Implications of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on Higher Education:

Mitigating or Reifying Educational Inequities?

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**Abstract**: The proliferation of massive open online courses (MOOCs) has stirred a fervent debate about global access to higher education. While some commentators praise MOOCs for expanding educational opportunities in a more open and accessible fashion, others criticize this trend as a threat to current models of higher education and a low-quality substitute for traditional learning. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review of both academic and popular media sources, this article will explore the impact of MOOCs on the field of higher education, with a particular emphasis on their promise to enhance educational opportunities worldwide. Specifically, the analysis will focus on the four issues that have – so far – proven to be most significant in shaping the future of MOOC as an equalizing force in higher education: credit, pedagogy, internationalization, and, finally, legal and financial aspects.

The recent rise of massive open online courses (MOOCs) can be understood as the confluence of several key trends in higher education: globalization and the push for internationalization; increasing demand for access to higher education; a celebration of lifelong learning and the consequent change in learner demographics; increased personal access to technology and social media; and, last but not least, the need for alternative models of access and affordability in the higher education sector (Powell & Yuan, 2013). In noting the game-changing nature of these online courses, many commentators have pointed to Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997; Christensen, Horn & Johnson, 2008) as a way to understand the tremendous impact that MOOCs might have on worldwide learning (Anderson, 2013; Daniel, 2012; Powell & Yuan, 2013; Regalado, 2012). However, the initial excitement about MOOCs as a democratizing force in higher education has recently been tempered by more pessimistic accounts which point to the very real possibility that MOOCs might create a two-tiered system, separating those who have access to on-campus education from those that are less privileged and must therefore make do with massive online courses (Carlson & Blumenstyk, 2012). This article will evaluate the social and educational potential of MOOCs, particularly in terms of the claims that MOOC proponents make about the empowering and equalizing effects of open online education. After providing a brief background on MOOCs and clarifying the essential yet often overlooked distinction between cMOOCs and xMOOCs, I will analyze the potential impact of MOOCs on higher education by zooming in on the issues that I see as most significant - and most contentious - for determining the future of this educational model: credit, pedagogy, internationalization, and, finally, legal and financial aspects.

**Background and key distinctions**

Potentially catering to thousands of learners, MOOCs are online courses generally characterized by free and open enrollment, video lectures, and assignments evaluated through peer or automated assessment. Although the Internet functions as the platform of delivery, MOOCs are not a synonym for online education - as they are often misrepresented in the press - but rather a specific type of online education. The key difference is that MOOCs, unlike conventional university online courses, are characterized by scalability - usually supporting an indefinite number of participants - and, respectively, open access, allowing (at least theoretically) anyone to participate in the course for free (Glance, Forsey, & Riley, 2013).

Perhaps ironically, given the transformations it has undergone ever since, the original MOOC concept was built precisely on an appreciation of social connectivity. The term “MOOC” was coined by Dave Cormier and Bryan Alexander to describe an open online course at the University of Manitoba, designed and taught by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. The course, titled “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge”*,* was offered to 25 fee-paying students on the Manitoba campus and 2,300 other participants from all over the world, who took the class online for free (Daniel, 2012). Significantly, the pedagogy behind this course was based on the notion of connectivism, which, according to Downes (2012), is “the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks” (p. 9). As a result, this course, and later courses that followed in its pedagogical footsteps, became known as a cMOOC (connectivist MOOC), due to its strong emphasis on “creation, creativity, autonomy and social networking learning” (Siemens, 2012). The earlier tradition of cMOOCs continues, but the attention has shifted to the so-called xMOOCs, which employ a more traditional pedagogical approach focused on video lectures, short quizzes, and little professor-to-student or student-to-student interaction. A prominent early example of the xMOOC approach is Stanford University’s 2011 course, “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence”, taught by Peter Norvig and Sebastian Thrun, and attracting 160,000 online enrollees. Out of these, 23,000 students completed the course; as Thrun mused, this meant that he and Norvig “taught more students AI, than all AI professors in the world combined” (Thrun, as cited in Shirky, 2012). Realizing the immense potential of this education model, Thrun quit his tenured post at Stanford and founded Udacity, which - together with Coursera and the nonprofit initiative edX - is one of the three major MOOC providers which dominate today’s market.

