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Markus Deimann et Sebastian Vogt

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Towards a European Perspective on Massive Open Online Courses: The Past, the Present and the Future

Markus Deimann and Sebastian Vogt

FernUniversität in Hagen, Technische Hochschule Mittelhessen (University of Applied Sciences)

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Over the last months, the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) debate has finally come of age, especially after Sebastian Thrun publicly announced that “we have a lousy product” (Chafkin, 2013), and a series of backlashes led to the conclusion that MOOCs mostly benefit those learners with a lot of cultural capital. Before this turning point, MOOCs were portrayed as a completely new educational innovation, and its conceptual ancestors such as distance education were ignored. Furthermore, other types of MOOCs such as the those based on the notion of connectivism, advocated by scholars such as Stephen Downes, George Siemens, and Rita Kop as well as the work around open content (Wiley & Gurrell, 2009), have been squeezed out of the collective memory.

However, these approaches are located within a certain culture that frames our thinking and acting about pedagogy. More precisely, the open education paradigm (for an overview, Deimann & Sloep, 2013) has been dominated by Anglo-American actors such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology which started the global Open Educational Resource (OER) movement a decade ago by opening up their teaching materials to the general public. Similarly, the Open University UK initiated its Open Learning project and in 2011 two famous Ivy League universities, Harvard and Stanford, began to broadcast their lectures that allowed a worldwide audience to participate regardless of their economic, social, or educational status. Inflated with a lot of venture capital, Coursera and Udacity embarked on a mission of providing high quality education to the masses around the globe at affordable prices. Meanwhile, a world-wide MOOC industry emerged and challenged many of higher education’s traditions.

Interestingly, those elite universities are vivid examples of the attempt to capitalize on the rich academic tradition of Europe as manifested, for instance, in the life and career of Charles Eliot (1834 - 1926) who spent two years in Germany and France after returning to America and became the father of American higher education (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). In a similar vein, distance teaching universities (OUUK, FernUniversität in Hagen) reflect a pedagogy that overlaps with many aspects of the MOOC. This pertains, first and foremost, to the insight that teaching and learning at a distance necessitates a special “operating system” that goes beyond large scale distribution of materials via sophisticated technological means but is “geared exclusively to the learning requirements of distance students” (Peters, 2003, p. 90).

Against this background, this special issue attempts to reconcile the much-hyped discourse around (MOOCs) with the European tradition of higher education. The goal is to reconstruct and revive venerable concepts such as: (1) “academic charisma” (Clark, 2006), one of the key influential factors for the modern research university that has become closely embedded in a process of bureaucratization and commodification; (2) public lectures, which were once praised as an instrument for science education for adults (Inkster, 1980) before falling prey to the “great university gamble” (McGettigan, 2013); and (3) the role of knowledge, once with value in itself (disinterested knowledge), now degraded as a marketable commodity which is “valued mainly as a crucial capital for successful competition and economic growth, while the democratic and cultural functions ... tend to become obscured” (Lundahl, 2014, p. 32) and tie them to the MOOC discourse.

Structure of this Issue

We are very pleased to present this selection of valuable papers that respond to our call. To begin with, three papers take on the broadest claims that are attached to MOOCs. The claim “education for all,” as analyzed by Matthias Rohs and Mario Ganz at the Technical University of Kaiserslautern (Germany), reveals that MOOCs are mostly beneficial to those with a high level of academic competence (Matthew effect). Building on Knowledge Gap Theory and the Digital Divide concept, Rohs and Ganz further elaborate on their findings and provide explanation for to provide causes of different usage.

In line with our call for an European MOOC perspective is the paper “Opportunities and threats of the MOOC movement for higher education in Europe” by a large group of authors from seven European institutions and the European Association for Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) that represents the EU-funded HOME (Higher education Online: MOOCs the European way) project. One of the major goals of the project is to develop a framework for a European MOOC perspective and to critically discuss the latest developments.

Another paper located at a more general level is “Theories and Applications of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs): The Case for Hybrid Design” from Abram Anders (University of Minnesota Duluth, United States) which is based on a meta-analysis and synthesis of the research literature to develop a conceptual model of prominent theories and applications of MOOCs. Anders then argues for a hybrid design as it seems to support the greatest diversity of learners.

On a more intermediated, meso-level, the following papers are all targeted at responding to recent calls for European strategies towards MOOCs that are aimed at connecting to previous traditions and reflecting on ways to translate them to the digital age. In this regard, Marco Kalz, Karel Kreijns, Jaap Walhout, Jonatan Castaño-Munoz, Anna Espasa, and Edmundo Tovar present insight from a research project that is targeted at developing a theoretical model to establish a large-scale, cross-provider data collection of participants of (European) MOOCs.

Christian Dalsgaard and Klaus Thestrup from Aarhus University (Denmark) present a theoretically grounded approach to openness and discuss implications for education. Based on the work of John Dewey, the authors argue that there are three main dimensions of openness (transparency, communication and engagement). Although pragmatism is often understood as an American philosophy, there are relations to the European tradition. Moreover, Dalsgaard and Thestrup present a university case to show how educational technologies can support the dimensions of openness.

Mark Brown, Eamon Costello, Enda Donlon, and Mairead Nic Giolla-Mhichil raise the question “How one European university is approaching the challenge” as an attempt to come up with a strategic response. Their case is the Dublin City University which illustrates the complex interplay of interest. The authors also integrate recent literature on MOOCs to draw further conclusions for other institutions.

Another *strategic* MOOC paper is provided by Darco Jansen (EADTU, Netherlands), Robert Schuwer (Fontys University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands), Antonio Teixeira (Universidade Aberta, Portugal) and Cengiz Hakan Aydin (Anadolu University, Turkey) who discuss research from the HOME project (already mentioned above). Given the heavy emphasis on US-based MOOCs, the authors conducted a study to compare institutional MOOC strategies in Europe and the US. Their findings are important steps for a better, more nuanced understanding of the power of MOOCs in relation to specific educational and cultural contexts.

Overall, this special issue has been an interesting endeavor as it steps foot into a new and emerging area, the raising awareness that the predominant US MOOC market has some critical biases. Yet, it has been also relatively unknown how a European response would look like given the various starting points that have been discussed in the media (e.g. dropout rates). Against this background, we are very pleased with the submissions as they present a considerably wide range of approaches to bring forward the European perspective. It is our hope that this will mark the beginning of a broader debate.

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