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MOOC postscript

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This is a postscript to an article about the evolution of the massive open online course (MOOC). In the brief space of time between the previous article's completion and publication, attitudes to the MOOC appear to be changing rapidly. The current follow-up discusses the rejection of key MOOC principles by Harvard University and its replacement by small private online courses, not obviously different from the online education offered by distance education institutions since the mid-90s. The article also presents evidence suggesting that the previous widespread acceptance of MOOCs has been more myth than reality.

Keywords: massive open online courses; MOOC; small private online courses; SPOC; connectivism; Doctor Spock

Introduction

What a difference a few weeks can make. In March 2013, I emerged from retirement to write a reflection for this journal (Baggaley, 2013b) about the rapid rise of the massive open online course (MOOC). In it, I lamented the fact that MOOCs tend not to be based on widely accepted instructional principles. The major MOOC providers, Coursera, edX, and Udacity, have offered a range of approaches with one central problem—massive student numbers are impossible for teachers to handle. To deal with the problem, MOOCs commonly offer a simple solution—get the students to teach and grade each other. As it turns out, in early 2013, other writers of senior vintage were also preparing presentations lamenting this development. Romiszowski (2013) indicated that MOOC practices are by no means new; Bates (2013) asked why institutions such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), in championing MOOCs, are ignoring 25 years of experience and research as to how they should be designed effectively; and Naidu (in press) pointed out that while MOOCs may be useful in causing us to rethink educational practices, their success will depend on how well they manage common challenges facing learning and teaching in large cohorts, such as learner engagement, assessment, and feedback. I don't recall a band of educational technology veterans ever launching simultaneously into print in this way with essentially the same message.

In June 2013, Tony Bates joined with another renowned distance educator, Sir John Daniel, in taking issue with the edX President, Anant Agarwal, in an MIT panel discussion. Daniel (2013) also stressed the MOOC movement's disregard for experience gained in the development of massive open courses over 40 years. Then,

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in July 2013, Agarwal was interviewed on the late-night US talk show, *The Colbert report* (Stewart, Purcell, & Colbert, 2013). He didn't appear in the slightest bit swayed by the recent naysaying of Bates, Daniel, and others; and he repeated the mantras offered since the MOOC was first mooted—about the value of student connection, learner direction, and teacher rejection. But Stephen Colbert, a skilled and acid interviewer, responded incredulously to Agarwal's points about massiveness, openness, and the learner as teacher, and the audience roared with laughter in apparent agreement with Colbert's barbs. The odds were certainly stacked in favor of audience agreement with the host; and with warning of Colbert's tactics, Agarwal could have defended himself better. Nonetheless, it was the first time I believe I have ever seen online learning lampooned on popular television. The raucous studio laughter suggested that MOOCs are not taken as seriously in US society as we might assume from reading the journals and blogs of our narrow academic world; and the interview was a reminder of how hype can delude us into believing that if we don't go along with a trend we are out of step, whereas in fact it may be those who do join the bandwagon who are in the minority.

Two contradictory views of that conclusion are emerging. According to the latest "Horizon Report" (Johnson et al., 2013), MOOCs are here to stay, and will find mainstream educational acceptance in a year or less. But Horizon Report predictions have been wrong before (Baggaley, 2013a); and a recent study by the Babson Survey Research Group concludes that the proportion of educational institutions supporting MOOCs is actually very small (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Most US higher education institutions (55.4%) remain undecided about MOOCs, and 32.7% of them say they have no plans to offer a MOOC. Only 2.6% of institutions state that they are currently experimenting with MOOCs; and a slightly larger proportion (9.4%) is planning to offer them. This is far from the 20% adoption level defined by the Horizon Reports as their criterion for "mainstream use" (Johnson et al., 2013, p. 39).

A final significant moment in an eventful few months occurred in September 2013, when one of the most auspicious champions of MOOCs, Harvard University, appeared to reject its two major precepts, massiveness and openness. Professor Robert Lue, Director of Teaching and Learning at Harvard and chair of the University's online trials, stated that Harvard is now "post-MOOC," and will henceforward be offering small private online courses (SPOCs) (Coughlan, 2013). The M and O seemed to be falling off the bandwagon even as we watched. Not to be confused with the Sex Professionals of Canada, SPOCs at Harvard are "small" courses limited to tens or hundreds of students, and "private" in view of their participants' selection via a closed application process—in other words, the kind of online courses that distance education (DE) institutions have been providing since the mid-90s! Who would have guessed that regular DE methods would find favor in the educational mainstream so rapidly?!

