The Forum, the Sardine Can and the Fake: contesting, adapting and practicing the Massive Open Online Course.

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Abstract

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) has emerged at the forefront of a burgeoning open education movement. In the typical MOOC, students are expected to use internet technology as a transparent window to the prestigious university lecture. However, the modes, tendencies and routines of MOOC participation remain significantly under-theorised, and the need for in-depth and extensive research in this area is critical. This paper will foreground the themes of resistance and appropriation in the MOOC through a discussion of *E-learning and Digital Cultures*, a course from the University of Edinburgh in partnership with Coursera. Three events from this course – a forum thread, a course review written by a student, and a final assignment submission - will be used to explore the ways in which teachers and students are responding to, contesting, adopting and practicing higher education in this emerging and digitally-mediated domain.

Keywords

MOOC; open education; digital education; online learning; higher education

Introduction

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) has emerged at the forefront of a burgeoning open education movement, in which internet technology is advanced as both the vehicle for widening participation and the solution to the perceived elitism of the traditional university. High profile MOOC offerings from Silicon Valley start-ups, such as 'Coursera' or 'Udacity', or the Harvard and MIT initiative 'edX', often attract enrolees in their tens of thousands, and have received unprecedented media attention. Despite a long history of distance and online education (for example the Open University in the UK), involving varying degrees of openness (for example the Open Educational Resources movement, or courses pioneered by connectivist theorists, see McAuley, A. *et al.* 2010), advocates of the MOOC frequently predict the impending disruption of higher educational institutions and practices (Adams 2012, Friedman 2013, Marginson 2012, Wente 2012).

These institutionally affiliated MOOCs are typically highly structured, content-driven courses, comprised of pre-recorded lectures, and assessed with automated or peer-marked assignments (Osvaldo Rodriguez 2012). They are courses designed to solve what is perceived to be the fundamental problem in education today: limited access to expert knowledge. Thus, the notion that internet technology provides unproblematic and revolutionary admittance to academic knowledge not only drives the promotion of MOOCs, but is also indicative of the educational rationale that underpins the course format, and the kind of educational experience one is meant to have as a participant. In the typical MOOC, students are expected to use internet technology as a transparent window to the prestigious university lecture, absorbing expert knowledge, and conducting their learning activities within a centralized platform. However, the modes, tendencies and routines of MOOC participation remain significantly under-theorised, and the need for in-depth and extensive research in this area is critical.

This paper will foreground the themes of resistance and appropriation in the Massive Open Online Course through a discussion of *E-learning and Digital Cultures*, a course from the University of Edinburgh in partnership with Coursera, and co-taught by the author. The following three accounts, derived from the design and delivery of the first instance of the course in January 2013, will explore the ways in which teachers and students are responding to, contesting, adopting and practicing higher

education in this emerging and digitally-mediated domain. These narratives derive from a forum thread, a course review written by a student, and a final assignment submission, and will be used to structure a discussion of emergent educational practices in the MOOC. The intention here is to understand how educational practices are forming in response to both the technologies utilised in MOOCs, and conventions of education and learning that are brought to bear upon them. This paper will analyse specific course content produced by teachers and students of *E-learning and Digital Cultures,* as well as selected academic literature and media coverage of MOOCs. Theoretical frameworks associated with the philosophy of technology (Dahlberg, 2004; Kanuka, 2008), critical technology studies (Friesen & Hamilton, 2010), as well as online learning and education technology (Land & Bayne 2011, Selwyn 2011) will underpin this analysis.

The Forum: recognition and resistance

The very first forum post in *E-learning and Digital Cultures* was entitled 'Where are the professors?' It enquired about the absence of video lectures, a feature which the poster was expecting to find upon entering the course site, and the subsequent discussion involved various interpretations of what a MOOC is, should, or could be. Specific posts from this forum thread be illustrated and analysed to prompt an exploration of emerging conventions and expectations within the MOOC format, and, significantly, the ways that these early practices are being contested and resisted through teaching methods and student activity. Claims to an authentic MOOC structure will be shown to vary considerably, while resistance will be suggested to manifest in a number of ways, including both student opposition towards self-directed modes of study and contestation regarding the central role of the teacher.

The Sardine Can: course content as 'objet trouvé'

Rather than pre-recorded video lectures, the content of *E-learning and Digital Cultures* consisted of a teacher-curated and -annotated selection of resources, including public domain short films, open-access academic papers, media reports, and videos, in response to which participants were asked to engage in discussion. A student review, posted online during the course, described *E-learning and Digital Cultures* as analogous to a 'sardine can' that had been smuggled into an art gallery to fool the unsuspecting visitors. This criticism will be used to explore: the idea of 'openness' in relation to the MOOC, specifically the distinction between free enrolment and open content; the fetishization of 'expert knowledge' and the idolisation of the university professor; and ownership of, and participation in, the knowledge producing practices of the MOOC. In addition to specific content from *E-learning and Digital Cultures*, this section will draw upon promotional material from MOOC providers and example video lectures and assessment exercises from a number of Coursera MOOCs. The appropriation of public domain content will thus be explored as a form of resistance to the dominant design approaches and technical features of MOOC platforms.

The fake Twitter account

Participants in *E-learning and Digital Cultures* were asked to create a 'digital artefact' for the final assignment, the definition of which was left intentionally open, simply as 'something that is designed to be experienced digitally, on the web'. This final narrative describes a submission which took the form of a fake Twitter account, designed to impersonate one of the course tutors. Specific tweets from the fake account, the student's rationale behind the submission, and the resulting responses and discussions from other participants, will be analysed here in a discussion of teacher and student roles, digitally-mediated presence, power and hierarchy in the MOOC. This section will highlight the ways in which learner and teacher subjectivity is often predetermined in a course format that maintains established educational orderings.

Conclusions

Through the discussion of recognition and resistance, the MOOC will be theorised as an educational format undergoing persistent transformation, resulting from a tension between the expectations fed into technology design and the subsequent practices of opposition and orthodoxy. Despite the recent emergence of the MOOC, processes of standardisation and deviation are already taking place, creating a space in which these courses are viewed very differently by the various stakeholders involved.

The use of open-access resources will be offered as an example of appropriating non-educational objects for the purposes of education, highlighting some of the nascent interventions through which established institutional conventions are being resisted in the MOOC format. However, rather than offering a simplistic solution, such practices of academic experimentation often conflict with student expectations of the value of university education.

Finally, it will be suggested that the established roles of 'teacher' and 'student' are placed into disarray and confusion in the MOOC. The scale of these courses creates a teaching presence that is profoundly outnumbered, while the student often experiences an overwhelming lack of direction and guidance. Rather than simply replacing a teacher-led education with a model of student-centred learning in which the pedagogue is absent (Anderson & Dron 2011), this paper will conclude with a discussion of the ways that these roles have been resisted and appropriated in *E-learning and Digital Cultures*.

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