MOOCs, A Phenomenon with Many Faces: Success and Failures

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ABSTRACT

The research presented analyses the application of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and its successes and failures so far. The authors discuss their different facets that emerged from their initial concept up to the implementation in the United States, Europe and Latin America. The article goes on with a short empirical and comparative study of the attention that the term “MOOCs” has received in different regions over the last five years. In what follows, the most deficient aspects of MOOCs and the resulting consequences will be extended and thus, contributes to explain the rise and fall of the MOOCs. The authors also evaluate factors which have been less discussed in the literature up to date, such as the form and design of their production and distribution processes, economic sustainability as well as prospects to create a global market for MOOCs.

KEYWORDS

Costing of eLearning, Distance Education, Economics, Globalization, GoogleTrends, Markets for Education Content, MOOC, OER

INTRODUCTION

The first online courses with free access and without enrollment fees for the participants were offered by some Canadian lecturers at Manitoba University in 2008. Specific entrance qualifications were not required. As participation was unexpectedly high, these courses were called MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). They were initially an attempt to assess the general interest for a topics such as “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge”, offered free for everybody, and to analyse students’ attitudes and communication patterns.

The guiding framework for studying the course was not strict and detailed. Learning and evaluation was left to the students themselves. Furthermore, the selection of web tools used to collaborate and communicate was not prescribed. The lecturers used the university’s Moodle course development system as a basic framework and gave access to some selected tools, for example tools for translation purposes, to be used, if or when needed (for more details Laaser 2014). The success of the MOOCs in terms of participation numbers was very impressive. The course attracted about 2300 students.

With the growing interest of other universities to follow and participate in the MOOC development a vivid academic discussion started which also included a lot of critical reviews as well (Garcia Aretio, 2017 Bozkurt, Akgün-Ösbek, & Zawacki-Richter (2017)).

Two of the most well known founders of the MOOC concept, George Siemens and Steven Downs later followed different development trails. Whereas Downs stayed with the constructivist approach, Siemens started to develop MOOCs for American Universities, which followed a more behavioristic model with less emphasis on student support and peer evaluation. In the behavioristic
MOOCs the dialogue between lecturers and students was replaced by video recorded live lectures. The profound differences ended in a public dispute between the protagonists themselves (Parr, 2013). As a consequence, the constructivist variant of MOOCs was labelled “cMOOC”, which means that MOOCs were centered on students’ self organization and interaction, whereas the behaviorist MOOCs, offered by leading American universities like MIT, Khan Academy and Stanford University were labelled “xMOOCs” (Daniel, 2012).

The fact that the MOOCs reached extremely high enrollment rates raised a lot of interest in the U.S. As a result especially xMOOCs received substantial funding from the Bill Gates Foundation and from public resources. MOOCs were considered a way to attract international students and to increase the prestige and visibility of the most prestigious American universities.

The hype and high expectations also had strong repercussions in the international press and academic journals. Even with a complex and specific subject like “Artificial Intelligence” the MOOC offered by Khan Academy reached 65.000 enrolled students.

To limit the cost of running the MOOCs, the constructivist approach of the cMOOCs was soon left aside in favour of the design of the xMOOCs. The solution which the xMOOCs provided for content delivery was by online distribution of lecture recordings - mainly talking heads with little or no classroom interaction. In addition, sets of multiple choice test beds were integrated to check individual achievements (Laaser, 2017).

For the distribution of x MOOCs, especially for the voluminous video content, special multimedia platforms were developed by major MOOC platform providers such as edX, Coursera or Udacity, organized as separate units or new enterprises. These platforms host other universities’ MOOCs as well.

The positive emotions and enthusiasm connected with the xMOOC development are clearly expressed in an interview given by Daphne Koller (Coursera) when she said: ‘I think that it is wonderful for students around the world to have access to the content from those universities...’ (the “elite “ universities like Stanford and MIT) (quote from Knowledge@Wharton, 2012). Another opposing view was expressed by Donald Thrun (Khan Academy) after his first enthusiastic start with the Udacity course about “Artificial Inteligence”. After running the course he was shocked by the high drop out rate and admitted ‘We have been in the headlines of journals and newspapers and at the same time we realized that we had failed to educate people according to what we aimed at and I personally headed for. We had an extremely bad product.’ (according to Deamicis, (2014). Charbonneau expressed his scepticism in a blogpost “The MOOC is dead, long live the MOOC’ (Charbonneau, 2013).

Gartner developed a typical life cycle of innovations which shows the rise and fall of expectations related to innovations over time and finally ends up in a phase of consolidation (Gartner, 2017). This cycle is sketched in Figure 1.

Where to allocate xMoocs on this cycle line will be discussed later.

CRITIQUE AND DESCENT OF THE X MOOCs

Independent of the opposing views concerning the MOOC concept one important caveat of MOOCs is their lack of being properly defined. What is the meaning of being a “massive” course. Does a course need 100, 500 or 10.000 enrollees to be considered "massive"? In which sense can a course be regarded as “open” without knowledge of previous learning experience, without knowing the individual quality of internet access, or under which condition it may be independant of time and space. Will the course have to be completely online or are there phases of offline learning included? Finally a position paper of the European Commission that defines the understanding of MOOCs mentions the following characteristics “MOOCs are online courses, designed for a huge number of participants that are accessible for every person from any place by internet without need for previous certificates and which offer complete courses for free (OpenupEd, 2015). This is probably the most rigid definition of a MOOC, but taken seriously this definition would prohibit labelling the actual existing xMOOCs as MOOCs, because in one way or another they are charging students for different
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