The current incarnation of MOOCs - where xMOOCs are by far more prominent - represents a significant departure from the original MOOC model pioneered by Siemens and Downes in 2008, especially in terms of pedagogical approach. In fact, Siemens and Downes are among the most disappointed commentators of this shift. According to Downes, “MOOCs as they were originally conceived were the locus of learning activities and interaction, but as deployed by commercial providers they resemble television shows or digital textbooks with – at best – an online quiz component… The idea of MOOCs as an experiment in pedagogy and educational organisation has been completely abandoned by the new platforms, to the detriment of MOOCs” (Downes, as cited in Parr, 2013).

In view of their crucial differences in terms of pedagogy, it is important to adequately distinguish between cMOOCs and xMOOCs - and popular accounts of MOOCs often do not. Osvaldo Rodriguez (2012) offers a beautifully simple explanation of these key differences: “c-MOOCs establish a many to many relation to develop massive interconnectedness. [xMOOCs] establish a one to many relationship to reach massive numbers.” In many ways, the bifurcation of MOOCs into connectivist versus instructional models reflects the perpetual debate between learning as process versus learning as outcome; as Siemens (2012) notes, cMOOCs focus on knowledge creation, whereas xMOOCs focus on knowledge duplication. Indeed, cMOOCs and xMOOCs are so different in terms of goals and pedagogy that it is confusing (and generally unproductive) to designate them using the same term. In addition, the confounding of the two types of MOOCs (or, more specifically, the universal use of the term MOOC when in fact commentators are referring primarily to xMOOCs) often prevents the development of a nuanced and productive dialogue, and glosses over key differences in pedagogy and goals. If the differences between cMOOCs and xMOOCs were better understood, opinions would be less polarized and the impassioned debate about MOOCs and the future of higher education would be a lot more grounded.

**Credit**

The most vital yet unresolved question that will determine the future of MOOCs both in the United States and abroad concerns the integration of these online classes within the formal system of higher education. Will credit be offered for MOOCs, and if so, for which ones? Are MOOCs meant to replace, supplement or remain separate from traditional college courses? Put bluntly, the shortcomings that critics point out when referring to the current generation of MOOCs would not matter so much if these courses “were intended to fill a sink-or-swim niche in higher education, where it might be acceptable that only a small fraction of enrolled students (commonly 10 percent or less) finish and earn certificates of completion” (Daniel, 2012). Where MOOCs run into the most trouble is when educators, administrators or legislators see them as a low-cost credit-bearing replacement for traditional college courses. This view is representative of the unhealthy ideology of technological solutionism (Morozov, 2013) and it threatens to create a two-tiered system wherein the most cash-strapped and already marginalized students will take MOOCs for credit, while their more privileged peers will enjoy the advantages of an embodied college experience. What is more, preliminary empirical findings also prove that this strategy is quite ineffective, as seen in the recent fiasco at San Jose State, where more than half of the students who took a (fee-based) Udacity course for credit failed their final exams (Oremus, 2013). As I note in the final part of this article, while MOOCs can be a lower-cost and helpful tool in some of these settings, it is important to provide alternative sources of support that will guide students through the learning process and provide them with individual feedback and assistance.

Although the American Council on Education has announced that it has started reviewing MOOCs for credit (Jaschik, 2013), at this point, credit-bearing MOOCs are a small minority, and most MOOCs are still free and credit-less. In fact, the current lack of credit options, coupled with the unavailability of individualized support mechanisms for MOOC learners, can explain, at least in part, the frequently cited attrition challenges in MOOCs. For this reason, it does not always make sense to compare MOOC attrition levels with the attrition levels of traditional college courses where students have clear incentives to complete coursework. Since most MOOCs are free and do not offer credit, lurking or auditing is more accepted than in a traditional classroom environment, and participation is not subject to the same normative and financial pressures to finish and do well in a course. Indeed, research shows that many MOOC participants sign up out of curiosity or enjoyment, and do not even intend to complete quizzes or assignments (Rivard, 2013). Given the scale and the diversity of participation, it is important to acknowledge that learners engage with MOOCs in a variety of ways, and for different reasons.

