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Reconceptualising Learning in the Digital Age: The [un]democratising potential of MOOCs

Book

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Reconceptualising Learning in the Digital Age: the [un]democratising potential of MOOCs: Book summary, Overview and Abstracts

Summary: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have been signaled as a disruptive and democratizing force in education. This book examines these claims, identifying characteristics that influence their development: MOOCs appear to advantage the elite, rather than act as an equaliser; they tend to reproduce formal education, rather than disrupt it; they are designed for those who can learn, rather than opening access for all; and they are measured by metrics that may not be appropriate for open, distance education. These tensions are analysed and potential ways forward are sketched out.

Book overview: Massive Open Online Courses have become popular in recent years. The term MOOC has become synonymous with almost any open, online learning. This book identifies specific tensions that exemplify MOOCs and characterise open, online learning in general:

1. MOOCs have the potential to democratise education. However, by highlighting prominent universities and organisations, they reinforce the values and extend the influence of the privileged. Open, online learning could be introduced in ways that emphasise the value, knowledge and cultures of all societies and institutes.
2. MOOCs have the potential to disrupt education. Yet, rather than being based on a future-focused view of learning, MOOCs often are modelled on the designs and traditions of conventional education. These norms include an expectation that learners intend to complete a course or that they will complete assignments, yet research illustrates that MOOC learners often have very different intentions. MOOC designs could be future-focused to ensure they disrupt education, rather than replicate conventional forms of learning online.
3. An important feature of MOOCs is to open access to learning for everyone. Conversely, they are designed in ways that require learners to regulate their own learning even though there is ample research that indicates not everyone has the capability to learn independently. More emphasis should be placed on Governments to make sure all citizens have the ability to regulate their learning. Until this happens, all forms of open, online learning will benefit those who can learn, rather than serving everyone.
4. A vision that underscores open, online learning is that learners can follow their own goals. Yet MOOC designs and analytics often are based on pre-determined objectives, rather than learner-defined goals. Learners usually are expected to conform to expected 'norms', such as submitting an assignment or completing a course. MOOCs could be designed in ways that allow learners autonomy and freedom to learn what they want in ways that suit them.
5. An important aspect of the vision of people learning autonomously in MOOCs is the idea of drawing on the support of the massive numbers of other learners in the MOOC. Yet these social features of MOOCs often are missing. MOOCs have to be designed to allow learner interaction with other learners and with tutors.
6. Data that are used to measure progress in open, online platforms may provide a reductionist view of learner development. Future analytics platforms and tools for open, online learning should capture data in ways that provide holistic understanding of the learners' intentions and scaffolds to support them in achieving their goals.
7. Open, online courses and credentials sometimes are viewed as products for 'consumer' students. This view might over-simplify the notion of learning as a means to transform human thinking and practice. This transformative role of education and learning has to underpin our future planning and policy around open, online learning.

Chapter 1: The many guises of MOOCs

Abstract Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) often are viewed as synonymous with innovation and openness. In this Chapter, we trace their origins and varied manifestations and the ways they are understood. We interrogate the wide-ranging uses and interpretations of the terms massive, open, and course and how these terms are represented in different types of MOOCs. We then identify contradictions associated with MOOC excitement. Despite the initial agenda of MOOCs to open up access to education, it is seen that they tend to attract people with university education. Rather than offering scaffolds that support people who are not able to act as autonomous learners, MOOCs often are designed to be used by people who are already able to learn. Like traditional education systems, MOOCs usually require learners to conform to expected norms, rather than freeing learners to chart their own pathways. These norms sustain the traditional hierarchy between the expert teacher and novice learner. A particularly troubling feature of MOOCs is that, as supports are becoming automated and technology-based, this power structure is becoming less visible, since it is embedded within the algorithms and analytics that underpin MOOCs.

Chapter two: The [un]democratisation of education and learning

Abstract MOOCs have engendered excitement around their potential to democratise education. They appear to act as a leveler and offer equal opportunity to millions of learners worldwide. Yet, this alluring promise is not wholly achieved by MOOCs. The courses are designed to be used by people who are already able to learn, thereby excluding learners who are unable to learn without direct tutor support. The solutions to this problem tend to focus on the course, as ‘learning design’ or ‘learning analytics’. We argue that effort needs to be focused on the learner directly, supporting him or her to become an autonomous learner. Supporting millions of people to become autonomous learners is complex and costly. This is a problem where education is shaped principally by economic and neoliberal forces, rather than social factors. However, ‘automated’ solutions may result in attempts to quantify learners’ behaviours to fit an ‘ideal’. There is a danger that overly simplified solutions aggravate and intensify inequalities of participation.