The explanation for this, of course, is that Harvard is using the SPOC acronym to suggest that its latest version of online education has something new about it, just as the massive online course providers have exploited the MOOC acronym to suggest they were being innovative. If the 2012–2013 flirtation with the MOOC term has had any useful effects, it may be the way in which it has allowed traditional universities to save face in favoring online education after opposing it for so long—one of the many paradoxes of the MOOC trend listed by Daniel (2012). Another spin-off of the trend has been the way it has helped to revive educational video—a welcome return to favor now that online bandwidth is sufficient for good video

transmission in many parts of the world, though, like MOOCs, currently varying in quality (Winter, 2013).

MOOC requiem?

But even the use of video in massive courses is not new. Apikul (2013) gives a reminder that the Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP) has provided online and satellite-TV courses to 10,000 students simultaneously for a decade; and the open universities of China and India have been doing so for 30 years (Baggaley & Belawati, 2010). So, it is premature to say that MOOCs are now dead, for well-designed courses such as those provided by the VUP can be massive and open without flouting pedagogical guidelines (Malik, 2010). MOOCs may not be called MOOCs from now on, of course, if that term is now turning sour; and the suggestion by MOOC providers (e.g. Coursera, 2013) that their courses are appropriate for worldwide adoption is being found to be groundless by MOOC evaluations that are now emerging (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013). These early reports agree on the lack of published MOOC evaluations to date involving developing nations participants and on the problems many students experience with MOOCs' connectivist and learner-constructed methods (Baggaley, 2014).

The current questioning of its massiveness and openness is not a triumph for those who promoted the MOOC idea originally—notably bloggers including Siemens (2008–2012), Downes (2008–2013); and Siemens (2012, 2013) is currently distancing himself from the way MOOCs have evolved in the hands of others. The so-called theory of connectivism offered by this team to help justify the learner-centered emphasis of MOOCs (Downes, 2004–2012; Siemens, 2005–2012) has also been called into question. In promoting it, they gave little or no credit to writers who had covered the same notion in detail previously, and evaluation studies have since indicated pedagogical deficiencies in the early "connectivist MOOCs" that Siemens and Downes designed and administered (Baggaley, 2012, 2013b). Connectivism has also been criticized for its lack of originality by Clarà and Barberà (2013), and for having emerged too quickly without the benefits of due deliberation and debate in online publications that permit instant commentary but fail to meet conventional academic standards (Lange, 2011, cited in Talk:Connectivism, 2013). Lange went so far as to accuse connectivism of being a baseless hoax. Her criticisms were so unusually indignant and harsh, in fact, that they allowed connectivism supporters to accuse them of being too elitist and emotionally charged for credibility (Mackness, 2011). In view of the current rejection of MOOC principles and their connectivist underpinnings at Harvard, however, one can no longer dismiss Lange's arguments so easily. One can even use her arguments to predict the rapid rise and fall of the MOOC itself.

The MOOC is a prime example of the rapid adoption of new technologies described by the Gartner Hype model (Daniel, 2013). At present, MOOCs sit at the Hype Cycle's "peak of inflated expectations" (p. 2), and the coming months will reveal whether or not they now join educational cloud computing and virtual worlds in the "trough of disillusionment" (p. 4). In September 2013, it was too late to take stock of these rapid developments in my previous *DE* article; and at times I wonder if I should mix my conventional publishing with some blogging, to give myself a platform in the heady world of instant commentary and feedback. But the evolution of the MOOC has not been a triumph for the blogging world either.

Blogs are like conference presentations. They provide a preliminary platform for testing ideas not yet vetted for conventional publication. They bring enthusiasts together to champion notions that they may believe, without checking, to be original, and which may sound beguilingly credible when wrapped in a pert little acronym or a jargon term ending with "ism." As an analysis of "the blogosphere" by Adamic and Glance (2005) showed, blogs attract like-minded participants rather than those with opposing views, so their ideas can flourish largely unchallenged. The MOOC's evolution in blogs since 2008 has been a case in point. That cute acronym has been exploited by commercial interests to suggest that the MOOC is a new idea; and their sales talk has stimulated a storm of blogging discussion of insubstantial ideas about the learner as teacher that might never have seen the light of day in more rigorous academic publications. Perhaps most remarkably, the MOOC phenomenon has promoted ideas about the irrelevance of teachers. On the one hand, this debate has generated attention to the poor teaching to be found in any medium. Otherwise, quite frankly, it is difficult to believe we are now having to defend the general value of teachers in serious academic discussion.

