MOOCs: Fad or Revolution?

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Looking back over the year that was 2013, one subject dominated management education discussion like no other topic has ever done so before. That subject, of course, is the MOOC, or to give it its full name, Massive Open Online Courses. Over the past 12 months, MOOCs have arrived like an alien invasion threatening to overturn centuries of tradition in education. And just like a scene from Mars Attacks! there are supporters waving “Welcome to Earth” banners while others are lining up the tanks. Yet there is one strange feature of MOOCs, despite the cacophony in the corridors and at conferences; there has been silence in the academic journals. This is simply because data are scarce and only just becoming available, and the necessary time required for thinking, writing, reviewing, and production. Next year, and probably for several years after, MOOCs are likely to dominate the pages of education journals and the Journal of Management Education in particular. In this editorial, I want to explore the initial hype and hyperbole about MOOCs as a way of setting the scene for the future.

What Is a MOOC?

Although there are many variants to what people consider a MOOC, the starting point is a free, online course that anyone (with an Internet connection) can sign-up for and take. When people use the acronym MOOC, they are usually referring to courses presented on one of the established platforms such as Coursera, edX, or Udacity, although universities are quickly coming online and developing their own delivery systems. The courses vary in quality and

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professionalism from PowerPoint slides with a narration through to full-blown, fully designed courses produced to rigorous professional standards. The platforms allow and encourage MOOC instructors to include tests, activities, and discussion forums in addition to the “lectures.” Some universities have invested substantially in their MOOCs and clearly have engaged professional media people to help with filming, animations, editing, and so forth. At present, almost all MOOCs are stand-alone short courses that do not lead to credit. Many suppliers offer a certificate of completion for a small charge, typically $49. MOOCs differ from online offerings from suppliers such as the Khan Academy or material on video sharing websites (e.g., YouTube) in that they tend to offer a course covering a subject fully rather than the useful nuggets.

MOOCs have aroused a lot of interest because of the huge enrolments they have achieved. Stanford University, for example, reported that more than 300,000 students enrolled for three computer courses (Hyman, 2012). A total of 12,725 registered for a bioelectricity course run by Duke University (Catropa, 2013). Twenty thousand students is not untypical, although there are many concerns about student completion, which rarely gets above 10% (Kizilcec, Piech, & Schneider, 2013; Marcus, 2013).

There are many different ways of viewing MOOCs. Unfortunately though, at this stage of their development, views on MOOCs are theoretical, argumentative, or speculative. No one knows where their arrival will take us, but some lines of argument are shaping our hopes and fears.

**MOOCs as Benign Disruption**

There is no doubting that the arrival of MOOCs has opened up learning and given many people access to knowledge that was previously inconceivable. This has been a goal of many educational initiatives throughout history. One notable example being The Open University in the United Kingdom, which was originally known as The University of the Air, and which used the new-fangled television as a primary means of communication. The Open University has thrived and is the biggest university, by far, in the United Kingdom by student numbers. In many ways, MOOCs are doing the same thing by taking advantage of Internet improvements (e.g., increased bandwidth, faster download speeds, streaming video, and cloud technologies) and the ease of use, greater power, and lower prices of professional cameras; web, networking, and editing software; and computers to reach distant audiences. Now people, wherever they live, have access to learning without having to pay, as long as they have an Internet connection and understand the language in which the course is taught. Viewed in this way, MOOCs are simply the latest installment in the development of distance learning.
Two different types of MOOC have been categorized (Siemens, 2012): the well-financed MOOC (xMOOC) and the connectivist MOOC (cMOOC). The xMOOC is one where money has been lavished on it, and it resembles a traditionally taught course with presentations prepared well in advance. It uses the new technology as an alternative platform to deliver learning. The cMOOC is a different beast altogether. It purports to be a different educational paradigm, a “network-based pedagogy” (Downes, 2011), dubbed connectivism, which is well matched to the new MOOC platform:

At its heart, connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks. Knowledge, therefore, is not acquired, as though it were a thing. It is not transmitted, as though it were some type of communication. (Downes, 2011)

Instead, Downes (2011) argues that learning and knowledge is a sense-making process that emerges from people connecting the diversity of opinions. To maximize learning, people must nurture connections and that the best learners are those who have the ability to spot connections between topics, thoughts, and theories. Viewed in this way, the cMOOC offers the prospect of a different type of learning. These ideas are in their infancy and are yet to be tested, but it is intriguing that a new technology has generated a new theory of learning.

