MOOCs as social practice: a kaleidoscope of perspectives

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Introduction

A basic tenet of this chapter is that the MOOC (massive open online course) movement is part of wider social practice. The movement is not on an independent trajectory, but rather entwined within a complex constellation of social, technological and educational change. This perspective recognizes that “[an] educational change is neither natural nor normal, constant nor common as it involves a deeper struggle over who will win control of the curriculum” ([1], p. 25). In this context, the term curriculum is used to define: (i) why, (ii) what, (iii) when, (iv) where, (v) how, and (vi) with whom to learn. Thus forecasts and predictions of the future of HE (higher education) influenced by MOOCs are inherently political images that have their roots in much deeper ideological battles. The current language of crisis, disruption, democratization and re-imagination in the age of the MOOCs reflects a kaleidoscope of competing and coexisting perspectives with different images of the past, present and future. In order to critically read these images and help shape our preferred learning futures, a type of double vision is required, combining both political and pedagogical perspectives.

This bifocal perspective endeavours to strike a balance between the language of opportunity, firmly anchored in the mission of equity and access, set against a deeper level of critique. On one hand, MOOCs provide a real opportunity to reduce costs, enhance quality and address increasing global demand for HE. As Daniel [2] observes, it will not be possible to satisfy the rising demand for HE, especially in developing countries, by relying on traditional approaches. Recent OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) predictions support this view with global demand for HE likely to increase significantly over the next the decade [3]. Even in developed countries, such as the U.S.A., where capacity to meet demand is less problematic, the costs of HE have reached crisis point with unprecedented levels of debt. Thus there is a moral imperative for exploring the potential of new models of online learning, as equitable access to education is a basic human right. On the other hand, arguably, the MOOC movement inhabits and transverses the contested terrain of globalization, fast capitalism, neo-liberalism and the decline of influence of the small nation-state. In many respects, the MOOC symbolizes Silicon Valley values, laissez-faire principles of individual freedom and the ultimate goal of an unrestricted global market for HE [4].

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This chapter begins by telling the story of how MOOCs have been portrayed through popular media and invites critical reflection on some basic questions. Who is telling the MOOC story and why? How are they telling the MOOC story? Whose story is not being told? It reports some of the international research on MOOCs in the media, including an analysis of newspaper stories in Australia, the U.S.A. and the U.K., along with preliminary findings of an Irish case study. The metaphor of a kaleidoscope is then developed in the next section to help reveal through a theoretical framework some of the competing shapes and shades of the MOOC movement. This theoretical lens illustrates subtle, yet significant, differences in underlying drivers and how different interest groups and stakeholders borrow the same language of persuasion around MOOCs to legitimize their own transformative agenda.

Finally, the chapter argues that we need to shift our current thinking away from HE being in change to the transformative language of HE for change. More attention needs to be placed on the why of MOOCs and the ‘big ideas’ we are seeking to achieve. A set of overarching pillars is outlined for building a post-digital era, which helps us to understand how new and emerging models of teaching and learning can be implemented to reshape HE for a better future.

**MOOCs in the media**

There have been many bold claims and counterclaims made about the promise and perils of the MOOC movement [5]. What distinguishes MOOCs from a long history of previous educational technologies is the high level of media attention that Coursera, EdX, FutureLearn, to name a few, have attracted in mainstream publications. Arguably, no other educational innovation since the Sputnik era of the 1960s when the importance of science and technology education attracted headlines has received the same level of media coverage, which in turn has fuelled public interest and brought MOOCs to the attention of senior academic leaders, politicians and policy-makers.

**Newspaper articles 2011–2013**

The first major account of the portrayal of MOOCs in the media was published by Bulfin, Pangrazio and Selwyn [6] in a detailed analysis of 457 newspaper articles published between 2011 and 2013 in Australia, U.K. and the U.S.A. This critical discourse analysis found that MOOCs were predominantly portrayed in relation to the ‘massification, marketization and monetization of HE’, rather than inviting debate of either ‘technological’ or ‘educational’ issues such as online learning and pedagogy, instructional design or the learner experience ([7], p. 175).

The most common theme associated with MOOCs was in terms of a source of change [6,7]. A range of metaphorical images was presented to position MOOCs as a digital agent of change. Some articles employed technologically deterministic descriptions of a fast-moving ‘juggernaut’, ‘online train’ and ‘rocket ship’, with people and traditional institutions desperate not to be left behind. In contrast, other newspaper articles equated MOOCs with the dismantling of the university as a physical form, describing the beginning of the end for the Ivory
Tower. MOOCs were also presented as momentous forces of Nature, with metaphors such as ‘avalanche’, ‘tsunami’ and ‘tectonic shift’ ([7], pp. 8–9).

