

Open and Distance Education Comparative Study of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Universities

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Abstract

This paper refers to the ideal of open education and to the three forms of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and it presents a comparative study for Open Universities, answering the question whether if it actually is about the “open” education systems and by combining experience and theoretical research, a precise critical presentation of MOOCs is given.

Keywords

Open education, distance education, open university, massive open online course.

I. Introduction

During the last decades, advances in technology have affected all parts of everyday life. In search for ways that will satisfy the demand for genuine and advanced knowledge, innovative parameters have been developed in education. Technology now offers great potential in creating a new philosophy in the field of education. Along with the will to learn and with teaching methods based on technology, opportunities are granted even when conventional education is not available. This new feature, which is the trade mark of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Universities, combines the method of approaching knowledge and technical mastery.

II. Open Education

The role model and values that dictate modern life promote a society of parity and equal opportunities while at the same time it offers a plethora of knowledge by developing new technology techniques. This makes the ideal of open education¹ more current than ever (Nova-Kaltsouni, 2010). The term “open” point of view and strategy is used not only to describe an educational perception but also a political perspective that has been used and is being used to state the politics of educational research and access which are adopted by educational systems and the administrations of education” (Vergidis, Lionarakis, Lycourghiotis, Makrakis and Matralis Ch, 1998). According to Lionaraki and Papadimitriou (2010), the ideal of open education promotes the right to continuous education during one’s life. Providing new opportunities in education and ensuring access describes open education (Lionarakis and Likourgiotis, 1998, Raggatt, Edwards and Small, 1996). Open education encourages students to be active and independent, and it supports the learning curves which offer the trainee elasticity (Keegan, 1986).

Open education has the same or similar goals with conventional education but the difference lies in the methods followed in order to achieve these goals (Keegan, 2001). Open education is a versatile form of education (Race, 1999). It is versatile towards time, pace, place of study and the educational steps which are followed during the learning process. Race (1999) indicates that through open education “the trainees” (or learners or university students) have the right to choose, there are no restrictions and they can control the way they learn. The supervision of invigilators or educators is not so as extensive as in conventional education. The term “open” can also describe the criteria of admission due to the very high standards for entering Tertiary Education.

Lionarakis (1999) presents the characteristics of open education

- Access (access is granted to people who happen to be poor or socially excluded, ethnic or religious minorities etc)
- Second and third chance (multiple opportunities)
- Lifelong and continuous learning
- Flexibility
- Student-central system (a system which is focused on the students)
- Transfer of teaching or student credits
- Recognition of previous learning experience and skills

Open education develops the methodology of distant learning, a structured body of means and methods, and the main difference is between open systems and conventional systems (Keegan, 1986). This gives us the opportunity to refer to the advantages and disadvantages of open education based on the bibliography (Race, 1999, Lionarakis, 2001, Varsamidou and Res, 2007).

Some of the advantages can be:

- Flexibility of time and space
- The trainee has the ability to determine his learning pace and the quality of the education he is receiving
- The ability for people of all ages to participate
- No entry examinations are required

The disadvantages focus mainly on the lack of face-to-face contact between the educator and the trainee -- trainee and trainee—and that affects, up to a degree, the feedback given by the learning process.

A. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses)

Internet/Information technology offers a new dynamic that has been developing for the last years and it represents a new trend in learning, MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses (Cormier, McAuley, Siemens and Stewart, 2000). There are similarities between MOOCs and conventional education such as a set timetable and weekly examinations but no payment and other conditions are required, expect for internet access and pre-registration. In addition, the participant vacancies are limited and there is no official certification (Cormier, McAuley, Siemens and Stewart, 2000 & Mackness, Mak and Roy, 2010).

1. Udacity

Udacity is a term used to describe a for-profit educational organization which offers Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). Each lesson consists of filmed lectures accompanied by a set of questions based on the course in order to help the students comprehend the given concepts. Udacity uses automated grading programs. . (<http://www.udacity.com> & <http://en.wikipedia.org>).

All courses have an “open enrolment”, namely students can enroll in more than one course at any time. All courses and anything related to them are available upon enrolment and they can be completed at the student’s preferred pace. (<http://www.udacity.com> & <http://en.wikipedia.org>).

Once a course has been completed, the participant receives a certificate which indicates their level of success. Since 2012 Udacity offers students the opportunity to take part in official certification exams (<http://www.udacity.com> & <http://en.wikipedia.org>).

