Chapter 3
MOOCs in the Global Context

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to present a critique of MOOC hype in the international context. The author scrutinizes the claims advanced by MOOC proponents by asking two questions: 1) What are the assumptions about literacy and learning that inform MOOC discourse about mass education of U.S. and foreign citizens? and 2) What could be some unstated political, cultural, and economic purposes behind these MOOC ventures? In order to provide a contextualized and substantiated critique of the exaggerated claims about the innovative nature of MOOC pedagogy and their extended reach to the poor citizens of developing countries, the author presents an analysis of two writing courses offered as MOOCs by Georgia Tech and Ohio State University, both sponsored by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Finally, the author also discusses the implications of this MOOC hype in the international context to the United States.

MOOCs IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

This chapter questions the overall premise that the introduction of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) as a solution to America’s broken university system under various rubrics—a paradigm-shifting educational reform of the outdated lecture-based classroom, entrance into an age of revolutionary technologies which would make assumedly costly instructors redundant, usherance of student-centered, machine-driven innovative pedagogies, or as a plain fiscal expediency (Adams, 2012; Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Friedman, 2013; Marginson, 2012; Parry, 2012). While all of the preceding claims require some critical scrutiny from multiple angles, in this chapter, I primarily focus on much-touted benefits of MOOCs for global masses and present a detailed critique of this claim both from an international and U.S. perspective. The venture capitalists sponsoring these MOOCs, as well as the universities providing the academic fronts, have continually propagated the far-reaching scope of MOOCs as “open access” global education system (Darrow, 2012). Not only has this value been inflated to appeal to the American masses’ sense of benevolence, these claims also have been employed to inflate general enrollment figures because a majority of these MOOCs have been heavily subscribed to by students from other

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1718-4.ch003

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parts of the world. While these MOOCs have been promoted as a great benefit to the world outside of the United States (see, for example, Schroeder 2012), their Americentric content, lack of local contexts, and their dismal completion rates tell a different story about their educational benefit for international students (Wilson & Gruzd, 2014).

Since the pedagogical and ideological implications of these massive courses remain under examined (Altbach 2013; Barlow 2014), I pose the following two interconnected questions about the nature, characteristics, and relevance of MOOCs in the international context to develop my critique:

1. What are the assumptions about literacy and learning that inform MOOC discourse about mass education of U.S. and foreign citizens?
2. What could be some unstated political, cultural, and economic purposes behind these MOOC ventures?

Before delving into these two international questions, I will first deal with the MOOC lore prevalent in the American press and flesh out the emerging metanarrative of these courses, using two particular examples from the field of writing. My purpose in dwelling on these examples is to draw attention to the vast gap between the futuristic claims advanced about the revolutionary improvement MOOCs will make in higher education and the relatively unimpressive pedagogical record of MOOCs so far. The commentary threaded throughout this section delineates the cracks in the MOOC pedagogy while showing that many of the characteristics attributed to the innovative MOOC technology and pedagogy existed prior to the introduction of MOOCs in the past decade. The upcoming MOOC analyses are also aimed at exemplifying the type of American MOOC pedagogy being proffered to the global learners outside the United States as the best education available on the American ground. Siemens (2012) points out, and my key points made about the nature of current MOOC pedagogies below also show, that massive open online courses gain vastly different connotations in the American and international contexts when the vendors of MOOC speak in the language of us and them, and the industrialized first world and that developing World, whether or not this exact phraseology is applied.

Assumptions about Literacy and Learning

The MOOC promoters in general position their projects offering the benefits of American education to the global masses with a novel and revolutionary learner-centered pedagogy. Likewise, they position the MOOC pedagogy as uniquely suited for delivering to those global learners at a scale. As a test of this claim, let us take a familiar element of American Undergraduate experience—the first year Writing course sequence or previously called, “Freshman Writing.” Outside the British settler colony countries—the United States, Canada, and Australia—few universities have an established tradition of writing instruction. Receiving formal instruction in this area is certainly a benefit for those international students interested in improving their English language reading and writing skills or those aspiring to continue their education in this country. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation specifically funded four writing instruction MOOCs which were heavily subscribed by students from other countries. The results reported by some of the instructors teaching these MOOCs undermine two of the highly touted claims about MOOC learning—namely, that: