

Chapter 34

Deceptive Promises: The Meaning of MOOCs– Hype for Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, massive open online courses (MOOCs) fired the imagination of the general public as well as the academics, university administrators and investors alike. This chapter is an analysis of the main promises and expectations associated with MOOCs in higher education. This analysis is largely informed by a literature review of new extensive research reports, press releases, media articles, scholarly blogs and academic papers. Considering costs and benefits, ethical aspects and the impact on the landscape of higher education, the author explores whether MOOCs stay consistent with their initial promises and rhetoric. This chapter continues the discussion on the book section ‘RIA and education practice of MOOCs,’ with the particular focus on the topic of ‘educational training design.’

INTRODUCTION

In the general enthusiasm for a set of generous promises, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) were often presented as the ultimate solution for most important problems facing higher education across the world: opening access to quality higher education to all, creating ‘global student bodies’ for universities, which believed in “the hope of perhaps, eventually, making money doing so” (Lewin, 2012). Enthusiasm was general – and groupthink so tempting – that many universities across the world adopted them as a panacea for ‘21st century learning’ (and all other problems) without hesitation or critical reflection. Academics and university leaders may be reluctant to adopt a solution that was based on no research data or empirical support discovered the power of groupthink and personal costs associated with it. A well-known example was that of the President of University of Virginia in the United States, who was dismissed for not being fast enough in adopting MOOCs. The Chronicle of Higher Education observed in September 2012 that “The University of Virginia board’s decision to dismiss Teresa A. Sullivan as

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president in June illustrated the pressure on universities to strike MOOC deals quickly to keep up with peer institutions” (Azevedo, 2012). In general, the ubiquitous prediction was that MOOCs will completely change the game in higher education.

THE MOOC FERVOUR: GENEROUS IDEALS AND PROSAIC REALITIES

Since the acronym became popular in 2011, MOOCs were predominantly described through the extensive use of strong metaphors that seem to be more suitable to express the amplitude of the change they bring to higher education. We find Massive Open Online Courses expressed in terms associated with natural disasters, from ‘tsunami’ to an ‘avalanche’ or ‘earthquake.’ Proponents of MOOCs promised that this particular solution will completely reshape the landscape of higher education across the world. MOOCs are – commentators said - a ‘tsunami of change’ that “is coming, whether you like it or not” (McKenna, 2012).

The year of 2012 was marked by the firm prediction of a historic transformation through the MOOC, promoted with compulsive passion as the solution for all problems faced by higher education. The promise was unprecedented: underprivileged students from all parts of the world have the possibility for the first time in history to get access to higher education and study at some of the most respectable – and expensive – universities of the world, as gates of knowledge finally stay unguarded for the first time in history. The New York Times published at the end of 2012 an article creatively titled ‘Year of the MOOC’ (Papanno, 2012), and David Brooks and Thomas Friedman wrote enthusiastic op-eds about the MOOC ‘revolution,’ the ‘tsunami’ that will undoubtedly transform all universities (Brooks, 2012; Friedman, 2013). The Economist – along with other financial publications that seem to discover suddenly an in-depth expertise in pedagogy and higher education – followed the same line, with articles with titles such as “Free education - Learning new lessons. Online courses are transforming higher education, creating new opportunities for the best and huge problems for the rest” (The Economist, 2012). This op-ed offers a perfect sample of the type of thinking fuelling the general excitement:

MOOCs are more than good university lectures available online. The real innovation comes from integrating academics talking with interactive coursework, such as automated tests, quizzes and even games. Real-life lectures have no pause, rewind (or fast-forward) buttons [...] MOOCs enrich education for rich-world students, especially the cash-strapped, and those dissatisfied with what their own colleges are offering. But for others, especially in poor countries, online education opens the door to yearned-for opportunities. (The Economist, 2012)

The solution to deliver good quality higher learning to all galvanized the imagination of academics and venture capitalists. The narrative was generous and inspiring; it said that the door to what Time magazine called ‘High-End Learning on the Cheap’ (Ripley, 2012) was discovered. New start-ups and investors were there to fight to open it for the benefit of the poor around the world. Silicon Valley venture capitalists have seen the potential of MOOCs and Thomas Friedman argued in 2012 that “nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty” than Silicon Valley solutions. His prediction was that MOOCs will “unlock a billion more brains to solve the world’s biggest problems” (Friedman, 2013).

In ‘Capital in the Twenty-First Century’, an outstandingly well-documented book written by the French economist Thomas Piketty, inequality is exposed as the main risk for the future of world economies and

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