



FLEXIBLE TRAINING MODELS: A RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT NEEDS

THE LONG-TERM EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE OF THE MOOCS

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1. **ABSTRACT:** Three features of the MOOCs present educational challenges to the current University teaching model. First, they open the classroom doors, and that fosters the objective evaluation of teaching on the same ground as research. Second, materials and lectures that can be downloaded separately and used in live courses. This cumulative effect fosters mainstreaming and interconnection in live courses. Third, the electronic support of the MOOCs courses allows teaching at two levels, and in doing so the course to be used both at the undergraduate and at a graduate level. There remain also some problems to be solved, mainly the Professor's abilities, the Assessments and the Forum.
2. **RESUM:** Tres aspectes de les MOOCs constitueixen reptes educatius per l'actual model d'ensenyament universitari. En primer lloc, obren les portes de l'aula, i això permet una avaluació objectiva de la docència, amb bases similars a les de la recerca. En segon lloc, els materials i les classes es poden descarregar separatament i utilitzar en classes presencials, proporcionant un efecte acumulatiu que afavoreix tant la transversalitat com la interconnexió de les classes presencials. En tercer lloc, el suport electrònic dels cursos MOOCs permet una docència a dos nivells, i els cursos poden orientar-se simultàniament a la llicenciatura i al postgrau. Queden alguns problemes per resoldre, bàsicament els relacionats amb les habilitats dels professors, les avaluacions i el Fòrum.



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3. KEYWORDS: teaching, evaluation, research, multi-level teaching, MOOCs /

PARAULES CLAU: Ensenyament, avaluació, recerca, ensenyament a diversos nivells, MOOCs.

4. DEVELOPMENT

a) Objectives

The aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of the MOOCs both for teaching evaluation purposes and for the flexibility of teaching. And at the same time, to point out some of the shortcomings that they still present at this moment.

b) Description of my work

The Massive Online Open Courses are an innovative factor of the utmost educational importance for Universities.

First of all let me state that I am a Humanities professor. My field is the History of China, mainly Ming China and the European's encounter with it. I've been following MOOCs for the last two years with the utmost interest, but my knowledge of them comes primarily from the Humanities. And I have just prepared a MOOC about "The European discovery of China", that will be on line next September.

To further clarify my points of view, let me state that I distinguish basically two types of MOOCs. The first type provide academic content. They deal with how to organize knowledge in a given field, how to transmit it and how to induce students to gain a personal approach to that given field. This is the kind of MOOC that corresponds to an academic subject and that can be used to directly support a live academic course. Students in these MOOCs only need a previous academic background, albeit a very general one. The courses are usually given by professors with decades of experience on teaching in that field.

The second type of MOOCs offer skill-based content. They provide the kind of expertise that serves as support for established academic subjects and can also be of interest for a



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wide range of interests outside academic studies. Students in those courses don't need a previous academic background.

Both types of MOOCs are very important for universities to place themselves once again in the informational and educational pipeline. First of all, online information, sometimes of excellent quality, is already readily available. And everybody uses it as part of their everyday routine. Wikipedia, to its critics' dismay, is the most consulted encyclopedia in the world, while many excellent universities have since a decade put freely online excellent courses, - like Harvard extension courses – or extremely good specialized web pages, like “Asia for Educators” by Columbia University, or “Silk Road Seattle” by the University of Washington. Furthermore, Google books and the Gutenberg Project make available online an exponential number of primary sources.

Three features of the MOOCs provide challenges to the current University teaching model, while, at the same time, open other opportunities to professors and education.

A. The evaluation of teaching

The MOOCs open the classroom doors, reversing the trend to closed door teaching that has prevailed for centuries. The closed door is so deeply rooted in University practices that it has even survived in the online platforms of our Universities, where online course content is still unavailable even to the other professors of the same university. From the professor's point of view, the closed doors might be a way of protecting author's rights, and from the university point of view, it is a way to protect teaching costs. But both professors and universities are paying a significant toll for keeping the doors closed: teaching is very difficult to evaluate and, as a result, its quality is much lower than the quality of research which can be objectively evaluated through its results and publications. This crucial difference between research and teaching pushes/or places teaching to second place in worldwide universities.



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The problems arising from the non-evaluation of teaching are most acute in Spanish universities, where external controls on teaching are bureaucratic procedures and where the so-called evaluation of professors is only based on students' surveys.

1. External evaluation

Currently, external evaluation applies not to individual professors but to a given level of instruction. This evaluation is doomed because it doesn't evaluate the quality of teaching, but rather the administrative adequacy of those studies according to the general administrative-pedagogical guidelines given by the educational authorities. This being so, those external evaluations generate a great amount of administrative documents of extremely dubious quality and a cascade of empty words. This external evaluation does not include a real presence of the evaluators in the classrooms during a given time, as is the case in other countries. For all the years that I have been teaching in the university, I've never seen any improvement in teaching – nor even any change – coming as a result of those evaluations.

Moreover, most of our disciplines lack even the indirect survey that comes from objective examinations, given with the participation of external professors, both in the layout and the evaluation of the assessment.