Conclusions

We are gathered here to mark if not to regret the possible beginnings of the MOOC's loss of educational support, and the return to more solid online methods than its "connectivist" tenets have proposed. In previous writings, I have tried to be generous in my views about connectivism, and to offer positive as well as negative justifications for the notion. For example, I have commented that, although not original, the modern reinvention of earlier connectivist ideas may be useful as a timely reminder of the need for more synchronous online interaction in DE, and for less preoccupation with impersonal asynchronous methods (Baggaley, 2012). In return for the attempted balance of this comment, however, I have found it quoted out of context to identify me as a connectivism supporter (Tinmaz, 2012). I hope never to fall into that category in relation to MOOCs, and I describe them now without equivocation as a naïve and damaging blip in the educational media's long and carefully grounded history. Learner-constructed practices may be useful as one option among many but not as the only option, as in many MOOCs.

One can be grateful to SPOCs for attempting to overcome the loss of pedagogical principle caused by MOOCs, and for returning to regular methods of online education that were not designed to make the teacher's role impracticable. One can be grateful to SPOCs for this even though their advocates seem to be inaccurately representing the "small, private online course" (Shimabukuru, 2013) as an innovation. The SPOCs that will now evolve may well prove to be qualitatively different from previous forms of online education, but one should not overlook the possibility that this difference will not be in the direction SPOC advocates may imagine. For if these new acronym promoters are unfamiliar with the copious literature of online education, their SPOC offerings may well be inferior to those developed over the last two decades.

The educators who have coined the SPOC acronym can be gratified, however, by the thought that it would probably have found support from Benjamin Spock, the pediatrician. As long as SPOCs protect the teacher's role in education, they can be justified by Dr. Spock's adage: "The child supplies the power, but the parents have to do the steering" (BrainyQuote, 2001–2013).

Reviewers' conclusions

At the beginning of this article, I noted that I don't recall ever seeing so many educational technology veterans appear simultaneously in print with essentially the same message, in the way that so many are currently speaking out about MOOCs. I was equally surprised to see the reviewers of this article all united with the article's negative message about MOOCs, and inviting me to add their own detailed amplifications of it. Of course, they made these comments anonymously, and I would feel bad about incorporating so many points as though they were by me. So, with the editor's permission, I append the following summary of the reviewers' comments. They add to the chorus of disapproval about MOOCs very capably.

> The concerns expressed about MOOCs by those who understand and follow educational technology should inform our thinking about them. There has been a clear pattern of technologies that were going to change and save education but never did—over-promising and then under-delivering. The pattern goes back decades, and yet we continue to make the same mistakes. A focus on technology without a focus on pedagogy has always been a recipe for failure, and for the constant "no-significant difference" conclusions of comparative media studies. Many MOOC proponents don't seem to understand this.

> For whatever good MOOCs may offer, they are unlikely to have sustaining impact, as with so many technologies in education, because of their neglect of teaching and learning principles, and their emphasis on technological and logistical factors. They have the wrong focus as many technology supporters have always had. It never was about the technology—not then, not now. When motion pictures were first invented and used for education, they were going to eliminate all other forms of education. So was radio, television, mainframe computers via CAI, then PCs, then the Internet, then …

> As the Hype Cycle illustrates, many MOOCs will fall out of favor rapidly, while a few well-designed MOOCs will gain traction because they focus on learning and sound instructional design. But we should not regard the Hype Cycle as suggesting that it is inevitable for technologies to fail, and that we should always drop current technology and chase the latest technology as a better educational solution. We should learn from the mistakes and do better.

> In future, a few efficient MOOCs may quietly go about the business of offering DE without hype and publicity, as some radio or television programs continue today to offer educational material, long after the hype has ceased and the early enthusiasts have lost interest. The open education principles which predated the emergence of the MOOC will also continue to develop after the MOOC has lost its hype and following. Open courseware repositories will provide a useful bridge between casual informal learning and formal study by using TV, radio, and the Internet to alert learners to topics and opportunities for study, then providing free access to open resources and the opportunity to pay a fee for further support.

Acknowledgments

Notes on contributor

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