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Editorial
The MOOC phenomenon: toward lifelong education for all?

JOHN HOLFord, PETER JARVIS, MARCELLA MILANA, RICHARD WALLER and SUSAN WEBB

In one of his more technologically determined moments, Marx famously remarked that ‘[t]he hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist’ (Marx, 1963/1847, p. 109). Education, no less than society as a whole, has been shaped by technology: writing, the codex, paper, the printing press, the blackboard, the slate, the epidiascope, the fountain pen—all have very clearly shaped how knowledge was developed and disseminated, and how people could study and learn.

In an age of Powerpoint, the Internet, Skype and the ‘virtual classroom’, the importance of technology for education is of course, a truism. Yet, perhaps strangely, specifically ‘educational’ technologies have always been of quite minor significance—certainly for adult and lifelong education—when set beside broader technological developments. Many years ago, Harrison (1961) showed how the development of railways made university adult education possible in nineteenth-century Britain. Correspondence courses everywhere have relied on cheap paper, cheap printing, and—probably most of all—universal and efficient postal services. The British government’s original name for the Open University, A University of the Air (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1966), reflected its reliance on radio and television.

While the power of technology to shape education is not in doubt, exactly how it does so is a matter of constant debate. Most new technologies have their evangelists, though many have proven false prophets. Educational history is peppered with technologies whose impact was far smaller, or more transient, than their advocates expected; likewise, there are many examples of technologies whose impact came only after a ‘lag’ of years or decades. To take an extreme example, libraries’ pedagogical role in universities changed when printing made books cheaper and more plentiful—but not ‘until more than two and a half centuries after the introduction of print’ (Moodie, 2014, p. 457).

The most recent objects of adoration among technological evangelists are ‘MOOCs’—Massive Open Online Courses. They will, we are told, change education out of recognition: partly by the new opportunities they present and partly by their threat to existing institutions, systems and structures. The authors of An Avalanche is Coming, for instance, have assured us that MOOCs both threaten ‘traditional 20th century universities’ which ‘don’t change radically’, and offer them ‘huge opportunities … if they do’ (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013, p. 3).

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That the bulk of universities are public, not-for-profit, institutions—while Barber and his colleagues are leading employees of Pearson, ‘the world’s leading [private sector] learning company’ (Pearson, 2014), proprietors, *inter alia*, of the *Financial Times*, Penguin Random House, and Pearson Education—may give us pause for thought. A generation which has experienced not only a ‘dot.com’ bubble but also a global depression fuelled by ‘sub-prime’ property might be expected to treat much-hyped new opportunities with a degree of scepticism (That said, J.K. Galbraith’s pessimism [1961, p. 21] that knowledge of the causes of the 1929 Crash could avert another proved sadly prescient: ‘There is no chance that ... those involved will see the nature of their illusion and so protect themselves and the system’).

But Barber and his associates were not crying in the wilderness: many in governments, think-tanks, universities, colleges and the private sector share this view. Having started in the USA, several MOOC platforms and entrepreneurs are now well established in Europe and Asia. Some educational leaders genuinely believe that they will be a ‘game-changer’—seeing them as widening access, improving the quality of learning, building their institution’s brand, stimulating innovation across the institution, generating revenue and diversifying income sources. Some, probably, see little strong case, but feel that the risk of being left behind outweighs the risks of engaging: ‘we can’t afford not to!’

What are we to make of MOOCs? After the hype, a body of research is now emerging; most, however, has taken an institutional perspective. A review of research for the UK government concluded that elite institutions—and by this it meant elite higher education institutions—are widely engaging enthusiastically in MOOCs by lending brand, content, funds, staff, badging and policy support. They see opportunities for brand enhancement, pedagogic experimentation, recruitment and business model innovation’ (Haggard et al., 2013, p. 4); smaller or less prestigious institutions have not—whether ‘through lack of appetite, lack of capacity, or lack of opportunity’. They fear ‘being left behind’ or ‘losing market share and recruits’, but also argue that MOOCs may be ‘unable to serve learners with more complex learning needs’ (Haggard et al., 2013, p. 4).

This review points to several areas of division between ‘enthusiasts’ and ‘sceptics’—and, very interestingly, concludes that although sceptical perspectives ‘probably represent the position of the vast bulk of post-16 educational activity, the sceptical literature reflecting these concerns is less visible and less extensive.’ (Haggard et al., 2013, p. 4) Have research funders and research projects been blinded by the hype, or are the grounds for scepticism genuinely weak? It remains to be seen: the same report concluded that the literature on MOOCs and further education was ‘sparse’ (Haggard et al., 2013, p. 8).

What do MOOCs offer to lifelong and adult education? If the literature on further education in the UK is sparse, then that on adult education—‘poor cousin’ everywhere to all forms of education (Newman, 1979)—is likely to be thinner still. For just this reason, we would encourage research and debate on this, still new, phenomenon. It is unquestionably the case that MOOCs—if they continue to be genuinely ‘open’ to all—offer a wide range of sophisticated learning material to adults. Haggard et al. found authors arguing that ‘high crude dropout rates’ from MOOCs are ‘an irrelevant issue’, despite ‘frequent reference to these numbers in popular discourse’. Adult educators will be familiar with the argument that ease of access can be associated with lack of commitment (‘with
no penalty for exit or entry, lapsing from MOOC enrolments is simply not a significant decision’, as Haggard et al. [2013, p. 8] put it), but a frequent response in adult education to high drop-out rates lay in forms of outreach, community education and learning support.

Other areas for MOOC research include development and operating costs and benefits, institutional motivation, the impact on institutions and education systems, the uses to which the ‘big data’ generated by MOOCs are—and could be—put, and the nature and processes of curriculum development and assessment in MOOCs. Perhaps above all, however, we need exploration of whether MOOCs will reduce, or intensify, the ‘Matthew effect’ in education. ‘For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath’ (St Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 25, verse 29). Arch-sceptics will wish to be convinced that MOOCs will not continue—as early results suggest—to provide high-quality education predominantly to the already highly educated.

Of course, education does not occur in a vacuum. In late nineteenth-century England, university extension was a major social force. Its principal beneficiaries were, not surprisingly, from the middle classes. Just over 100 years ago, Albert Mansbridge published a critique of university extension: universities should work with organisations of the working class—trade unions and co-operative societies in particular—in a partnership to ensure university education was relevant to working people and therefore served the genuine interests of ‘the nation’. Out of this was born the Workers’ Educational Association and University Tutorial Classes—a movement which generated genuinely new and democratic pedagogies, and contributed to the democratisation of education in the twentieth century (Mansbridge, 1903/1944, 1912/1944, 1913). Thoughts along these lines will seem to many unrealistic—vain triumphs of hope over experience—but if nothing else, Mansbridge’s achievement shows that where venture capitalists, in pursuit of big bucks, can spot and exploit market opportunities, visionaries can spot social needs and democratically harness collective efforts to a common purpose.

So was Marx right? Will we inevitably succumb to technology? As so often, what Marx really wrote was rather more subtle than the oft-quoted aphorism suggests. ‘Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces’, he continued. People ‘establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity’, but at the same time they also produce ‘principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations’. In the short term, the March of the MOOC may dominate our thinking, but such ideas ‘are as little eternal as the relations they express.’ (Marx, 1963/1847, p. 109)

References