For those who are taking non-credit MOOCs but would like to pursue these topics further as part of a college degree program, a head start can make a huge difference. According to The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), students who receive credits for prior learning are 2½ times as likely to graduate as those who do not earn such credits (Selingo, 2012). Prior learning assessment is a promising yet lesser-known path towards obtaining college credit for MOOC participation, as it enables students to get official credits for college-level learning gained outside of traditional academic contexts (Fain, 2012). Here is how it works in practice: 1) a student successfully completes a non-credit-bearing MOOC and receives a (non-credit) certificate of completion from the MOOC provider; 2) the student describes what they have learned in the MOOC - usually through an academic paper - and demonstrates their mastery of the subject by building a custom portfolio on [LearningCounts.org](http://LearningCounts.org) (a service facilitated by CAEL) or a similar site; 3) a CAEL-affiliated faculty member with expertise in the relevant subject matter reviews the student’s write-up and portfolio, and decides whether they are worthy of college credit; 4) if the faculty expert makes a recommendation for awarding college credit (which is very specific: say, 2 credits to be applied for an Engineering program), the student can then take this document - which would be backed up by the American Council on Education (ACE) - and enroll in one of the many colleges that accept ACE’s credit recommendations or that are partner institutions for [LearningCounts.org](http://LearningCounts.org).[[1]](#footnote-1) The entire process is quite complex, so students attempting to take this route must be committed and proactive; in addition, there are some fees involved ($250 for the CAEL-affiliated faculty review of a 1-12 credit portfolio) (Fain, 2012). Nonetheless, this approach is worth pursuing as a potential bridge between non-credit MOOCs and the achievement of a college degree, since it relies on a promising model of fair and individualized assessment. Moreover, it could further be improved, for instance, by replacing the centralized portfolio site with smaller customized sites, developed and run by the colleges themselves, according to their own certification criteria.

Georgia State University has already taken an important step in this direction, by announcing in 2013 that it will start reviewing MOOCs for credit, just like it reviews courses taken at other institutions, or Advanced Placement exams. In order to receive credit for MOOCs that they have previously completed, students will have to work with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and relevant academic departments, in order to demonstrate competency in specific academic areas (Jaschik, 2013). In a similar initiative, Academic Partnerships, a company that collaborates with public universities to put their academic offerings online, announced a new program called MOOC2Degree, where students can take an initial MOOC for credit, free of cost, in the hope that they will later enroll in the full degree program. Cleveland State University, Florida International, and the Universities of Arkansas, Cincinnati, Texas at Arlington and West Florida are among the first institutions that have signed up to pilot this initiative in collaboration with Academic Partnerships (Jaschik, 2013; Kiley, 2013).

**Pedagogy**

As Claire Potter (2013) asks, pragmatically, in a recent Chronicle article, “what course open to thousands of random people could really teach all of them well?” To achieve scalability, xMOOCs rely on the large lecture format, with filmed lectures and automated quizzes, thus effectively substituting student-teacher interaction with student-content interaction. CMOOCs, on the other hand, substitute student-teacher interaction with student-student interaction, counting on course participants to take a more active role in their own learning, and that of their peers (Anderson, 2013). Seen from this angle, when scalability is the ultimate goal, critics are (most often) right to be concerned about the pedagogical foundation of massive online courses. I say “most often”, because many commentators make blanket statements about the pedagogical shortcomings of MOOCs, failing to distinguish between xMOOCs and cMOOCs, and not giving proper credit to innovative experiments that test out different models of engagement. As I will describe towards the end of this article, we are witnessing the emergence of an impressive set of alternative MOOC models – such as the hybrid distributed open online course (DOCC) designed by Anne Balsamo and Alex Juhasz, or the P2PU or NovoEd platforms – which indicates that there is indeed some hope in regards to the pedagogical ambitions of such courses.

Due to pedagogical shortcomings, commentators have argued that, rather than courses, MOOCs can better be understood as digital textbooks (Oremus, 2012), curation systems (Literat, Carstocea & Kramer, 2013), libraries (Fister, 2012), or, simply, information (Selingo, 2012). However, as Literat, Carstocea & Kramer (2013) observe, it is possible that the function of MOOCs as curated informational resources is simply more noticeable because that is “the only aspect of traditional classroom coursework that Coursera preserves in full…Curation becomes much more visible when the interactions and engaged learning practices that form much of the traditional seminar experience disappear.”

