

MOOC Revolutions?

Written by Giles Scott-Smith

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GILES SCOTT-SMITH, OCT 1 2014

Over the summer I participated in my first MOOC – Massive Online Open-Access Course – as part of Leiden University’s cooperation with the education platform Coursera. This involved a couple of lectures for the course The Changing Global Order, which was convened by Professor Madeleine Hosli of the Political Science department. The focus of the course was the role and importance of international organizations in global governance, with an emphasis on the UN and NATO. Wanting to diversify the content, I added two lectures on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Arctic Council. Writing the script was straightforward enough – recording it was not, since the lack of a professional studio on that particular day meant we had to contend with angry lecturers being told to talk quietly in neighboring seminar rooms, workmen stomping around on the roof repairing the elevator mechanism, and the inevitable coffee trolley being wheeled loudly down the corridor. We completed the session with about 15 minutes to spare before the deadline.

In terms of statistics, the course was a resounding success. It went online in May. Ultimately, an apparently impressive 36.000 individuals signed up, and 455.207 individual lectures were viewed as of September 22nd 2014. Around 5% of participants – a figure typical for this kind of MOOC – have so far completed all the tests. Leiden University administrators were thrilled, and plans for a re-run are already in motion.

As you can tell, I am a latecomer to the world of MOOCs. I have also been a committed sceptic. A couple of years ago, I gave the commencement speech at a small liberal arts college in my hometown in the Netherlands. My theme: the explosion of interest in MOOCs over the previous 12 months, and the challenges this created for regular education. That was in 2012, and the question thrown into the air by the web wizards was whether freely accessible courses, given by the best instructors the Ivy League could provide, would undermine the classroom as we have known it (and the colleges we have worked at). MOOC revolutions were in the air. In response, I defended the small classroom, face-to-face interaction, and liberal arts philosophy as something that should not be lost to this new wave of technological utopianism. I was very much in line with Gary May, dean of the College of Engineering, Georgia Institute of Technology, who argued around the same time that

A college education is much more than mere knowledge transfer. It is a rite of passage and an important part of personal development and the maturation process. As universities work to assure that result, online courses will no doubt be part of the mix. How much a part depends on our ability to innovate our way forward.

Two years down the line and the MOOC debate has moved on. This can be tracked via, for instance, the Inside Higher Ed’s informative discussion forum, where MOOCs have been a hot topic for around 30 months. Early on, it was about fundamentals such as how to define, or redefine, such key terms as “students”, “faculty”, and “courses”. It was about the online replacing the offline (not how, but how soon), about how to offer worthwhile accreditation for online courses in order to maintain standards, and how to combat fraud on a vast scale. The practical issues remain, but they are gradually being dealt with. In terms of the online-offline debate, as one commentator put it, there is now “a recognition that these two environments simply provide different venues for learning, each venue leading to certain subject mastery in its own ways.”

This is of course only partly true – it is still early days for tracking the impact of MOOCs on college education and – crucially – colleges themselves. The positive aspects have been shouted from the rooftops by the technological

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utopians, with a special emphasis on technology 'liberating' and democratizing quality education. Both Clay Shirky and Thomas Friedman have pitched essays on a 'flattening world' of endless opportunity. As Friedman put it less than two years ago:

Nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty – by providing them an affordable education to get a job or improve in the job they have. Nothing has more potential to unlock a billion more brains to solve the world's biggest problems.

Shirky's 'venture capitalist-style' essay did receive some well crafted pushback from, among others, Aaron Bady, who critiqued the fact that MOOCs are moving into the space being opened up by declining, underfunded state-funded education, with Udacity and their ilk acting as "essentially parasitic organizations." The increasing accreditation of MOOCs in the United States is also an inevitable part of colleges searching for a verifiable business plan – no credits, no pay. This trend has not yet hit the UK, but it will – and as for the Netherlands, its noticeable that the Changing Global Order re-run has exactly been packaged so that a desire for recognizable credit requires a fee of \$49. You can still do the course for free... but that brings less of a return. It will be interesting to see the figures on this in a few months time. As this 'no fee—no credit' approach spreads, the MOOCs provided by elite institutions will inevitably impact on courses offered elsewhere by less renowned venues, be they online or offline.

As is generally the case with Friedman, some of his observations were quite correct (if not that original). MOOCs can contribute to a social context where it is not what you know that's decisive, but what you can do with what you know. And it's not so much the actual course product that's the key, it's the connectivity that it can generate. MOOCs should be more than simply 1.0 lecture-based education transferred to a screen – it's about the 2.0 "connectivist MOOC" that "seeks to provide participatory space". This is the xMOOC / cMOOC contrast, and the latter, better described as open-source learning platforms, are the flexible, adaptable, remake-remodel way forward. Instructor-student interaction no longer functions in the traditional sense, so the question is how to develop tasks that engage both the distance learning audience and the 'flipped classroom'.