Chapter three: The Emancipated Learner? The tensions facing learners in massive, open learning

Abstract MOOCs have the potential to challenge existing educational models. Paradoxically, they reinforce educational conventions by requiring learners to conform to expected norms of current educational models. Recent research has produced data on how learners engage in MOOCs. And yet, despite the extensive data, rather than freeing learners to chart their own pathways, MOOCs still require learners to conform to expected norms. The very act of learning autonomously often causes tensions, most noticeably when learners choose to drop out, rather than complete a course as expected, or when they engage in MOOCs as mere observers, rather than active contributors. In this Chapter, we explore how the emphasis on the individual as active and autonomous learner sometimes conflicts with the expectation that learners conform to accepted norms. This expectation that learners conform to accepted ‘ways of being’ in a MOOC isolates those who plan their own pathway. The chapter concludes with a typology of different learners, arguing that, rather than adhering to a ‘type’, each MOOC participant moves across these learner types, depending on their motivations, and may span different types, rather than falling into one single category.

Chapter Four: Massive numbers, diverse learning

Abstract MOOCs provide education for millions of people worldwide. Though it’s not clear whether everyone can learn in a MOOC. Building on the typology of MOOC participants introduced in Chapter 3, we explore the claim that MOOCs are for everyone. We trace the different reasons people participate in MOOCs and the ways they learn. MOOCs tend to be designed for people who are already able to learn as active, autonomous learners. Those with low confidence may be inactive. However, even learners who are confident and able to regulate their learning experience difficulties if they don’t comply with the expectations of the course designers or their peers. For example, if a learner chooses to learn by observing others, rather than contributing, this behavior can be perceived negatively by tutors and by peers. This indicates that MOOCs sustain the traditional hierarchy

between the educators (those that create MOOCs and technology systems) and the learners (those who use these courses and systems). Although this hierarchy is not always visible, since it is embedded within the algorithms and analytics that power MOOC tools and platforms.

Chapter Five – Designing for quality, but quality of what and for whom?

Abstract There are significant complexities in interpreting and measuring quality in MOOCs. In this chapter we examine experts' perceptions of how to measure quality in MOOCs, using empirical data we gathered through conversations with MOOC specialists. In their experience, while data can be helpful in understanding quality, the metrics measured are shaped by underpinning assumptions and biases. In conventional education, it is assumed that the learner wants to follow a course pathway and complete a course. However, this assumption may not be valid in a MOOC. Quality data might not capture the underlying goals and intentions of MOOC learners. Therefore, it is difficult to measure whether or not a learner has achieved his or her goals. We stress the need to explore quality metrics from the learner's point of view and to encompass the variability in motivations, needs, and backgrounds, which shape conceptions of quality for individuals.

Chapter 6: A crisis of identity? Contradictions and new opportunities

Abstract Drawing on the previous chapters, this chapter explores four tensions that characterise MOOCs. Although MOOCs are seen as an attempt to democratise education, they often privilege the elite, rather than acting as an equaliser. MOOCs are also considered a way to radically open access to education, yet they tend to offer education to people who are already able to learn rather than providing opportunities for everyone. While MOOCs are positioned as a disrupting force, often they replicate the customs and values associated with formal education, rather than unsettling educational norms. MOOCs are conceived as social networks that allow learners to learn through dialogue with others, yet many learners have limited interactions with others. Even when learners have the ability to learn autonomously, they often are expected to conform to course rules, rather than deciding their own learning strategies. These problems may be accentuated where MOOCs are viewed as a set of products (content and credentials) on sale to student consumers, rather than as a transformational educational experience for learners. The view of a MOOCs as a product for the consumer learner may overly-simplify the complex, transformational processes that underscore learning. Particularly where underlying automated systems try to improve progression by quantifying learners' behaviours and 'correcting' these to fit an 'ideal' learner profile or where algorithms and metrics are based on conventional education, rather than on future-facing forms of learning. This chapter examines these problems with MOOCs, offering promising future directions.