It is also important to note that, from a legal perspective, the terms of use (TOU) that students accept when joining a MOOC usually contain a clause to the effect that the MOOC provider (Coursera, Udacity etc) does not make any guarantees as to the quality of the learning experience therein (Davis, 2013). The companies do not accept any liability, and there are no mechanisms to enforce a higher quality of learning in a MOOC. This is a significant contrast with the traditional university, where a system of evaluation and accountability (including course evaluations, departmental hierarchies, official complaint policies) is in place to ensure adequate standards of instruction. Quality in online learning can be operationalized in a variety of ways - quality of content, quality of design, quality of instructional delivery, quality of outcomes (Legon, 2013) - but the process of MOOC accreditation should be tempered, rather than accelerated, until there is a feasible way to evaluate the quality of MOOCs and to provide students with a firm guarantee that their experiences in MOOCs will be worthwhile (especially when participation is fee-based). Significantly, we must also acknowledge that the perceived quality of a MOOC will depend, to a great extent, on students’ personal goals – which differ greatly when it comes to MOOC participation (Rivard 2013) – and their consequent engagement with the course. Indeed, given the major departure from structured degree programs and institutional standards that MOOCs represent, the concept of quality may need to be reconsidered for this context.

Nonetheless, there are several pedagogical opportunities to be gleaned from MOOCs. One such opportunity is the ability to meticulously design a course and learning environment. “When we teach online, we have to build both the course and the classroom,” writes Jesse Stommel (2013), cautioning against the disconnect that exists at many institutions between those that build online courses and those that teach them. Of course, given the technical infrastructure of MOOC delivery platforms, it is not always possible to modify certain parts of the learning environment - and indeed, this inability to make key design choices in the interest of pedagogy is often cited as one of the most frustrating aspects of teaching a MOOC (Head, 2013). MOOC experiences can also help inform innovative pedagogical practices in the embodied classroom, and some universities are using MOOCs as an incubator or “skunkworks” for pedagogical experimentation (Armstrong, 2012; Weissmann, 2012). In fact, in *The Chronicle*’s survey of MOOC professors, thirty-eight percent of respondents said they were motivated to try out MOOCs in order to pick up tips that might help improve their classroom teaching (Kolowich, 2013). For one, platforms like Coursera, edX, and Udacity provide detailed metrics, tracking student interactions, participation, and performance; this data (though exclusively quantitative) can help professors determine which methods and materials are seen as useful and engaging, and which are not. At Wesleyan - the first small liberal arts college to venture into MOOC territory - the allure of this rich data was one of the main reasons the university decided to partner with edX. Once the first Wesleyan MOOCs have run their course, the president of the college, Michael Roth, plans to get together with the faculty who are teaching MOOCs in order to discuss lessons learned and potential implications for the improvement of on-campus learning (Tilsley, 2012).

**MOOCs in International Contexts**

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s expansive survey of professors teaching MOOCs, the most frequently cited reason for embracing this model was the desire to increase access to higher education worldwide (Kolowich, 2013). Tabarrok (2012) argues, rather naively, that “the best way to increase the quality of teaching is to increase the number of students taught by the best teachers. Online education leverages the power of the best teachers, allowing them to teach many more students.” (Of course, as Vaidhyanathan (2012) astutely points out, this perspective rests on the assumption that popularity is a proxy for quality). But when MOOC proponents - many of whom enjoyed top quality educations at elite residential colleges - argue for the great potential of MOOCs to increase access to higher education, they are not referring to increased opportunities for their children and their friends’ children, but for “others” who are impoverished and marginalized, and for whom a college education is an ambitious dream (Carlson & Blumenstyk, 2012). Specifically, they generally invoke the needs of two populations: American students who cannot afford the rising costs of college in the US, and also, importantly, students in developing countries. Indeed, it is this latter category of student that is often showcased in the most utopian accounts of MOOCs.

