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EDITORIAL: WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN, AND WHAT’S THE VALUE OF OPEN

Apostolos Koutropoulos – Editor, CIEE

In one way or another, Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs as they are widely known, have certainly taken the educational world by storm. The New York Times famously christened 2012 the “Year of the MOOC” (Pappano, 2012); 2013 was predicted to be the year of the Anti-MOOC during which public sentiment would swing the other way (Siemens, 2013). There has yet to be any prognostication, or pronouncement regarding how 2014 should be dubbed, with regard to the MOOC. Some think we will understand 2014 as the year the MOOC rebounded, with faculty members and institutions that did not abandon the format seeing positive results (Lapowsky, 2014). I see 2014 as the year when new research about MOOCs became available. We moved beyond the hype and replication of existing pedagogies into different environments, and adopted a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be teaching at scale, and to be teaching and learning in the open.

This special issue of *Current Issues in Emerging eLearning on MOOC Theoretical Perspectives and Pedagogical Applications* has roots in an older project: the *Great Big MOOC Book*. The MOOC Book project, initially proposed in 2011¹, was intended to provide a look at MOOCs from a variety of angles including analyses of historical underpinnings, pedagogies, instructional design, and open content, to name just a few. At that time only the *connectivist* variety of MOOCs had existed, so the project was conceived through a *connectivist* lens. In keeping with the spirit of Openness, the second “O” of MOOC, the book was to be crowdsourced, a collective knowledge gathering and knowledge sharing project. The outcome of this project would have looked like Wikipedia meeting open academic publishing. The project didn’t succeed as the grass-roots, crowdsourced, endeavor originally envisioned. Among other issues, publication as a book through a traditional press would have run counter to the ethos of openness espoused by proponents of Open Education, a movement in which MOOCs play a part.

¹ For more information on the original please see this link: <http://bit.ly/MoocBook>

It is perhaps unsurprising that the original 2011 project should have evolved, given how few things about the MOOC have remained constant since 2011. Yet none of the concepts represented by the individual letters in the acronym, MOOC, reference concepts new to academia. The term, “massive,” has applied variably from course-to-course, and subject-to-subject. In the past year, a new term, “at scale,” has been adopted to identify the teaching that occurs in MOOCs. However the concept of teaching *at scale* has been a part of academia for a long time. All of us who have sat in an auditorium for some part of our university studies, listening to one professor lecturing to, or at, many students who later take graded exams, can attest to that fact. A local colleague and president of one of the big xMOOC platforms quips that traditional lecture hall practice is no different today than it was fifty years ago (Agarwal, 2013).

Online and Distance Education are certainly nothing new, either. Most who are involved in the field of education know the rich history of distance education in all its many forms, from correspondence education, to modern day Computer Mediated Communication. The MOOC builds on this rich history, incorporating new technological advances that make it cheaper to provide offerings to learners far and wide, offerings unimaginable even five years ago. Recent technological affordances include low cost local disk and server storage space, vastly increased bandwidth, and a range of platforms enabling remote social interaction. Nevertheless, the practices built on these developments all are conceptually compatible with our long history of distance education practices.

What remains essential to the MOOC acronym, then, is the key term, “Open,” which, itself, is nothing new. In the context of education in the 1970s Open meant *free* of admissions requirements; however in the ‘80’s open grew to encompass the meaning, ‘*free* of cost,’ while also acquiring additional meanings. Anything that was *open* granted content users the right to retain the content, to reuse it, revise it, remix it, and redistribute it as they wished. These verbs have come to embody a principle known as the 5Rs of Open (Wiley, 2013). Recently, however, this principle has been altered, or perhaps co-opted. “Open” has reverted to its 1980’s meaning, ‘*free* of cost.’ In a practice dubbed *openwashing*, some products and services, including courseware, now stake a claim as *open*, attempting to leverage the good will that *open* engenders, while violating the 5R principles of *open* (Wiley, 2103).

This co-opting of the “Open” label is particularly problematic because, as Wiley says: “Openness facilitates the unexpected” (Wiley, 2013). Open should remain more than a marketing buzzword, especially in the case of the products created by academics and their respective academic institutions. This certainly pertains to MOOCs, but should also include the academic articles written for free by faculty, peer reviewed for free by volunteers, and edited and compiled for free by journal editors. When academics forgo openness for the sake of expediency,

recognition, and/or career advancement, and when for-profit service providers co-opt the nomenclature of openness, we lose opportunities to achieve the unexpected, the next big *disruption*, to the extent that we allow this term to be abused.

In my view Open enables persistent and perpetual iteration, not just by the original author or creator, but subsequently by anyone interested in the subjects and products put forth by original creators. Open spurs new ideas, and it allows for a *Rhizomatic* flourishing of new ideas from existing work². Individuals, or groups, can *fork*³ existing work made available under an open license, innovating new possibilities. This process not only advances the community whose members use the *open* work, but enriches the original authors by providing a window into alternate visions of the original conception. That which is truly *open* does not withhold or delay the granting of permission to explore ideas, or to explore existing lines of thought in different, or unforeseen, ways. Open means that both a community, and individuals, can develop work continually, either within the original project form, or as a forked version. Members of an open project can work in parallel, or cooperatively, or collaboratively⁴. All bets are on.

Finally, those whose work is produced in truly *open* schemas prevent the circumstance of criminalizing access to knowledge and the distribution of knowledge. Academics and non-academics alike benefit from knowledge we contribute to the world free of constraints imposed by the need for seeking special permissions to exercise the practices of retention, reuse, revision, remixing, and redistribution. In order to leverage the affordances of lower technology costs we must take the next step and enable value creation by releasing our work freely under open licensing.

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² See (Cormier, 2008) for more on Rhizomatic learning

³ To fork a project means to a copy of the original work (in the software world this would mean the original source code) from one project and start independent work on it; thus creating a new distinct, and separate work, from the original.

⁴ See (Downes, 2010) for distinctions between cooperative and collaborative work.

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