Open Courses, Informal, Social Learning and Mobile Photography

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and contextualizes them within the broader trends of open, informal and mobile learning. It then discuss Phonar Nation, a free, open, non-credit five-week photography course that was offered twice in 2014 using mobile media to reach youth from 12-18 years of age. The author argues that Phonar Nation highlights several related developments that are leading to positive innovations in education. Firstly, it is not only open access but also uses and produces Creative Commons-licensed content that is open to be shared. Secondly, it is collaborative in the way that it is taught and in the way that participants are encouraged to engage with one another through social media sites. Thirdly, Phonar Nation exemplifies an approach that advocates call “Connected Learning”, which is socially embedded, driven by personal interests, and oriented to further educational and economic opportunities.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, Community Education, Connected Learning, Creative Commons, Mobile Media, MOOC, OER, Open Education, Phonar Nation, Photography

INTRODUCTION

According to the NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Higher Education Edition, the key trends in the adoption of technology include the growing ubiquity of social media, the integration of online, hybrid and collaborative learning, the shift from students as consumers to students as creators, and the evolution of online learning (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014). Mobile devices and apps support and extend these developments, by enabling the “flipped classroom”, by extending the learning context to include the world beyond the classroom, and through the integration of social media and online learning networks. This evolving landscape is the result of changes in attitudes, social practices, educational technologies, learning theories and public policies over the last several years. A review of these changes will provide the background and context for a discussion of Phonar Nation, a course that has arisen as a result of these developments and serves as an example of a more open, collaborative and connected approach to formal and informal education.

MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES (MOOCS)

In The Big Switch, Nicolas Carr draws a parallel between the electrification of America in the late 19th century and the development of computing as a utility at the end of the 20th century. The electrical grid and the resulting centralization and concentration of production, labour and capital supported large-scale factory production and the development of the modern corporation. Pervasive digital networks and computing as a utility will, Carr believes, have a similarly transformational effect on...
institutions, the nature of work, and personal identity in the future (2009). As early as 1995, just two years after Mosaic, the first graphical browser for the World Wide Web, was released, Professor Eli Noam argued that changes in the way that information was produced and distributed were “undermining the traditional flow of information and with it the university structure.” He believed that the traditional university had a “dim future” (Noam, 1995).

Recent experiments with large-scale distributed, online education and courses suggest that, if not “dim”, the future for post-secondary institutions is likely to be significantly different. The popularity of a variety of alternative models that have thrived outside of the walls of academia suggests that the external forces for change might eventually overwhelm internal efforts to maintain the institutional status quo. Public universities have not yet demonstrated that they are able to, or even see the need for, change from within. The danger is that, by the time they recognize that fundamental innovation is not just desirable, but necessary, it may no longer matter — they may have already ceded their privileged position as public providers of higher education to a variety of fast moving for-profit corporations, public/private hybrids and privately-funded non-profit entities that have succeeded in attracting customers, public support and, if they are smart, public funding.

Sebastian Thrun’s “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence,” which was offered through Stanford University in 2011, was the first MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) to attract the attention of the popular press and higher education administrators. The experiment in distributed education attracted 160,000 registrations from 190 countries, and more than 23,000 completed the free, non-credit online course, (“Introduction to Artificial Intelligence,” 2011). The surprising popularity of the initiative led Thrun to leave Stanford to develop Udacity.com, a for-profit Internet start-up focusing on open access science and technical courses, which was launched in February 2012 (Thrun, 2012). Two months later, Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller (also from Stanford University) raised US$16 million in venture capital and launched Coursera, another platform for delivering free courses online. Hosting courses from six elite universities, they soon claimed to be “changing the face of education globally” (“Coursera: Our Vision,” 2012). By October 2014, the education platform was working with more than 100 institutional partners and was offering over 400 courses online (“Coursera: Our Mission,” 2014). EdX, a nonprofit online initiative created and funded by founding partners Harvard and MIT, was also launched in April 2012 to create “a new online-learning experience” and to “research how students learn and how technology can transform learning—both on-campus and worldwide” (“About edX,” 2013). By October 2014, edX was offering over 300 courses through 54 member institutions and had awarded over 100,000 certificates to their online students (“edX: Schools and Partners,” 2014). MOOC platforms soon launched in other countries, including Open2Study (Australia), FutureLearn (UK), OpenupEd (pan-European) and iversity (based in Berlin).

As the list of leading institutions joining the open course bandwagon increased and the number of courses and student enrolments quickly grew, the disruptive nature of MOOCs became a hot topic in the academic and technology press. In August, 2012, the University World News stated that, although the MOOC movement was less that a year old, “it is already clear this will be the game changer in higher education worldwide” and that it was “reverberating through the world’s universities like a tectonic shock” (Marginson, 2012). The sudden emergence and growth of these courses led The New York Times to declare 2012 to be “The Year of the MOOC” (Pappano, 2012). In a January 2013 New York Times opinion piece titled “Revolution Hits the Universities”, Thomas L. Friedman commented that “nothing has more potential to enable us to reimagine higher education than the massive open online course, or MOOC,” citing edX, Coursera and Udacity as the platforms to watch. He noted that, when he visited Coursera in May 2012, about 300,000 students were enrolled in 38 courses, and, by the end of the year, 2.4 million students had enrolled in 214 courses (Friedman, 2013).

In May 2015, the Open University-owned FutureLearn, in collaboration with the British Council, launched what they claimed was “the world’s biggest free online course ever” to be delivered on desktop, tablet and mobile devices. More than 380,000 individuals from 153 counties enrolled in “Understanding IELTS: Techniques for English Language Test”, a free, six-week MOOC designed
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