2. Coursera

According to the official website of Coursera (<https://www.coursera.or/about> & <http://www.alfavita.gr/arhron/coursera>), Coursera is an educational platform which cooperates with top universities and organizations worldwide, offering free online courses. World-known professors give online lectures while the knowledge that is gained is evaluated and re-enforced by interactive exercises. Interaction and long-term learning results form the basic pedagogic/educational methods of these online courses. The candidate must be over 18 or must have legal or parental consent to enroll and participate. The courses take place on specific dates which are announced long before the courses begin. Once the courses have begun the user has one week to attend each lecture. Then, when the lecture is completed, the user must participate in short examinations which evaluate his progress. The participants who manage to achieve a certain percentage are entitled to certification of attendance (<http://www.alfavita.gr/arhron/coursera>).

3. Edx

Edx is an open online course (MOOC) which was founded by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University in 2012 (now it cooperates with 28 top universities) and its purpose is to offer free online university courses that cover a wide range of disciplines. Thus, Edx’s final goal is to conduct research that shows how students learn based on the data they give (www.edx.or & www.theguardian.com). Edx uses online software for leaning via interaction. Each week new educational data is provided. Teaching is conducted through short video lectures which come with exercises. In addition, an introduction and textbook is given. Also, the participants can have online discussions on a forum created specifically for the course’s theme.

B. Open Universities

Open Universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate programs as well as vocational/training programs of short education via open and distant education. The university’s mission is to promote scientific research and to develop technology and methodology in open and distance learning. The academic programs are allocated with Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and the students can interact between conventional universities and Open University.

III. MOOCs (Udacity, Coursera, Edx) and Open University

A. Comparing MOOCs and Open University

By comparing MOOCs and the Open University we discover similarities yet many differences. The main similarity is the full use of the opportunities given by the using the internet and technology. They prefer distant learning² for sharing and fulfilling their vision.

Online lectures and university notes are given regularly and at the same time the students are provided with a study schedule, a deadline for delivering papers and other forms of evaluation. However, in MOOCs the above process is done in an automated framework and without interaction or guidance while that does not apply to the Open University. Each paper is evaluated and the students are guided during every Thematic Unit by participating in consultative group discussions and by communicating with the professor put in charge. In Edx, as with the Open University, the students can have constructive discussions based on a topic via online forums. But these differences are crucial. Open University provides degrees that are accepted by every private or public institution. Udacity offers the participants the chance to take part in official certification exams, Coursera offers a certificate of attendance while Edx searches for a way to provide official certification for the courses they offer. Although we are discussing about certificates of attendance, which are quite equivalent to participating in similar seminars, few business recognize these certificates as an additional skill in specialization (if that was one of the reasons for participating).

As a tertiary educational institution, Open University has a library fully equipped to satisfy the students’ demands and since it is about distant education, this opportunity must not be limited within the four walls of a huge classroom, just like an online library. MOOCs do not offer this possibility since a fee is required in order to gain access to such entries and participating in MOOC program is free of charge, it is mandatory to find sponsors who will cover the costs of the logistical construction. At this point we must state the obvious: paying fees – the University’s operating expenses. In an ideal world, an equilibrium between certification, knowledge and financial motive must be established.

B. “Open” educational infrastructures

Edwards et al (1996) quote Harris perspective that “*any open process related to distance education seems to have another side, a tendency towards exclusion*”. This perspective reflects the viewpoint of 1987 but for how long it can remain contemporary should be examined. Enrolling and filling in the personal information required – in any form – automatically limits the entries. And since the ideal of open education aims at democratizing education because it is not actually open to whoever wants to participate, when they want it and not at specific time range.

According to McAuley et al, the MOOCs model is open (2010). Those who do not want to participate are not excluded. People determine for how long and how they will participate according to their personal needs and wants. This framework allows a large number of people to participate when in any other case they would be excluded for different reasons, from weather conditions, geographic location, formal requirements for enrolling to their financial status. However, distant education demands technical, technological and electronic means and also the skill to use them. Having an internet connection and knowing how to use the internet obviously exclude a wide percentage of the population from taking part– not the majority, but mainly the elderly. This ascertainment covers most parts of everyday life, since nowadays an “illiterate” is also a “digital illiterate”.

IV. Debates/Subsequent debates about MOOCs

Skepticism is very common reaction when it comes to something new. Anything that is new and innovative is criticized or it comes up against superstition and it either prospers and prevails or it

deteriorates and disappears. Criticism becomes more intense when it goes against established practices as in the case of the new “MOOC” educational rearrangements and conventional education. MOOCs seem to be nostrum, which is something that disturbs tertiary education. They predict a dramatic decline in the tuition fees, a massive increase of participants, while the universities and colleges will be degraded and become moderate or inefficient (Attis, 2012). Viewing it from a participant’s perspective (and not the provider’s), the possibility to enroll in an educational program, tuition free, and powered by reliable universities is quite enticing.

