**HEPI breakfast seminar / House of Commons / Wednesday, April 23, 2014**

**MOOCs and the Challenge to Innovate**

Peter Scott

Institute of Education University of London

Introduction

1. Thank you for inviting me to speak at this seminar. I suspect I may have been invited in the role of the 'Luddite', who has little or nothing good to say about MOOCs. If so, I may disappoint you! Instead I want to offer you a critical commentary on the issues that arise from the advance of MOOCs - but critical in the best, and most positive, sense.

2. Let me start, therefore, by stating my personal position, my starting point:

* + First, I am certainly not a technical expert; nor am I any longer, if I ever was, a member of the higher education policy elite (I only dabble in these waters occasionally nowadays!). Rather I am now on the ‘receiving end’ of innovation - but also, as I like to think of it, at the ‘cutting edge’ of practice; my day-to-day experience is now as a teacher, dealing with all the mundane issues that arise from the use of learning management systems and blended learning and the (still very lively) expectations that students have in terms of feedback and assessment.
  + Second, I am not ashamed - two weeks after the death of Richard Hoggart - of standing up for what I believe to be ‘authentic’ higher education, in other words a process that transforms the lives of individuals not simply in terms of their socio-economic or class advantages but in terms of being better able to live fuller and examined lives (and which also transforms the nature of the society in which we live). I apologise if that sounds very old-fashioned, or leftish nonsense. But I judge all innovation, all change, in higher education in terms of whether it contributes to or detracts from that authenticity - an authenticity, I hasten to add, that is (or should be) as available to a nurse as to a philosopher.

3. So, in my brief contribution this morning, I want to do three things:

* + First, sketch out the three main ‘stories’, or myths, about MOOCs;
  + Second, to distinguish between the different kinds of MOOCs that have emerged. The label I fear has been used rather too promiscuously;
  + Third, to discuss some of there major issues that arise from the development of MOOCs;
  + and, of course, I want to finish with a few broad conclusions.

Three MOOC ‘stories’

4. So let me start with the ‘stories’, or myths. As I said a moment ago, I believe there are three such ‘stories’:

*Paradigm shift*

5. The first is of MOOCs as a game-changer, a true paradigm shift in how we deliver (but not just deliver also design and conceive of) higher education. Past attempts to apply new technologies to higher education, starting of course with the first and still the best example the Open University, may have struggled to transform the traditional cultures of pedagogy, curricula and qualifications that have always prevailed in universities. But MOOCs are about to change all that - because of two new factors. The first is the opening up of higher education to the market (not necessarily of full market practices but, crucially, market mentalities). The second is the rise of new communicative cultures among, especially, younger people - the explosion of social networking and the pervasive use of multiple devices, smartphones, tablets and the rest.

*End of ‘academic’ civilisation*

6. The second story is the opposite. MOOCs, and all they represent, are a threat to the ‘authentic’ higher education I described a moment ago. All the computer-generated peer-led online ‘learning communities’ cannot substitute for the intense intimate engagement of the tutorial or seminar, ultimately descended from the imagined ideals of Plato’s Academy. How can the most skilfully constructed MOOC offer the reflective, critical, even subversive environment that is crucial to a true university experience? And this is even more important for students who will go on to deal with messy problems in the real world, such as doctors and engineers, as it is for those in more academic and theoretical disciplines. I could go on - but I am sure you are familiar with this view point.

*Nothing is new under the sun*

7. The third MOOCs story is that they represent another example of a ‘bubble” blown up by the technophilia to which a society like ours that historically has never valued (or understood) science and technology is so casually vulnerable and also by the ruthless hunt for novelty (and ‘branding’ opportunities). In fact, all that is new about MOOCs is their technology - and even that can constrain as well as open up learning possibilities. You can look in any issue of the *New York Review of Books* in the past 20 years and see advertisements for courses generally in ‘Great Books’ consisting of written and increasingly digital components (not free, of course!). And what about good-old public libraries, now reduced to threadbare staffing by volunteers? Isn’t every book a mini-MOOC?