The debate around MOOCs and their potential to trigger an educational revolution in developing countries is a worthy and important conversation to have, but, for now, it is still steeped in idealism. Putting free American courses online and opening them up for massive global participation cannot solve higher education needs around the world; at this point, it is just a small step in a generally promising direction. When it comes to widespread MOOC adoption in developing countries, the rhetoric is still very far from reality. Jamie Hodari (executive director of Generation Rwanda, a local nonprofit experimenting with a MOOC-based university) has captured this sentiment poignantly, noting that “it’s hard for us to read these op-eds all the time, saying now a student in Sudan can get a first-rate college education for free. It’s just so far from the reality of what could happen for all but just a few right now” (Leber, 2013).

Empirical data about the location of MOOC participants has shown, so far, that the large majority come from North America and Europe, with very limited participation from Asia and even less from Africa (Liyanagunawardena, et al., 2013) – although this is likely to change as MOOC offerings are becoming more diverse and accessible. Many developing countries still struggle with poor digital infrastructures, especially in rural areas, while MOOCs usually require fast connections and frequent logins.But beyond these technological concerns, a further obstacle is the participation gap, described as the inequality of access to the full range of “opportunities, experiences, skills and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow” (Jenkins et al. 2006, p. xii). The new media literacies identified by Jenkins et al. are particularly valuable in this respect, since a learner’s successful performance in a MOOC – and particularly in a cMOOC – depends heavily on their ability to navigate multiple digital spaces, engage in complex interactions, and read and write multimedia texts. In addition, the vast majority of MOOCs are in English; foreign students need a superior level of English language proficiency in order to understand course materials (especially non-subtitled video lectures) and to participate in forums.

There are also significant cultural and ethical considerations that need to be taken into account. How do you tailor the content of a massive online course to the diverse cultural contexts of its thousands of enrollees? Critics fear that the notion of all these students taking the same courses, with the same content, from the same instructor will lead to the “McDonaldization of higher education” (Lane & Kinser, 2012) and might result in the dominance of a few elite Western institutions over the global realm of higher education (Leber, 2013). When considered in an international context, this dynamic poses an important ethical challenge. The president of the University of South Africa labeled MOOCs a form of “intellectual neo-colonialism” (Daniel, Uvalić-Trumbić, & van Wyck, 2012). Yet we like to assume that university administrators in developing countries cannot jump on the MOOC bandwagon fast enough, and are eagerly awaiting American MOOC offerings. Upon closer scrutiny, that is not the case. A vital takeaway from the annual meeting of the Learning International Networks Consortium at MIT was that virtual universities abroad are resistant towards the inclusion of American-made MOOCs in their curricula because they do not aptly reflect “[their] own realities, context and culture” (Young, 2013).

Beyond these context-specific technological and cultural challenges, one of the most crucial issues that needs to be resolved before MOOCs can make a true impact on education in the developing world is, again, the question of credit. Students in developing countries, perhaps more so than elsewhere, need to be assured that the time they put into online education will lead to a job and a paycheck (Bartholet, 2013). Although a minority of them might participate in MOOCs for fun or curiosity or self-actualization, real change will occur only when these students are able to obtain credit - or some kind of alternative certification that local employers will find valuable - for their work in online courses. Fortunately, we are starting to see some promising opportunities for the local/cultural customization of MOOCs. The vigorous public debate surrounding MOOCs in the United States has already encouraged foreign universities to devote more attention to online learning and to develop their own locally-relevant models (Daniel, 2012). In India, for instance, Microsoft Research is launching a pilot project to develop MOOC-style online classes, taught by leading Indian professors and compliant with the existing curriculum at Indian engineering schools; the program is called Massively Empowered Classrooms (MEC; Bartholet, 2013). Future initiatives in this spirit might be more feasible, more effective and also, importantly, more ethical.

**Legal and financial considerations**

There is also a set of legal and financial issues that need to be resolved before a verdict can be reached as to the positive and democratizing potential of MOOCs. Foremost among these is the problem of copyright and intellectual property. Currently, commercial MOOC providers operate with very restrictive terms of service, maintaining all rights to use, reproduce, distribute and modify user content, including user data like clicks and demographic information, and student content like forum posts and media artifacts (Davis, 2013).[[2]](#footnote-2) Professors, too, are concerned about intellectual property in MOOCs, because the commercial agreements between MOOCs and educational institutions often conflict with the common institutional policy approach that grants intellectual property rights to faculty who develop a course (Cheverie, 2013). Faculty members therefore consider copyright one of the key issues that needs to be clarified before they can fully embrace these online courses (Bacow et al., 2012; Schmidt, 2013).