Accomplished professors from all around the world participate in these online courses which attract thousands of people from all around the world. Simply by enrolling in one of the various official MOOC websites, the students gain access to various courses, online lectures, notes, exercises with feedback and they can evaluate their own performance. The enrolments are limitless and once a new course, a series of lectures have been announced, they go viral due to constant announcements via internet (Attis, 2012, Open UToronto, 2013, Mackness et al, 2010 & McAuley et al, 2010). After this, the debate begins. Consulting mainly the online bibliography (since MOOCs are in use for only half a decade, and approaching them is tantamount to the reason why they were developed – online) one does notice a big divergence from those who register for a course and those who actually complete it (Mackness et al, 2010, McAuley et al, 2010). The initial interest is lost, and the causes are not just generated because of the registration flippancy, the tentative enrolment (such as the approach of online sources) but also by disappointment. Besides, the MOOCs methods are new and they must undergo constant change (the claim in doing so) and the providers must consider the needs of the thousands who are interested, and then form a diverse community.

Many studies have been carried out in an attempt to determine a perfect teaching and evaluation method, the ideal teaching role and the attitude a teacher much hold towards the students, aiming at perfecting the learning procedure in conventional education. MOOCs may undergo extreme scrutiny about not having proper teaching and evaluation methods since it is an innovative educational infrastructure. But MOOCs follow the methodology of distant learning and they adapt their courses to the outcomes deriving from their first attempts which can reduce the causes mentioned above (Attis, 2012, Open UToronto, 2013). At this point we must espouse Race’s outlook (1999) that conventional education is not flawless and add that the “*new pedagogy*” in conventional education differs from the way Kazantzakis puts it, but it does not decline from the simply proposition. MOOCs utilize the advantages of e-learning such as teaching materials in the form of lectures, the use of multimedia, interactivity, learning through self-evaluation and the opportunity to exchange opinions about the course in discussion groups and this way the new generation is attracted by all the possibilities which the internet offers and they can use to their advantage the new form of communication, such as a social media. However, at the same time, older people are excluded from the whole process since they probably will not be able to completely utilize or even not be able to utilize at all the available opportunities. (Freetas & Jameson, 2012). An online course helps the trainee improve by providing additional knowledge and perspective on the course matter while for some adults this may present an opportunity to specialize and reskill their profession.

At this point, we discover one basic disadvantage of MOOCs: the students are not granted a higher education qualification but at best, a certificate of attendance which they display on their CV but it is highly unlikely for their future employers to take it into account. This may change since some steps have been taken. For now, a student enrolls in order to gain more knowledge or improve his knowledge so he can become more active in the academic world, more specialized and to capable of adjusting to the rapid changes over everything else. Many questions are, however, raised when we examine the goals of education, some of which are according to O’Connor (Marples, 2003)

- To teach people the basic necessary skills: a) so they can find their place in the world and b) to search for additional knowledge.
- To provide them with the proper professional training that will help them earn an honest living.
- To make them love and become interested in learning.
- To help them stimulate critical thinking.
- To teach them the human culture and its achievements and so they can appreciate it.

While MOOCs meet most of the goals mentioned above, they cannot achieve the first goal, namely to provide the participants with basic skills required for them to find their place in the world. So the main condition, is socialization and according to Aristotle “*Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god*”. People who have enrolled in online courses decide when and where they participate besides maintaining a personal relationship with a team that shares common ground and maybe common interests, and besides the close personal interaction of those taking part in the learning process. Our society must deal with another “epidemic”, the epidemic of alienation as isolation, which is strengthened by an additional cause. Hiding behind a user name, the person becomes an anonymous user – among thousands of them – shares the knowledge which is offered to him in a way that is directed to the maze of trainees, beyond any personalized teaching.

V. Conclusions

Massive Open Online Courses is a new form of education which will inspire many people, from simply dreamers to knowledge providers. We must not overlook that the majority of the knowledge provided has been acquired by experience and been intergraded with the conventional educational system. However, skepticism must also be taken into account. Education is a living organism which will die if it does not conform to the new conditions. These conditions are known as “*open education*” and MOOCs is one of its forms. Everyone aims at the ideal of knowledge and when they succeed, the eternal circle becomes stronger.

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