8. Which of these MOOC ‘stories’ is most true? None and all, is the only sensible answer. In one sense MOOCs are a potential game-changer (although Thomas Kuhn would have gagged on any claim of ‘paradigm shift’). New generations of students do expect to engage with their ‘learning’ in new ways - although they can also have remarkably conventional expectations at the same time. But MOOCs can also represent a threat to critical enquiry. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* may be a short book by the standards of academic tomes - but even its notoriously cryptic author would have struggled to say much in a 140-character ‘tweet’. And we do need to beware of being carried away by technophilia and novelty, and so confuse mechanisms for substance.

Different types of MOOCs

9. The second topic I would like to rise is the sheer variety of courses, and delivery mechanisms, that are now masquerading as MOOCs. Naturally, everyone is jumping on the bandwagon. So any scrap of distance delivery now tends to get dressed up as a ‘MOOC’. But should we worry? Only, I believe, in the sense that such promiscuity may actually tend to conceal the creative potential of really well designed and appropriately targeted MOOC-like provision. I do not believe we should adopt too pedantic or pure an approach and insist that every MOOC must genuinely be ‘massive’ (what does that really mean?), ‘open’ (surely there must be add-ons, optional extras, enhancements for which there must be some kind of charge?), ‘online’ (OK perhaps, if you mean every form of digital communication; we should never forget how the lowly text message became so pervasive), and ‘course’ (how big a bite? how do ‘courses’ accumulate into ‘programmes’? and so on). So I do not believe at this stage of the game it would be useful to try to introduce some kind of kite marks for MOOCs.

10. However, I do believe there are two broad approaches, or philosophies, to the development of MOOCs that might be worth distinguishing.

* The first is what I will call is MOOCs as an alternative to conventional forms of higher education. The argument here is that MOOCs put the ‘learner’ in control of their own ‘learning’ because they can proceed at their pace and on their terms; that MOOCs enable outdated and snobbish distinctions between ‘education’ and ‘training’ to be broken down; that they enable savvy commercial firms to apply their sophisticated knowledge about efficient delivery, marketing, data analytics and so on to the tradition-bound operations of higher education; that new kinds of students, who would never respond to even the most ambitious widening participation initiatives (if only we believed in such things any more!), can access higher education… and so on. So that is the first approach - MOOCs as substitution, alternative, even rival provision;
* The second approach is, crudely, that MOOCs represent the most advanced forms of distance and/or blended learning. Although they can be taken as standalone one-off courses, their main purpose is to find innovative and creative ways of delivering those components of larger programmes that are best suited to e-learning (and I am thinking not just in technical but also behavioural terms, so large-scale data analytics but also peer-generated virtual learning communities). This approach has the virtue of maximising the potential for very cost-effective and highly flexible delivery of some ‘courses’, or programme elements, while pushing downstream trickier issues of accreditation and, in particular, more complex forms of assessment.

11. Of course, in practice, it is difficult to draw such a sharp distinction. Many MOOCs, or courses now branded as ‘MOOCs’, have a bit of both - the alternative or rival, and the additional and complementary. But, in determining institutional (or corporate) priorities with regard to the development of MOOCs, it is clearly important to get the emphasis right. Is this a different kind of business altogether - ‘HE-lite' as some critics (like me) have labelled it - in which case it may be better for institutions to hive it off into a separate company, or subsidiary, maybe run as a joint venture with a commercial firm; or is it a refinement, enhancement, extension of core academic business, in which case it is perhaps best to find ways to mainstream it within traditional departmental, school or faculty structures (with appropriate technical and marketing support).

Issues in the development of MOOCs

12. My third topic this morning is a number of issues that arise in considering the future development of MOOCs. Because of the time available I can only list them (inevitably a selective and personal list ) and the discuss them very briefly.

*Scalability*

13. The first is scalability. After all, one of the selling points of MOOCs is that, unlike conventional forms of higher education, access to them does not really have to be rationed. But there are problems. First, is the question of whether access should be rationed - at least by establishing some prerequisites. I know that just by asking that question you can expose yourself to charges of elitist gate-keeping (and, surely, one of the attractions of MOOCs is that they don’t have ‘gates’). Next, the widening access argument - in practice, those who access higher education, whether via an adult or continuing education class or a CPD programme or a MOOC, are - by and large - people with already high levels of education. Also not everyone is yet a member of the ‘wired / wireless’ society. So MOOCs participants are not likely to be the under-motivated and the socially and culturally excluded. Indeed there is an argument for saying that e-learning is not always well suited to those who need most learning support. Next, how mass is ‘mass’? Are there / should there be limits? Maybe not to the basic products but perhaps to crucial add-ons and extras, which may provide the true educational value.

