Making sense of MOOCs

Massive online open courses or MOOCs as they are known is humourously described Fiona Hollands at a TEDx Teachers College presentation.

Entering the MOOC maze...

There has been a great deal of hype about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in the past few year. Some people argue that they are set to revolutionise Higher Education, while others claim they are a flash in the pan and as relevant to education as a Sinclair C5 was back in the day. But what are MOOCs exactly?

MOOCs generally share a few key characteristics:

- They take place entirely online
- They do not cost anything
- They usually have a fixed start and end point and last between 4 - 15 weeks
- They frequently have large numbers of students distributed geographically around the world
- They do not generally provide any formal, recognised certification or accreditation
- With very large cohorts there is an extremely limited role for the tutor(s) - individual feedback is not given and there is a reliance on peer support and feedback

Despite these common features, there are two distinct types of MOOC which seem to be heading in very different directions. These two alternative approaches are often referred to as xMOOCs and cMOOCs.
**xMOOC:**

These are generally associated with high profile institutions and partnerships – for example *edX* (a collaboration between MIT and Harvard), *Udacity* (created by professors at Stanford), *Coursera* (an education company which partners with a large number of universities worldwide, including Edinburgh). For a fuller list of these major players, the Chronicle of Higher Education has created an [infographic](#) which also contains details of funding.

These are highly polished operations from some of the world’s best universities, which is partly why these MOOC providers have garnered the most attention. Reports describe courses with 160,000 students and speak breathlessly of how they are bringing education to everybody around the world. What is not mentioned is the fact that these courses also have extremely low levels of completion (around 7% so far), do not make any money for the institutions and don’t actually provide any tangible accreditation for the students taking them. Furthermore, pedagogically they often merely replicate ‘transmission models’ of education with their recorded lectures and quizzes, and may be more suited to certain subject areas e.g. Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Science etc than to others because of the nature of the knowledge / learning involved in that discipline. Nevertheless, the sheer amount of free learning resources being made available by high profile institutions is remarkable and the hysteria surrounding these courses may contribute to moving forward the debate around educational models in a digital age.

**cMOOC:**

In contrast, the cMOOC is, to a certain extent, the original MOOC. Born in Canada in the mid-2000s, these were innovative online courses which aimed to explore the boundaries of online learning in networks, and facilitate socially collaborative learning spaces for massive audiences. Pedagogically, there’s no doubt that these original courses were more ground-breaking – their developers/facilitators spoke of networks and connectivist approaches to learning, used a variety of social media and other ‘Web 2.0’ tools to encourage communities to form and relied on distributed nodes of knowledge and expertise as a resource for participants. In fact, the participants themselves also formed part of this resource. Although these courses were popular, they were never on the same ‘industrial’ scale as some of the xMOOCs, and it is probably fair to say that the
participants were not on the whole entering education for the first time – the courses were and are very popular with educators and those with some experience of online learning.

*Whatever your views on MOOCs, they are certainly a phenomenon which will continue to garner a lot of media attention in the near future, and are therefore worth investigating further.*

For a really in-depth look at the development of MOOCs, the pedagogy behind them and some of the implications for Higher Education, the JISC/Cetis report below may be useful. There is also a new Universities UK report which makes some interesting points:

**ORIGINAL POST BY JIM PETTIWARD JUN 04, 2013**

- eMOOCS - THE BIG HITTERS
- cMOOCS - THE ORIGINAL MOOCS
- WHY NOT TRY ONE FOR YOURSELF?

The video above introduces you to the narrative surrounding the more famous MOOCs. It features Peter Norvig, one of the Stanford founders of Udacity, describing some of the decisions that went in to developing one of their MOOCs. Below you’ll find links to blog posts and articles taking a look at xMOOCs from various angles – here you’ll find some of the key arguments for and against this type of educational model.

**The March of the MOOCs – Monstrous Open Online Courses**

**What Happens when a MOOC Goes Wrong**

Jeff Haywood (Edinburgh University) gives a *reasoned explanation* of his university’s decision to sign up to Coursera to provide a MOOC.

Here’s the view from some (US) professors who have experienced teaching on MOOCs.

**The Professors who make the MOOCs**

**The MOOC will soon die – long live the MOOC**


...and a backlash from some philosophy professors

If you’re interested in the pedagogical aspects of MOOCs, a good place to start is with this blog post from Paul Stacey.

Looking at the history of MOOCs takes you back to the mid-2000s and names like Dave Cormier, Stephen Downes, George Siemens, Alex Couros and David Wiley. In his video (above) Dave Cormier describes how the original MOOCs were a lot more about connections, networks and participatory learning and the role of MOOCs in lifelong learning.

**Here’s an example of a Connectivist cMOOC: DS106**

The PDF below describes how an xMOOC platform (Coursera) was used by Edinburgh University to provide a cMOOC type experience:

[Image: CC-BY: Sarah Murray]

If you’re looking for an xMOOC from one of the big players such as edX, Coursera etc. a good place to start is with the MOOC aggregator below:

http://www.class-central.com/

(alternatively just use google to search for what you want to learn AND MOOC)

Connectivist cMOOCs aren’t as ubiquitous as xMOOCs - they are often run by and for educators, but a good place to start is with the original cMOOC community:

http://www.mooc.ca/courses.htm
http://www.connectivistmoocs.org/