Some commentators are quite negative about the prospects for MOOCs. They point to the low completion rates (Kizilcec et al., 2013) as evidence that it is a failing technology. Those familiar with distance learning will know how much effort goes into the motivation of students to help them get through a course; the timing of assignments, encouragement from the tutor, the pacing of learning, the development of self-help groups, and the design of an examination are examples of some of the things that are manipulated with the learner’s motivation in mind. Moreover, in a “traditional” course, the learner (or a learner’s sponsor) has paid a fee for the course and this is a powerful motivator to get to the end. MOOCs are free, so there is no such incentive; nothing is lost if you find yourself too busy to do it. There is no qualification at the end, and although the better MOOCs will make an effort to engage in discussion forums and the like, contact with the teaching staff is necessarily limited. It is not difficult to make the case that they are a fad and will remain an appendage on the fringes of management education.

A more cynical, but equally benign, perspective is to view MOOCs as a university’s shop window. They can showcase the best teaching and research that a university has to offer. This, of course, is a double-edged sword, and it
is interesting that most MOOC providers in the initial wave are universities high in the rankings and many have invested large sums to produce very swish courses. This marketing perspective has a second version. Rather than shop windows for prospective students, some universities are putting out MOOCs for political reasons; to be able to say to their “Lords and Masters,” “We are up with the times and at the cutting edge of educational technology.” If this perspective becomes the narrative around MOOCs, they seem destined to be short-lived.

MOOCs as Transformational Disruption

There are other perspectives on MOOCs that paint a more gloomy picture—more gloomy for academics and universities that is. In these perspectives, academics are authors of their own downfall, and a radical realignment of universities rewards the biggest and best and threatens the existence of others. These potential outcomes might be the result of universities finding ways to attach credit to MOOC completion, something that is emerging with developments at the University of New England (Loussikian, 2013) and Georgia Institute of Technology (Lewin, 2013). Then the MOOC becomes a global delivery mechanism that reinvents distance learning. The cost of obtaining a degree would then plummet; Georgia Institute of Technology predicts a price of $6,600 for their MOOC-delivered computer science degree compared to the on-campus cost of $45,000 (Lewin, 2013). In such a scenario, the threat is to the market for international students, particularly those who are not studying abroad for visa or experience purposes. Many universities now rely on income from overseas students and even a small reduction in such income will be felt.

Giving credit for courses delivered as MOOCs will be influenced by a number of factors, not least of which is universities’ desire to create such a market. Currently, the biggest stumbling block appears to be the assessment of students, or more bluntly, how can universities be sure that the person claiming to have done the work is the person who has actually done the work. Universities across the globe already have problems with impersonation and plagiarism, and MOOCs would appear to amplify these concerns. But there are solutions already available and more are following. Large distance education universities such as The Open University have set up a worldwide network of examination centers. This is an expensive solution, especially as there exist many networks of examination centers that can be tapped into. An alternative solution is to require some form of video submission that requires students to identify themselves with photographic ID on the screen; in effect, designing assignment work in which the student appears. A more elegant
solution, which will not require students to leave the comfort of their own homes, comes from new technology. It is now possible to “fingerprint” someone’s typing and use this to check that they have written the work (Eisenberg, 2013). It is an interesting development and it seems likely that these innovations will have an impact on assessment beyond the world of MOOCs.

The issue concerning the verification of students’ identity is perhaps the most interesting feature of MOOCs; not because of the possible solutions, but because it brutally exposes the unique differentiator of universities—the ability to award qualifications that people value. Many people and organizations can deliver teaching and research, but they cannot award degrees; that is what makes universities special. In the Brave New MOOC World, we might come to disassociate teaching and assessment. Some universities might decide to abandon the expensive activity of teaching and concentrate on research and assessment. In such a world, there would be a premium on the reputation of universities with students flocking to those whose degrees they value. Such disruption is perhaps unlikely because MOOCs would seem to relate to a narrow niche of students, but there is no denying that the MOOC revolution does expose universities’ key differentiator.

This is a largely theoretical issue that is easy to ignore. To demonstrate the potential of MOOCs to disrupt current markets, consider the following hypothetical scenario. Imagine that a major university (I’m thinking about one such as Harvard, MIT, Wharton, Stanford, London, Insead, Hong Kong UST, or Nanyang) decided to launch an MBA via a MOOC platform. Instead of charging tens of thousands of dollars, they just charge a more modest $250 for assessment of each course, meaning that someone might be able to get an MBA from a top provider without any entrance requirements for $3,000 to $4,000. About 300,000 students flocked to Stanford for a computer MOOC, how many might be attracted to a top MBA program? And when there is a qualification attached, students will have a huge incentive to continue their students to the end. Of course there are issues, such as whether employers will regard such qualifications highly, but the disruptive impact is plain to see.

