Chapter 1

Disruptive Democratisers?
The Complexities and Incongruities of Scale, Diversity and Personalisation in MOOCs

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ABSTRACT

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are described as disruptive and democratising. It is claimed MOOCs have characteristics that challenge traditional forms of education. This chapter critiques these claims, arguing that MOOCs do not always allow for the diverse motivations of masses of learners. This brings into question forms of data-based support based on and in response to learner behaviours. The chapter interrogates narrative accounts of MOOC learner experiences to pinpoint four distinct ways people learn in MOOCs. Factors critical to learning are motivation, self-regulation, environment and socialisation. Developing analytic tools that address these are important. However, analytics systems tend to personalise learner support in relation to pre-defined course goals, rather than focusing on the goals of the learner. Next generation systems are already focusing on empowering learners to follow their own goals and flexing course designs to fit the goals of each learner. These are more powerful than systems where the students have to adapt to a course designed for the masses.

INTRODUCTION

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have been signaled as a disruptive and democratising force in online, distance education. It is claimed that MOOCs have unique characteristics that challenge traditional parameters of learning (and education). These characteristics act as a leveler by offering equal access to Higher Education to billions of learners worldwide, reducing a huge divide between approximately 7% of the world's population who have a degree and 93% who do not (Bloomberg, 2011).

Advocates of MOOCs also promote their ability to provide forms of teaching and learning more relevant to a hyper-connected, digital age, and which are more attuned to the needs of people, particularly those wishing to up-skill and engage in life-long learning. As Andre Dua (2013), a Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company, claims:

What most people—including university leaders—don't yet realize is that this new way of teaching and learning, together with employers' growing frustration with the skills of graduates, is poised to usher in a new credentialing system that may compete with college degrees within a decade. This emerging delivery regime is more than just a distribution mechanism; done right, it promises students faster, more consistent engagement with high-quality content, as well as measurable results. This innovation therefore has the potential to create enormous opportunities for students, employers, and star teachers even as it upends the cost structure and practices of traditional campuses (n.p.).

Indeed, MOOCs have become an industry in their own right. ClassCentral, a website aggregating data and information on MOOCs, listed 30 MOOC providers in 2017. These providers collaborate with over 800 universities and companies to offer over 9,400 courses, more than 500 MOOC-based credentials, and more than a dozen graduate degrees. 20 million new learners signed up for their first MOOC in 2017, bringing the total number of MOOC learners to 78 million.

The four dimensions comprising the acronym MOOC – massive, open, online, course – simultaneously represent valuable assets that underpin the promise of MOOCs as well as posing challenges for MOOC designers and facilitators and leading to a number of contradictions associated with MOOCs. Massive refers to the scale of the course and alludes to the large number of learners who participate in some MOOCs. It is closely connected to open, which can refer to access; anyone, no matter his or her background, prior experience or current context may enroll in a MOOC as well as to cost – that a MOOC is available free of charge. New technological infrastructure and digital technologies are not only providing wide-

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