A starting point for this shift can be the re-interpretation of the data produced on MOOC users. A traditional xMOOC format assumes that 'students' should follow and complete a 'course', both in term of attendance and fulfilled assessments. A cMOOC approach treats its segments more as separate items to be used in different settings. This lego-like understanding of MOOCs as made up of interchangeable parts is in tune with a different view on usage. A Department for Business Innovation and Skills report from September 2013 agreed that "non-completion is not a significant problem in this learning format" and that "mere completion is not a relevant metric." A whole spectrum of users can at any one time be 'auditing', 'sampling', 'disengaging', 'completing', or (an unfortunate term) 'lurking'. These behaviors are probably what we have in a typical classroom anyway, but the need for a grounded approach to MOOCs means they are now being categorized. This diverse community can function in unexpected ways. Experience has shown that developing forms of interaction that tap into crowd-sourcing methods – for instance, by drawing on user input for setting tasks and topics of lectures – can utilize the global audience in novel ways.

So it is not about the online complementing the offline, but about enhancing it. It's not about brute statistics, it's about learning to understand the MOOC user and how they function. Leiden University has adopted 'flipping the classroom' so that online lectures and research platforms can be used to set up classroom interaction and problem-solving tasks. Of course, numbers still matter, as was evident with the Changing Global Order course. Evidence of marketing 'outreach' is always important – perhaps still too important – but only as one set of factors that can be used to determine 'success', and if these numbers can be used to support pedagogic innovation then that is a worthwhile added benefit. The recent interest in SPOCs – Small-scale Private Online Courses – is already an indication that seminar-style knowledge-sharing is back in. For a university, a diversified portfolio will work best: for marketing purposes, Big is Better can productively coexist with Small is Beautiful. The next stage with the Changing Global Order MOOC is not to simply generate yet higher user numbers with a re-run, but to find ways to incorporate its content into existing courses. Here, economies of scale still play a role, since to achieve that new goal the course should ideally be re-framed and re-recorded. Ideally, the format centered on a list of lectures with questions that makes up most of its content would ideally be transformed into a more interactive experience. In this sense, the Google Hangout with NATO's Jamie Shea and the closing task of proposing and discussing how to reform the UN

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Security Council mark the way forward. This would mean re-crafting the segments on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Arctic Council to allow for user input and opinion on those two institutions and their relative value as contributors to global governance. I would be interested in learning more about how I can interact in this way with those who log-in, be it for a whole course or part of a lecture. In doing so, I take my key from Joshua Kim: "The xMOOC world is evolving from one defined by its platforms to one that is defined by its community of practice."

So I now have to endure the inevitable taunts from former students that I've sold out. I remain a sceptic, but a sceptic who can be convinced by good arguments. I find it noticeable and intriguing that the Coursera offerings in the field of International Relations remain incredibly thin. Typing in a search for 'international relations' produces only the Changing Global Order and related courses from the Challenges in Global Affairs module produced by the Universities of Leiden and Geneva. 'International political economy' produces... the same result. Only trendy niches such as Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism produce alternative hits.

Educational methods are never static, and new trends are worth evaluating for their respective merits. The downside to MOOCs is that they could definitely appear on a sufficient scale to negatively undermine many higher educational systems across the post-industrial world. Competition among universities for specific branding labels will inevitably push them in this direction, especially as state funding declines and image becomes more important. The fall-out from that will have to be dealt with. On the positive side, MOOCs do at least make those of us active in education reflect on what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. And that is no bad thing.

About the author:

Giles Scott-Smith holds the Ernst van der Beugel Chair in the Diplomatic History of Transatlantic Relations since WWII at Leiden University, and is a senior researcher with the Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands. He is the current chair of the Transatlantic Studies Association, and is involved in the New Diplomatic History network. Originally starting out in International Relations, he gradually moved into Cold War history, and has always looked for a productive mix of IR theory and historical analysis. His research interests cover the role and influence of non-state actors in international affairs, be they think tanks, social movements, academic institutions, or private citizens. Recent publications include *Western Anti-Communism and the Interdoc Network: Cold War Internationale* (Palgrave, 2012), and *Transnational Anti-Communism: Agents, Activities, Networks* (Palgrave, 2014). His wider work can be viewed at academia.edu.