Another interesting avenue for future research on MOOCs centers on the academic’s future. It seems likely that in the marketing melee and fight for students, “big name” professors are likely to dominate the market. Also, those academics with “something to say” may also draw a crowd. This phenomenon may intensify our academic star culture and change the game for junior academics. Their development would be about making a name for themselves and doing something that will attract the attention of the market. Strangely, therefore, the MOOC revolution, if it comes, may do a lot to move management academics into high-impact research.
There is another way in which academic careers may change, and it is not a good one. Some of the high-quality MOOCs have cost a lot of money to produce. In addition to the academic staff, their production might require a film or TV director, an editor, animators, designers, lighting engineers, web design engineers, actors, and educational designers. Such high-quality MOOCs are high-cost investments. When I worked out the cost of developing MOOC versions of the 12 courses comprising the Master of Leadership at my own university, I found myself looking at seven-figure numbers. Creating these things and making them good costs a lot of money. Interestingly, once produced, they are “in the can,” to borrow language from movie production. And once they are in the can, they can be rolled out as often as the university wishes. It may need to employ some junior staff to monitor discussion forums, but are the stars needed? Might they be contracted like actors on a show-by-show basis? Might we be making ourselves redundant as we make these MOOCs? Even if such an outcome is a bit extreme, MOOCs will create a “try-before-you-buy” environment. Students will be able to put their finger in the water and see if they like what is being offered. Enrollments and completions will be, more than ever, used as a performance indicator and an influence over promotion and salary.

Who knows which, if any, of these scenarios will play out. One thing is for sure—the next few years promise to be interesting times in management education. I hope that the *Journal of Management Education* will be a venue where MOOCs and all their implications are discussed.

Just as I am finishing this editorial a startling piece of news crossed my desk that demonstrates how quickly this field is evolving. Wharton has just announced that its first year MBA courses will be available as MOOCs in the New Year (Lavelle, 2013). They are not credit bearing, and so someone cannot get a Wharton MBA through MOOCs, but it is clear in which direction we are moving. It is surely just a matter of time before someone announces an attractive MOOC MBA. And then the discussion really will start in earnest.

**In This Issue**

I am delighted to announce that in this issue of the *Journal of Management Education* we are reintroducing the resource review section. Our reintroduction of this section reflects changes in the nature of management education. These days, it is commonly accepted that anything and everything within ethical and safety guidelines might be used for teaching as long as its inclusion is justified in terms of satisfying learning objectives. Gone are the days when people using films, games, poems, and the like were sneered at and looked down upon by their colleagues. We now work in much more
enlightened times where engaging students through diverse and innovative means is an accepted and encouraged approach.

Our plan is to include three or four reviews in every issue. Our focus will be on resources that can be used in teaching. Not only will this focus differentiate our reviews from those in other journals, it will also accord with the practical interests of readers. We hope to review a full range of resources including new and imminent releases along with resources that might have been around for many years. We are interested in reviewing any resource that you think might be useful for management educators. This range is reflected in the inaugural offering in this issue with reviews of online talks and training and serious games, alongside a film review.

There are five research articles in this issue. There is an interesting theme running through the first three. In the first article, Syeda Noorein Inamdar and Malu Roldan review MBA capstone courses with the purpose of seeing whether they are teaching four skills that prepare students to meet business job demands: theoretical, practical, applied, and reflective. Learning from developing their own capstone course is the starting point for M. Ann Welsh and Gordon E. Dehler, who combine critical reflection and design thinking to develop integrative learners. In the third article, Paul Hibbert develops this theme by offering an in-depth analysis of reflexivity and reflection.

The final two articles offer fascinating insights into the teaching process. Charles J. Fornaciari and Kathy Lund Dean look at grading and how most instructors experience frustration with his process. They apply the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to provide insight noting that individuals can develop the personality types that they have weaknesses in, thereby improving their grading experience. J. Kirk Ring, Franz W. Kellermanns, Tim Barnett, Allison W. Pearson, and Rodney A. Pearson looked at the impact of a web-based course management system and found that the greater students made use of the system, the higher their course score.

References


