Chapter 18
MOOCs:
Exploiting Networks for the Education of the Masses or Just a Trend?

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ABSTRACT

MOOCs have become a new trend in education, taking the world by storm in 2012. Is this just a fad or is it because of their nature in opening education to the masses? In this chapter, the authors explore how Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) use networks that connect people across the globe to foster education that cannot be replicated in any walled classroom. They illustrate case studies, emphasizing best practice strategies employed as well as lessons learned, in an attempt to understand what makes these courses the new cry in higher education. The authors ask whether the local, European, and international markets are ready to accept these massive, open learning environments and how the transfer and transformation of information occurs during exploits of massive collective intelligence. They address learning that is manifested inside social networks and this can be augmented through the sharing of knowledge within the global community. In this digital economy, the authors look at capturing and harvesting "open knowledge" using means that are accessible to all. Is academia ready for all of this? The authors propose an outline of a journey from the birth of MOOCs to their indicative future directions. The scope of this chapter is that of discussing the role of social networks and social applications in these massive courses, as the authors describe why they think this lies at the root of the courses' success.

INTRODUCTION

"Why should I enroll in an online course? I did it once and it was terribly lonely – so isolating," a friend of ours told us, when we suggested that she tries out the new online courses set up by social magnates Coursera and Udacity. Her answer got us thinking…is that it? Are new courses trying to emulate traditional e-Learning courses or do they have an added 'secret ingredient' to their success? What importance is attributed to the 'social' in these massive open online courses? How did the notion of such courses come into being?

Some decades ago, when e-Learning and computer-aided learning were in full flourish, people started advocating their potential but shortly afterwards, emergent research gave indications about the sense of isolation that is most often created in these kinds of settings (Weller, 2007). People, like our friend above, complained that answering an email, reading a script, or answering a question in a forum did not compare to the 'real' classroom feel. It made them feel isolated.

Researchers like Vargas-Vera & Lytras (2008) started discussing the exploitation of Semantic Web Services to enrich e-Learning in terms of personalized learning systems, where the system itself is able to trace learner needs and track their progress. Following this, there arose an era where the issue of standardization in e-Learning started taking forms in a way that people could be presented with a customized setting that is tailored to their profiles, needs and experiences (Stoica & Ghilic-Micu, 2009).

In this context, a number of authors describe the use of developing the right technologies to be able to provide a more 'effective' e-Learning service (Conlan & Wade, 2004; Dagger, Wade, & Conlan, 2003; Manouselis & Sampson, 2002; Van Harmelen, 2006). Most often, this type of research was rather detached from the complexity of the human learning involved and this is why such systems were morphed into personalized learning networks that amounted to more than simple systems. A system was just that – a system that sometimes disassociated itself from that which it was targeting – human learning.

Yet, what all researchers seemed to find a point of convergence upon was the increased accessibility to resources and courses that increased drastically with the proliferation and advancement of Internet technologies. In 2001, e-Learning was mostly aimed towards a number of commercial sectors, and e-Learning in the field of education was shared only among a handful of universities, mostly from the US with the exception of a few European ones.

Carson (2009) describes how in 2001, the possible provision of open access to courses and resources was just a concept put on paper by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). However, people like Peter Drucker, back in 1997, were already predicting that campuses were going to be the subject of great change, if they wanted to keep on competing in the market. Forbes magazine, quoted Peter Drucker as saying "Universities won't survive. The future is outside the traditional campus, outside the traditional classroom" (Gubernick & Ebeling, 1997). 1997 was a year when the Internet was still in its infancy and when there was neither Web2.0 to support technologies nor a wide access to learning materials. Yet, 8 years previous to that, during 1989 people were already enrolling at the University of Phoenix, which was the first university in the US to roll out online courses (Brooks, 2012). Gubernick & Ebeling (1997) describe 'cyberlearning' as a trend that could potentially be very important for people who are working and who need to keep up-to-date with different learning programs.

At that time, the authors were already mentioning the importance of making provision for 'low-cost, good quality Education' especially to people who would not be able to afford studying full-time at universities. This is very much in resonance with a talk delivered by Daphne Koller (2012), much later than 1997, and when we had come a long way in terms of online learning. Cavanagh

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