WED: To what extent do MOOCs contribute to a narrative of development as freedom? (Tim Seal)

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Tim Seal
23 December 2014

[DRAFT abstract - comments please]

The uptake of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) within the HE sector has increased exponentially in the last 2 years with a belief that it will be of benefit to the provision of education in an ever expanding population (Trucano, 2013). With the majority of MOOCs coming from and being aimed at the global north (ICDE, 2013), how are MOOCs contextualised by providers for local context, what impact does this have on their applicability to the global context, and how does OER and openness support this contextualisation? One commonly heard line of rhetoric in respect to MOOCs is that they largely benefit those already engaged in their own education, rather than those excluded from other forms of education. Some studies (Christensen et al, 2013) finding over 80% of participants having post-secondary qualifications and almost 50% reporting post graduate qualifications. Understanding the mechanisms by which a MOOC is delivered can support the engagement of participants, or act as an additional barrier, particularly in development contexts, is essential to the ability of MOOC providers in ensuring equitable access and support for students' learning.

Set within the context of Nobel economist Amartya Sen's (1999) ideas of development in 'expand[ing] people's substantive freedoms through the removal of "unfreedoms": poverty, limited economic opportunity, inadequate education and access to knowledge, deficient health care, and oppression' (p. 1). This presentation seeks to identify the ways in which MOOCs and by association other forms of openness either add or remove barriers to engagement in education in relation to the removal of unfreedoms, providing an understanding of the openness of MOOCs and the extent to which MOOCs as tool contribute to a narrative of development as freedom.

References

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Stefanie Anyadi
1:09pm 24 January 2015 Permalink

Looking forward to your presentation, Tim, it's a fascinating topic. Not sure if the info and links at http://www.alumniportal-deutschland.org/en/sustainability/social-affairs/article/moocs-digital-divide.html might be helpful.

Tim Seal
11:46am 26 January 2015 Permalink

Thanks Stefanie really useful, have joined the group discussion as well

Dr Simon Ball
10:50am 12 February 2015 Permalink

Your questions and comments from the live conference presentation are below:

- Concentrating on the barriers to participation is most interesting.
- Access to technology is needed before one can even access MOOCs.
- If I remember from H800, many people in the developng world are moving straight to smart phones as cheaper than laptops etc. Could MOOCs be accessible on smart phones?
  i think coursera has an app for smartphone
- xMOOCS match cultural expectations of delivery in developin countries better?
- Is one barrier having the skills to navigate the open course at scale and how would you approach tackling thisin your context?

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- FutureLearn courses are supposed to work across multiple devices including MOOCs but bandwidth/connectivity as important as device
- data charges also raises an issue again maybe
- surprised UK take up is not higher
- I wonder what the FutureLearn figures look like?
- The student profile isn't a major surprise
- US has more mooc platforms than UK and got started sooner I think
- to what extent do you think this demographic is a function of time? eg most facebook users were graduates 8 years ago but not now, might same be dfor moocs
- Good point about cMOOCs - more limited range of topics too?
- absolutely - there is a lot of rhetoric about cmoocs being more open, but they require very advanced study/online identity skills
- Are MOOC platforms being made more freely available to developing country teachers/institutions to help reduce barriers?
- I remember from H800 something about developing countries leap-frogging technologies, so mobile phone networks can replace direct internet access?
- Those were exactly the recommendations made by the SA bank for taking development to their teams in the bush
- Yes Tim, we're developing MOOCs at Univ of Cape Town with FutureLearn and trying low bandwidth videos, transcripts etc. Will see what happens after launch
- Really interesting Tim. I read something a while ago that suggested that MOOCs were a thing of the past but this shows potential

[Tim Seal](#)
3:43pm 12 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Could MOOCs be accessible on smart phones?

Absolutley, the accessability is within the course & content design. Some platfroms do have apps as standard but it is not difficult to run websites on mobile as long as the content and the course structure has been developed with this in mind.

xMOOCS match cultural expectations of delivery in developin countries better?

I think this is potentially true. Some primary research i worked on in usability testing the edX platform in India suggested that a more directive approach in activity instruction would provide a better expereince in respect to a clearer understanding of the activity and so enhance engagement.

Is one barrier having the skills to navigate the open course at scale and how would you approach tackling thisin your context?

Absolutley, i don't think it is just about scale though. There are a number of approaches one might take. Having some pre-course learning that looks at developing users digital literacies. Provide support within the course regarding digital literacy. Make sure that for those that don't have the ability there is a clear structured route through the course, differentiate the learning to ensure that students could continue to get value at multiple

levels.

to what extent do you think this demographic is a function of time? [in response to stats on high percentage of users with college degree]

I think this is highly dependent on what happens with MOOC business models but in essence I would agree that the levels of user with and without college degrees should even out. My main interest is whether it widens particpation beyond those already engaged in their education (you don't need a college degree to have college degree level of engagement with education).

Are MOOC platforms being made more freely available to developing country teachers/institutions to help reduce barriers?

At this stage i would say no as the majority of course are from and aimed at the global north. In India the government has committed to providing a national MOOC platform aimed specifcally at the home population. So there are movements in this direction but i would say at this stage it is around government engagement with education.

I remember from H800 something about developing countries leap-frogging technologies, so mobile phone networks can replace direct internet access?

Yes this is true and the stats are slightly skewed in terms of understadning the gap or the crossover between mobile andfixed internet access as there will be some double counting. But mobile is a significant area for teaching and learning in developing regions.

[Jane Ballans](#)
2:09pm 13 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Tim, Sorry to have missed your presentation on the live event but I managed to access the recording this morning. I really enjoyed your presentation, by favourite of the session. I have a common interest in freedoms (and social justice) so found your presentation fascinating. Do you post a blog or use Twitter. I would really like to follow the progress of your research?

[Tim Seal](#)
9:28am 16 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jane

I think we both follow each other on twitter i am [@tim10101](#) I blog at [http://a-world-of-open.blogspot.co.uk/](#) when i have time, hoping to put up my thoughts and toolkit on the MOOC soon. I must admit i missed your presentation (watching the recording now) and it was the one I was most interested in that day as you say there are some common themes.

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