2. Student surveys

Students' surveys are also completely useless. Students know well by experience that these surveys are of no consequence as to the promotion or removal of the professors. Furthermore, the results are not publicized, a fact that protects bad results and denies incentives for good ones. The only reason for the students to participate in these surveys would be the opportunity to express aloud voice their satisfaction or dissatisfaction either with the teacher or with the contents of the course. But if through the surveys the students can't influence the course in any way nor give a public voice to their opinions, they don't do them.



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3. Impact of non-evaluation over professors

With internal promotion depending exclusively upon research, the incentive for good teaching is only based on the satisfaction obtained by a well-done job. But even this has only a limited effect on the quality of teaching, because the powerful bias towards research as the only way towards promotion. For most professors, teaching is the price they have to pay to maintain their job and they have no enthusiasm for it. The only reward for teaching is to get feedback from the students about the professor's field of research. That is certainly a very adequate way of teaching at PhD levels, and it can even work at the Master level, but it doesn't work at all in undergraduate teaching, where subjects are of a much more general scope.

There is still another problem with university teaching, and that is the uneven distribution of professors at the different levels of the studies. Since the massification of universities in the last decades of the twentieth century, it has become the general norm that the better and more experienced professors teach at the higher levels, while the first university years are handled by assistant professors or even by teachers in a precarious professional job. Even if some of them, display a real interest in teaching, their knowledge is more specialized than general and they lack the broad view that fosters connections and arouses student's interests. And certainly they have no prior teaching experience at all. Certain universities have devised some pedagogical courses for them that might be helpful. But teaching is a profession, and professions are learnt with a master at your side. And this they haven't had. First rate teachers have all disappeared from the first years' courses. And they'll never come back unless this is recognized as a problem and special support is devised to provide them help.

4. MOOCs and evaluation of teaching

Universities as institutions are well aware of the problem of the declining quality of teaching in its classrooms. Certainly, in the short term, some measures could be taken to ensure a certain improvement of teaching, but they are of limited reach and would certainly



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entail very severe tensions in the Academia. The only way out of this situation is to open the classrooms doors – which is what MOOCs are doing – and allow teaching to be evaluated. From the point of view of professors, the most important consequence of opening the classroom's doors is its impact on the evaluation of teaching.

If teaching can be evaluated in explicit and universal grounds, then it can become an accountable element for university promotion, on the same grounds as research. And if teaching becomes an evaluable factor for promotion, the quality of teaching will improve, something that is now in great need in Spanish universities, especially at the undergraduate level.

Certainly evaluation will not be immediate: evaluation schemas will have to be devised and a global evaluation agency will have to emerge.

B. The cumulative effect of the MOOCs

The MOOCs policy of Open Doors has also many practical and immediate consequences, that are especially relevant for professors of the same or related disciplines as the ones of the existing content MOOCs. It is worthwhile to note that a large proportion of the so-called students that sign-in for a given MOOC are professors of the same field, or professionals in related disciplines. Most MOOCs are oriented towards a general public with no previous knowledge on the field, but through the Forums it is easy to see that courses abound with people who are highly familiar with the discipline.

The interests of the professors attending the MOOCs are twofold: their interests include both the pedagogy and the contents. That is, first, they want to know how other professors structure the course and what they highlight in it. Second, they want to know what materials they use and how they use them. In that sense, the MOOCs offer a very consistent example of continuing education, be it to support an already existing profession, for instance a history professor taking a course on Renaissance architecture; to provide support for a life-long hobby, like a course on the secrets of archaeology; or to give expertise in some general ability, like public speaking -.



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The fact that materials and lectures can be downloaded separately allows professors to profit from the accumulated efforts of their colleagues. They can direct their students to the already uploaded materials that are relevant to their own courses. In doing so, MOOCs promote mainstreaming and interconnection between different courses, discards useless repetitions and opens the intellectual horizons of the students. The downloading of course materials has also evolved: a year ago, there were universities that had their MOOC courses protected and they couldn't be downloaded. By now, as far as I know, this is no longer the case.

Open doors give the opportunity to direct students to well organized knots of knowledge, with materials arranged in a much more pedagogical way than those separately existing on a website. And this is really important, because given these truly reliable materials, you can ask the students to work on them outside of class time and then devote your own class to the discussion of the subject.

And MOOCs also tackle another problem that professors have been detecting in the last decade: students don't take notes anymore. As far as I can tell, this is true wherever I go, be it in Barcelona, in China or America. Sheer information is not essential anymore in the classroom because students rely on web sources to find it. Live classroom hours have to be centered on discussing or applying the information, not on transmitting it.

C. Multi-level teaching

The Online Open Doors also tend to suppress the volatile element of a face to face class, because words, sentences, and assertions that will be replayed again and again have to be very carefully elaborated. And the thread that links one lecture to the previous and to the next has to be very clear and explicit. In fact this approximates preparing a MOOC to writing a book: in content MOOCs it is very usual that both things come in parallel. But the electronic support of the courses makes possible the teaching at two levels of depth, which allows the course to be used both at the undergraduate and at a graduate level. 1. The undergraduate level. The video classes that form the MOOC continuum are a classic basic



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course on that topic that can be cut and reused by anyone who needs it, or serve as guideline for those who are teaching similar contents. They are a very good tool for high school teachers as well.

