

Chapter 3

Evolution or Revolution: Are MOOCs Saving Education?

Eduardo Díaz San Millán
University of Salamanca, Spain

Rubén Gutiérrez Priego
University of Salamanca, Spain

ABSTRACT

This chapter tries to awake a critical sense from sociological approaches in an analysis of the Massive Online Open Courses (hereinafter, MOOC), that is capable of emerging from the media noise generated from concerned positions. This reflection shows some explanatory variables about the socio-educational MOOC phenomenon involving appropriate research lines to approach the veracity of such sensation. Determining the scope of analysis and its internal logic is essential in a concept as confusing as MOOC. A close up on three levels -genesis, maintenance and related effects- lets us overcome simplified visions associated with functionalist approaches. At these levels, the network of relationships, interests and struggles for power is shown as well as the influence of the own educational actors themselves that is determined by the impact of their environments. Moreover, it is possible to realize the variables that explain the interactions with other fields: scientific, economic, business, administrative which are interested in influencing the autonomy of the educational field by means of MOOCs. The chapter concludes with two sample reflections as to show how to think inside the aforesaid sociological analysis. Clearly, any analysis will be restricted by the extent of the chosen model of causal variables that will never embrace all those that reality imposes. In this sense, previous studies of such variables and a suitable election will determine its explanatory scope.

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INTRODUCTION

Revised some of the figures on the MOOC phenomenon, shelled in the New York Times, in particular about enrollments, involved universities and number of courses, they justify by their own that this media entitled the article where they are shown -in November 2012- as “the year of the MOOC” (Pappano, 2012). No less spectacular than these figures was the media hype and the noise of social media from that month onwards, as MOOCs were becoming an educational trend. Evidence is that a simple Google search of the term MOOC gives us back 28,900 books, 967,000 blogs and 5,360,000 websites that contain the acronym.

Anant Agarwal, president of edX, one of the most important platforms where MOOCs are taught, said in the same story, the feature that has been attributed to them more times on hundreds of news and blogs, their disruptive and revolutionary capacity in Higher Education: “I’d like to call this the year of disruption” (Pappano, 2012). However, this is a very debatable and controversial feature, and at least very uncertain in a general way and not for much repeated and amplified it becomes certainty.

This hyperinflation of the term and its purported disruptive ability is based on an unthinking repetition of topics, coming directly from the subjects properly interested in its dissemination, very typical of diffusion dynamics in emerging social networks and in the increasingly necessary content creation as stamp for our personal brand that leads to amplification with little criticism of what is considered “a trend”. Recently, it was echoed by a generalist Spanish newspaper, “El País”, referring to a study by Chartbeat which demonstrates the poor correlation between tweeting and complete reading of what it is tweeted. Consequently, much of the spread is carried out in an uncritical way (Vázquez, 2013).

The most common way to present MOOCs is in its training analysis focused on assessing its benefits or deficiencies in their ability to stimu-

late learning. Nevertheless, developing a training analysis exclusively, without underestimating its importance, hardly shows all the possibilities for MOOC as a social phenomenon to consolidate in the field of Education: how and in which ways. Education cannot be seen as a closed field where training proposals, however justified they may seem, are assumed by other actors dutifully, those with the capacity to influence or simply those who are subject to influence. The dynamics leading to the objectification of educational thought in institutions like MOOCs is the result of multiple interests and strains in a constantly adjustment process within the same field of Education and in front of other social disciplines.

In the direction immediately indicated, each socio-historical situation of birth and permanence of the phenomenon MOOC is different, that does not mean that we cannot find global regularities, but maintaining an extreme caution in generalizations and conceptual leaps as the logic and strategies of each analyzed situation are, to some extent, different in each socio-cultural context. The internationalization and globalization of Education is a fact:

The historically international nature of universities is playing out in new and dynamic ways, while the trend is extending broadly and rapidly across the Higher Education industry. Pushed and pulled along by the forces of globalization, internationalization presents many exciting opportunities to higher education institutions and systems. At the same time, real risks and challenges are inherent in this complex and fluid environment (Altbach, 2012).

MOOCs are, by nature open and online, an example of globalizing and internationalizing educational phenomenon, but in their analysis cannot be ignored the specificities of each context in which they develop, and consequently, it is advisable to perform a double analysis in

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