*Feedback and assessment*

14. The second issue is feedback and assessment. In MOOC terms you can do wonders with some forms of learning - mathematical equations, or French irregular verbs. But there are other forms of learning that are not so amenable to checklists and multiple-choice questions and answers. For example, it’s always going to be difficult to reduce issues in, say, ‘post-crash economics’ to ‘frequently asked questions’. Peer-generated forums can help - but only up to a point. This is a key issue because, almost as important a feature of student expectations alongside demands for more e-material and asynchronous learning opportunities, is a growing appetite for more feedback and assessment - as the National Student Survey results demonstrate year-on-year. I know that, now as a grass-roots teacher, I spend at least as much of my time on advice, feedback and assessment as I do on actual delivery. Yet these are, and will remain, labour intensive activities.

*Metadata*

15. My third issue is a bundle of things to do with metadata. One of the big attractions of MOOCs is that they give us the opportunity to collect, systematically, large amounts of data about student learning. So we can find out, with a high degree of accuracy, which ideas, concepts or just facts students find most difficult - and design targeted solutions. This, of course, also give us unprecedented opportunities for educational research. But metadata has its downsides too. For example, peer-generated forums through which students can help each other to improve their learning are valuable - but using ‘crowd-sourcing’ to come up with the ‘right’ answers or solutions is definitely not. In MOOCs, as in all such systems, there is potentially an acute tension between the needs of the individual and the mass pressures to systematise and generalise. We experience these frustrations all the time with online or telephone banking or NHS Direct (now 111) when our particular circumstances don’t conform to the pre-determined algorithms. But the same issues arise with MOOCs too.

*Business planning*

16. The fourth issue I want to raise is making MOOCs pay - or, at any rate, generate convincing business models that they can cover their costs and generate a reasonable contribution. Broadly speaking, there seem to be two approaches. The first is to regard them as part of marketing or branding; they enable institutions to showcase themselves and, by implication, their more traditional, and income-generating, products. Students can be lured by ‘open’ courses into enrolling for fee-paying programmes. The second approach is, while retaining the basic MOOC as an ‘open’ course, to offer a range of enhancements that can be charged for (rather, as in the earlier days of the Open University, we could all watch the TV programmes - if we stayed up late enough! - but we had to be OU students to get the full deal). This is a key issue, as it was in the [dot.com](http://dot.com) bubble, once initial hype and enthusiasm abates. There is also an interesting parallel. A quarter of a century ago adult and continuing education departments were forced to introduce credit rate their course, often strongly opposed by their students who didn’t want to be corralled into whole programmes, simply so that there could be a secure basis on which such education could be funded.

*Intellectual criticality*

17. My final issue - and here I revert, in part, to the Luddite role originally allocated to me - is intellectual criticality. The basis of modern science is falsification; the basis of a university education is, at root, the Socratic ‘I know that I do not know’. How do you engineer such creative anarchy into mass systems? This is an issue for all mass-access higher education systems, even if they predominantly rely on traditional forms of pedagogy. It may be an even more acute issue for MOOCs. I remain concerned that what I called earlier an ‘authentic’ higher education experience may be restricted to certain kinds of students, studying certain kinds of subject, in certain kinds of university - while the masses are offered a pale semi-industrialised version.

Conclusion

18. My time is - more than - up. But I am very conscious that I have not really offered any firm conclusions. Maybe that is because none is available, at least at the moment. We all have to ride the MOOCs ‘wave’. But there is one thought I would like to leave you with. It is not sufficient to rely only on the language of branding and business planning, even of innovation and products; we also need to have a proper intellectual and critical debate about the implications of MOOCs (as we do, of mass higher education more broadly) - not in the spirit of opposing them but of understanding them better. Thank you for listening.