2. The research level. The professors can present, comment and provide in a second level the sources and research that are behind each class or each unit. This ought to be done, as some platforms like Coursera and Edx are already doing, through separate units that discuss specific topics, elaborating on them and presenting different opinions. The idea is to provide students with a more complex approach to a given subject. A separate Forum for this level ought to be provided, that would probably be much less chaotic than the current general one, because the intellectual motivation of students at this level is much higher and they would follow more strictly the guidelines of the professor-instructor.

Working at this level ought to qualify students for a special accreditation certificate, which would be much more likely to be recognized for credits than the actual ones.

Last but not least, preparing a MOOC exposes university professors to the new technologies and tends to reduce the gap between generations. The *course-wiki* platform helps to gather up a wealth of internet resources about any given topic and foster a real collaboration between students and professors.

D. The shortcomings of the MOOCs

On the other hand, the shortcomings of the MOOCs are minor and derive basically from the professor's teaching abilities, the assessments, and the Forum.

1. Professor's abilities.

The MOOCs are given by professors, not by actors or TV presenters. A professor can write a book to back up a MOOC, it's even a good thing to do, but he can't learn it by heart. Neither can he read it in front of the camera, nor can he rely heavily on his notes, which is what he is used to do, because he has to be looking at the camera. For this reason, the prompter is a practical solution that most adopt. But a class is characterized by the feedback



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between professors and students, and that is lost. The professor can talk to a prompter but he has to imagine its audience and react to it. This is an ability that we have never been taught, and to my experience even the best professors tend to be uneven in this aspect.

Furthermore, the interest of the invisible audience has to be maintained all the time, and for this you have the only support of your eyes, your voice and your hands, because movements are very limited, be it in front of a computer or standing on a platform. You have already lost the feedback and now you lose your body language. Teaching a MOOC is a new professional field that requires new abilities, and we are not professionally prepared for them.

To solve those two problems, the lack of feedback and the limitations of the body language, some universities have turned to recording live classes. But the results, up to now, are quite poor, because those two modes of teaching require different efforts for the professors, and different technologies for the university.

2. Assessments are important to help participants to keep up with the pace of the class: they don't lead to regular university credits, but that is not what the great majority of participants are looking for. The motivations of the students who take a MOOC are very different from those who take a regular university course. The assessment problem is quite different in the two main kinds of MOOCs:

- a) *Utilitarian* MOOCs that are usually taken as a complement to regular (or standard?) studies or as a way to improve professional aptitudes. For those MOOCs, assessment can be more practical, and peer assessment quite effective, because the rubric can easily match the requirements of the evaluation.
- b) *Content* MOOCs attract persons with intellectual curiosity and, mostly, professors who wish to learn about their colleagues' practice. In both cases, interest in the assessment is low, and a very low percentage of the participants take them: between 5 to 10% are the usual rates. For these MOOCs, a rubric that doesn't reveal answers but provides a clear guideline is much more difficult to achieve. Multiple choice tests tend to be



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oversimplifying and schematic, and this makes them inadequate for many disciplines, like Humanities and Social Sciences.

The MOOCs are experimenting with assessment and changes are frequent. A couple of years ago, inserting short tests of attention at the middle of a given segment was highly recommended, while by now this seems to have been left behind. Most professors distrust questions that reproduce exactly the professor's words, which unfortunately is what most of the MOOC tests do: it is too childish and too far away from live classroom practices.

3. The Forum is a positive device, but its best implementation is still to be found. It is easiest to follow for the professors-instructors of the course, who often gather interesting comments from it, than for the mass of students, who usually get lost in its chaos. Thousands of persons can start a new thread at any moment – these days a MOOC accumulates hundreds of threads - and that makes discussions very difficult to follow, because new comments simply disappear lost in battle.

Some MOOCs have confronted the problem with a couple of preventive measures:

- a) By establishing arbitrary groupings - based on alphabetic or zodiacal criteria - in the Forum, they reduce the number of participants in each discussion. This practice alleviates the problem, but this is a measure that isn't necessarily followed by all participants, especially when they detect that in one group the discussion is livelier than in another.
- b) By strictly monitoring the content of the discussions they keep the discussion under control. However, this is a very costly measure, because its implementation requires a teaching staff far more numerous than most universities can provide. And it is artificial, because real students comment about everything: the quality of the slides, the accent of the professor, and the opportunity of many of his sentences.



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On the other hand, those preventive measures tend to inhibit the contribution of students to the wiki course. And this wiki course – a space that gathers all the references to existing web resources that all participants provide along the course – is a major tool for a MOOC.

c) Conclusions

The MOOCs are already almost three years old. They are a universal phenomena and need a universal visibility. We want to have available not only its proceedings, but also its results: how many students sign in, how many finish, and which is their professional profile. And last, but not least, it would be a great help for teaching if a global evaluation agency was established, that could provide rankings on three levels: platforms, universities and individual courses. That would no doubt have a tremendous positive impact on university teaching, and universities and professors are in great need of it.

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