Mittell (2013) draws out an interesting contradiction when he contrasts the MOOC phenomenon with another crucial albeit lesser-known movement in academia: [COAPI](http://www.sparc.arl.org/about/COAPI/index.shtml) (the Coalition of Open Access Policy Institutions). Launched in 2011, COAPI includes more than 40 higher education institutions across the US. Its general aim is to offer a platform for colleges and universities to coordinate and advocate for open-access policies; in practice, this entails making faculty publications available for free online, streaming lectures and faculty talks, and increasing access to course-specific educational resources. As Mittell convincingly argues, although MOOCs are often promoted as a step towards openness and more equitable access to educational material, fewer than 20 percent of the institutions that are offering MOOCs on Coursera are also members of COAPI. Mittell is right in pointing out that such a discrepancy is, at least to a certain extent, rather hypocritical. Moreover, as he further notes, the disconnect between the rhetoric of MOOCs and the rhetoric of open-access policies is equally concerning, because on a basic level it speaks to the profit-seeking incentives that characterize Coursera and similar MOOC providers.

This brings us to another essential but unresolved variable in the MOOC equation: the monetization strategies that commercial MOOC providers will employ in order to make a profit. In an excellent synthesis of MOOC business models, Daniel (2012) identifies the following potential sources for monetization:

* + Certification (students pay for a badge or certificate)
  + Secure assessments (students pay to have their examinations invigilated (proctored))
  + Employee recruitment (companies pay for access to student performance records)
  + Applicant screening (employers/universities pay for access to records to screen applicants)
  + Human tutoring or assignment marking (for which students pay)
  + Selling the MOOC platform to enterprises to use in their own training courses
  + Sponsorships (3rd party sponsors of courses)
  + Tuition fees.

MOOC providers have already experimented with many of these models (particularly the first and the last on this list), but it is still not clear what the future holds in terms of monetization strategies. What is clear, however, is that MOOC stakeholders - including students, professors, administrators, legislators, and entrepreneurs - should keep a close eye on these financial developments, which are often not prominently featured in the popular press reporting on MOOCs. After all, as Ian Bogost (2013) skeptically reminds us, “MOOCs are an expression of Silicon Valley values” and their main motivation is to maximize profit, not access, or equality, or pedagogical quality. While he is partly right, Bogost’s statement also illustrates, unfortunately, the unproductive trend of failing to discriminate between different types of MOOCs; his criticism might hold true in the case of xMOOCs, but cMOOCs are certainly not an expression of Sillicon Valley values, nor do they value profit over pedagogy.

**Conclusion and Future Research**

The debates around MOOCs are anchored almost universally in a comparative approach, evaluating the educational potential of MOOCs side by side with that of traditional classroom instruction. While this approach is understandable, and makes sense both heuristically and practically, it should also be interrogated more critically. What kind of “traditional” classroom are we comparing MOOCs to? When commentators and analysts criticize MOOCs, the yardstick that they generally invoke - sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly - is the romanticized image of higher education as the intimate college seminar, preferably conducted by tenured faculty, at a selective residential college (Shirky, 2012). As Shirky (2012) aptly notes, “the fight over MOOCs is really about the story we tell ourselves about higher education.” However, considering the economic realities of going to college in the United States, the reality of the American higher education system is worlds apart from this idealized image. “If you want to know what college is actually like in this country, forget Swarthmore, with 1500 students. Think Houston Community College, with 63,000. Think rolling admissions. Think commuter school. Think older. Think poorer. Think child-rearing, part-time, night class. Think 50% dropout rates. Think two-year degree” (Shirky, 2013). And that is just the American landscape; educational systems in the developing world have their own host of challenges. We need to be more aware of what we are actually comparing when assessing the effectiveness of MOOCs, and to avoid making generalized claims without being mindful of the socioeconomic and cultural particularities of specific educational systems. Perhaps this is a needed opportunity to rethink what we mean by “traditional classroom,” in both domestic and international contexts.

