller student groups, often at a single university. In the following chapter, Victor Hu discusses the challenges MOOC providers face in an effort to develop sustainable business models, while in chapter six Dennis Yang and Meg Evans return to locality and the question of local versus global as related to content.

In what is arguably one of the more pertinent essays of the volume, Evans and Yang argue for a future where MOOCs teach topics that matter at the local-level. The authors acknowledge that MOOCs are not a panacea and cannot take the place of malfunctioning education systems. MOOCs, they argue, "must be part of a broader strategy to increase access to affordable and applicable education that includes primary school development, blended learning, apprenticeships, and mentoring" (p. 94). This is a message that needs to be heard, particularly by educational leaders, advisors, and policy makers, who tend pursue after "quick fixes" and "magic tools" and are thus susceptible to what Evgeny Morozov has described as "technological solutionism" (Morozov, 2014). Technological solutionism is the tendency to think that society's problems – including the shortcomings of formal education systems – can be solved through technology.

From their inception media pundits and ed-tech gurus have hyped MOOCs as a revolutionary tool that can and will offer a standardized, universal solution to educational problems around the globe. Yet, as the aforementioned experiment at San Jose State University proved, no solution can ignore local realities, priorities and needs.

Focused around the nature of participation and the legal issues surrounding openness, chapters six and seven take the reader on a quite different route. Farnaz Ronaghi, Amin Saberi, and Anne Trumbore describe the design principles they embedded into the Novoed MOOC platform to facilitate networked collaboration and project-based learning through mechanisms such as participant engagement scores, algorithmic team formation, and peer evaluations. By conceptualizing MOOCs as sociotechnical artifacts, the authors draw attention to the social nature of learning and participant experiences in these courses. In chapter eight, Samantha Bernstein is concerned with the "open" character of MOOCs and the controversy surrounding the term. Focusing primarily on commercialized MOOCs, or xMOOCs, Bernstein discusses some of the copyright challenges of faculty-generated content, student work, and third-party educational materials. The author also addresses the question of user rights as they relate to analytics collected by providers like Coursera. As her discussion makes evident, the different stakeholders and players in the field face individual challenges that will only increase with the spread of MOOCs.

In the volume's last chapter, the discussion returns to pedagogy, specifically to teacher's professional development. Glenn Kleiman, Mary Ann Wolf, and David Frye describe the lessons learned and future directions of their Massive Open Online Courses for Educators (MOOC-Ed) initiative, which aims at providing professional development for K-12 teachers. Although MOOC-Eds are currently focused on K-12 teachers, it is hoped that they will offer insights into training educators more broadly, including future MOOC designers. The book ends on this hopeful note, but without an epilogue to help the reader situate or process what has been read. Thus, much like the editor intended, the volume functions like a snapshot of current issues and practices around MOOCs, rather than a definitive portrait at this complex phenomenon.

In a revised edition, it would make sense to organize the chapters around major themes that emerge from the essays to help navigate the reader: teaching and learning design; business and sustainability; and openness and scalability, for instance. The current structure feels somewhat rushed and would benefit from more cohesion, particularly given the aforementioned lack of an epilogue. Overall, the collection succeeds in what it sets out to do; it is a useful and timely introduction to MOOCs that contributes to the debate around the troubled relationship between technology, pedagogy, content, and locality.

Readers looking for an in-depth, epistemological analysis of the subject will need to look elsewhere, as will readers interested in the political and economic dimensions of MOOCs. Critical issues like gender, race, and class, for instance, are not addressed in the essays. Despite its lack of engagement with issues of power, ideology and diversity the collection still offers plenty of food for thought, particularly around questions of course design, teaching methodology and copyright protection. What stands out positively here is the editor's ease in light of the uncertainty and his refusal to offer definitive explanations or clear-cut recommendations. Rather, what the different essays included here highlight, is that there are as many ideas about what MOOCs mean and where their potential lies, as there are people producing, using and studying them.

References

Chafkin, M. (2013, November 14). Udacity's Sebastian Thrun Godfather of Free Online Education, Changes Course. *Fast Company*. Retrieved from http://www.fastcompany.com/3021473/udacity-sebastian-thrun-uphill-climb

Morozov, E. (2014). *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. PublicAffairs.

Rivard, R. (2013, July 18). Udacity Project on 'Pause'. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/18/citing-disappointing-student-outcomes-san-jose-state-pauses-work-udacity

Reviewer

Natascha Chtena is a Ph.D. student in Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include the anthropology of information and communication technologies, actor-network, postcolonial and practice theories, and digital learning. Natascha's current research examines the materiality of teaching and learning in virtual learning environments. She holds a Masters in Cultural Studies and Comparative Education from UCLA, a Masters in Media Anthropology from SOAS, University of London and a Postgraduate Certificate in Development Education from the Open University. Natascha is also a Book Reviews Editor for *InterActions,* coordinator of the UC Center for Global Digital Cultures and a regular contributor to *Inside Higher Ed.*