



MUCH ADO ABOUT MOOCs

BY RYAN TRACEY

One of the hot topics at the 2014 AITD National Conference was the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). This word MOOC elicits passionate promotion and cynical detraction among our peers in seemingly equal measure, while the rest of us look on wondering what all the fuss is about.

So what is a MOOC anyway? How do they differ from other forms of education? And are they truly open?

These kinds of questions have been the subject of intense discussion and disagreement over the last few years. To be frank, I suspect it reflects the

penchant of intellectuals to complicate matters. Consequently, the definition of "MOOC" was in danger of becoming so conditional that it was of no use to anyone.

Thankfully the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* weighed into the debate with its own definition:

"a course of study made available over the Internet without charge to a very large number of people: anyone who decides to take a MOOC simply logs on to the website and signs up"

I like this definition because it's both simple and concise. But is it accurate?

To answer this question, I suggest we go back to first principles and review the history of MOOCs, with a view to shedding light on their contemporary incarnation.

A very brief history of MOOCs

While MOOCs (or at least MOOC-like courses) have arguably been around for decades, Dave Cormier is credited with coining the term "MOOC" to describe the *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* course facilitated by George Siemens and Stephen Downes in 2008. This course was undertaken online, for free, by over 2000 people around the world.

Fast-forward to today, and a proliferation of MOOC providers has emerged including several big players. For example, Coursera offers over 600 MOOCs on its platform, while Udacity's *Introduction to Computer Science* class attracted over 300,000 sign-ups a couple of years ago.

Back to first principles

It is only fair we consider what Dave Cormier himself has to say on the definition of MOOC. Aside from his blogging and speaking on the topic, he has also uploaded *What is a MOOC?* to YouTube. When you look it up (which I suggest you do!) you will notice that Dave uploaded this clip back in 2010. Has the definition of MOOC changed since then?

Let us consider each component of the acronym separately...

M is for Massive

A MOOC is "massive" because it attracts tens of thousands of participants per intake. For example, the University of Edinburgh's *E-learning and Digital Cultures* course which I undertook attracted over 40,000 students. They hailed from North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

While I found the enormity of it all a little overwhelming at first - particularly as the masses swamped the discussion

forums - I found that many of them dropped off after the first week or so, while the remainder tended to self-organise into their social media forums of choice. This made the interaction a lot more manageable and enjoyable.

I valued the diversity of thinking that such a large of cohort of participants provided, and I expanded my network of peers significantly. We continue to share our experiences and expertise long after the MOOC has ended.

If a lesser known provider offers an open online course, does that make it massive? Potentially. The scalability of the cloud means it might be massive, but of course we could only ever know after it had been run.

Technically, then, the massiveness of an open online course is a matter of past tense. Evidently, however, the likes of Coursera well and truly put the M in MOOC.

O is for Open

Open means different things to different people. According to Dave Cormier, "open" means the work is accessible, participation is free, and the work is shared among all the participants.

Others have emphasised the openness of the educational resources (OERs) on which MOOCs such as *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* were based, but that no longer holds true as so many contemporary MOOCs are based on licensed content.

Other commentators have emphasised the openness of the platform's architecture, but while some MOOC platforms are open source, others most certainly are not.

Regardless of the history, these days the first O in MOOC has settled on the fact that the course is open to anyone who wishes to participate. MOOCs have no prerequisites, entrance exams, applicant interviews or tuition fees. All you need is an internet connection; and while this in itself may present a barrier to some people, a MOOC by

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nomenclature is an open *online course*, not just an open course.

That is not to say that other barriers do not exist either. Access is not the same as *accessibility*, and some people may be challenged by factors such language, digital literacy, bandwidth, firewalls and even national censorship. Notwithstanding the importance of these issues, it is also important to recognise that at its end, the MOOC provider will not deny anyone from signing up.

O is for Online

The second O in MOOC refers to the fact that the course is delivered over the internet. This might involve the distribution of video clips and downloadable readings, supplemented by plenary discussions, segregated social media activity, and perhaps synchronous events such as live chats.

While elements of the course such as the weekly tasks and local meet ups occur offline, the bulk of the course is hosted online.

C is for Course

Another candidate for academic argy bargy, the term "course" for me is simply a series of instructional content delivered over a period of time. This might involve an expert transmitting pre-defined content to the learner as per traditional university lectures and replicated by the so-called xMOOC - but not necessarily.

The so-called cMOOC has the expert *seeding* the course with provocative content, which the participants then analyse, debate, deconstruct and build upon - and in doing so, co-create content of their own. Thus the "instruction" is also sourced from peers.

While MOOCs typically run over

a fixed time period with a start date and an end date, between which each cohort participates semi-synchronously, I predict this constraint will be lifted. I would argue the massiveness of a MOOC supports flexible timing at the individual learner's convenience, as thousands of other people at any one time will be at hand to collaborate with.

Vive la evolution

As the MOOC evolves, so must its definition. What we think of as a telephone today is very different from what we did in the 1800's, though its essential nature remains the same. Why should MOOCs be any different?

I think the boffins at Oxford got it right, for now. A MOOC is a course of study made available over the Internet without charge to a very large number of people. Anyone who decides to take a MOOC simply logs on to the website and signs up.

In other words, a MOOC is a massive open online course.

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