It is also necessary to note that, although certain dynamics and interactions can be mirrored in online courses, the unique ecosystem of the physical campus cannot be reproduced, and MOOC students cannot benefit from the infrastructure, services, and resources that brick-and-mortar colleges provide. Granted, this “college experience” may not be an ideal – or even desired – option for all learners. However, college, in a sense, is a support system, and it is the students from the bottom tiers that need this support system the most. But in the absence of such opportunities for millions of learners, both in the US and abroad, we must consider, pragmatically and with a solid empirical base, whether MOOCs could perhaps make a positive impact. While MOOCs may not be ideal, can they at least represent a viable option for some learners and in some circumstances?

In their current incarnations (after all, it is probably safe to say we are still in the MOOC 1.0 era), MOOCs may not yet be the answer to the problems that plague higher education, but they could offer helpful tools to better achieve solutions. They could also engender a much-needed push towards experimenting with different educational models; indeed, in many areas, they already have. As Cathy Davidson (2013) suggested, MOOCs can be “a useful goad toward educational experimentation that may lead to methods for educating more students and in ways more responsive to the connected world they inhabit everywhere except in school.” Therefore, there are important opportunities where MOOCs could make a positive impact on the current higher education landscape. One such opportunity refers to hybrid models that combine MOOC instruction with face-to-face teaching or even with small virtual classes that offer individual feedback and support. Such models would preserve the advantages of small group learning, feedback, and interaction, while simultaneously removing the need for lecturing and allowing instructors to devote more time to interacting with students (Burke & Mahoney, 2013). The distributed open online course (DOCC), designed by Anne Balsamo and Alex Juhasz, is a great example of an ethical and innovative hybrid model. According to Balsamo and Juhasz (2012), the DOCC is a feminist rethinking of the MOOC concept, where professors at participating institutions will rely on a shared set of online resources (including course materials and assignments), but will customize the content of the course, tailoring it to the interests and goals of their students.

The issue of credit and certification will continue to play a big part in determining the future of MOOCs. But the absence of credit, while posing serious problems for the integration of MOOCs within college degree programs, doesn’t mean that these online courses are not valuable to some communities. Non-credit-bearing MOOCs can function well as communities of inquiry, participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2006) or affinity spaces (Gee, 2007). In fact, some of the best MOOCs I have seen - and participated in - have been credit-less cMOOCs that allow learners, young and old, to explore new interests, brush up on old ones, and achieve some form of self-actualization, gratis, and at their own pace. For instance, by engendering a helpful community and using video, audio, chat, and discussion forums, MOOCs could be an amazingly effective platform for learning foreign languages.

It is also important to acknowledge that there is a lot we don’t know yet about MOOCs. Research in this area is still in its infancy, and, as of now, there is not enough empirical data to reach a definitive conclusion (Glance, Forsey, & Riley, 2013). In addition, we don’t know much about the experiences of learners who have dropped out of MOOCs (Koutropoulos et al., 2012). As Veletsianos (2013) notes,

[T]he narrative of MOOC successes is often one-sided. MOOC providers tend to share the stories of extraordinary individuals that overcome insurmountable struggles to succeed in MOOCs (e.g., individuals in conflict-ridden Afghanistan and Syria that participate in MOOCs)… At the same time however, there are numerous individuals that have struggled with and abandoned MOOCs, individuals whose life circumstances, motivations, and needs negatively impacted their learning. The stories of these individuals are rarely shared. They are, in fact, concealed. They become figures and statistics (e.g., “90% dropped out” or “82% completed the first two assignments”), and their stories remain untold.

We need a better understanding of how students from different educational, cultural, and social backgrounds navigate MOOCs. We need to know what motivates them and, conversely, why they might fail or drop out. In order to paint a richer picture of student experiences in MOOCs, quantitative research needs to be supplemented by thick description and qualitative assessment (Stommel, 2012). Importantly, this approach also involves paying more attention to student voices, which are most often problematically missing from the debates that can decide their academic futures.

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1. Although this list is growing fast, for now, most of the partner institutions are state schools and community colleges, and the program does not include any top-tier universities. The full list of affiliated institutions is available at <http://www.learningcounts.org/affiliated-universities/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. And since MOOC participants are not considered to be students of the universities delivering these courses (no matter whether these online participants receive university credit or not), FERPA regulations do not apply either, which means that students’ personal information and privacy are not legally protected in the same way that they are in the traditional classroom. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)