The second major theme was the more uniformly expressed characteristic of being ‘free’ [6,7]. Notably, the concept of university-level education being offered to students ‘at no cost’ was generally described in incredulous tones. According to Selwyn, Bulfin and Pangrazio [7], there was very little serious analysis of the business and economic aspects of MOOCs.

The authors also reveal some of the counterassertions or contradictory messages rarely probed in any depth in media stories [6,7]. For example, on the one hand, MOOCs are claimed to circumvent traditional HE systems, whereas, on the other hand, their legitimacy as an educational innovation is primarily derived from their association with high status, elite universities. Moreover, the MOOC was portrayed in the media as offering a free alternative means of studying at university level, but, at the same time, reinforces the traditional status quo by providing a virtual shop window and pathway to ‘proper’ courses at ‘proper’ face-to-face institutions ([6], p. 300). There is also a sense conveyed that MOOCs herald a new type of innovative pedagogy, which fundamentally challenges centuries-old teaching methods. In this regard, MOOCs represent a new model of Education 2.0 where students can benefit from renowned professors and a crowded stadium-like experience [7]. In contrast, a very different and less approving image is presented in a minority of stories where MOOCs are seen as replicating the passive transmission models of pedagogy of the 20th Century. Although few in number, some media articles also refer to ‘robot-graded assignments’ where online learners crudely interact with less expert tutors rather than an elite group of ‘rock star’ world-renowned professors.

All in all, during the initial rise to prominence of the MOOC, the media coverage serves to illustrate a number of contradictory messages, albeit unified by an overarching sense of technology-driven change. Notably, the descriptions and meanings portrayed in the media differ considerably from the ways in which MOOCs have tended to be discussed within specialist educational technology circles [6]. Little credence is given to the last 30 years of research and experience in online learning, and news accounts convey a narrow representation of MOOCs within just a handful of elite Ivy League ‘big fish’ institutions. Selwyn et al. [7] conclude that a lay-reader is likely to view MOOCs as a relatively safe new educational form that in turn reinforces long-standing status differences between universities. Despite the radical possibilities of the MOOC movement, the underlying sense is their positioning within popular media as a continuation of the established mores, conventions and hierarchies of HE. In short, MOOCs have been used as a ready means through which to reiterate and reassert in the media the dominance of elite universities and the global HE order [6,7].

A more extensive study
A more extensive study which includes data up until the first half of 2014 has been undertaken by Kovanovi, Joksimovic, Gaševic, Siemens and Hatala [8]. The study analysed 3,598 articles from 591 news sources from around the world using the Factiva platform, which is a business information and research tool developed by the Reuters news agency and Dow Jones & Company. This tool generated a
dataset almost nine times larger than the aforementioned research. An added feature of the literature search methodology was the use of the Google Trends service to confirm the dataset’s validity and check the popularity of specific MOOC-related news articles.

Notably, the authors report only three articles in the dataset written before 2012. Two appear in the first quartile of 2009 and one in the third quartile of 2010. This finding shows that almost all newspaper articles referring to MOOCs in English-speaking publications around the world were written between 2012 and 2014.

The major headline from this study is that coverage of MOOCs in public media is rapidly decreasing. By the middle of 2014, the number of stories in the media had decreased by almost 50% from the peak activity during 2013 [8]. It is noteworthy that financial and business newspapers were found to have reported extensively on the topic of MOOCs. This finding reinforces the point that initial stories about MOOCs have been dominated by the marketization and monetization of HE as distinct from education-focused discussions about the nature of pedagogy and online learning.

The second major finding is that the focus of MOOC-related newspaper articles is changing. Although the majority of discussions during 2012 and 2013 focused on MOOC providers, major announcements of new partnerships and million dollar investments, there appears to be a shift in attention to more strategic and government-level discussions focused on the overall position of MOOCs. The previous hype has been replaced with more balanced and productive discussions related to the role of MOOCs in the broader spectrum of HE, including an emphasis on learning analytics, workplace learning and continuing professional development. This shift of emphasis could be a sign that educators are finding their voice in debates about the future of MOOCs, although rigorous scholarly analyses of HE are rare in popular media.

The Irish story
Set against the backdrop of the international coverage, a study has been undertaken of Irish positioning of MOOCs in local media. At the core of this line of research is the assumption that "a story is never just a story – it is a statement of belief and of morality" ([9], p. 56). Therefore this section endeavours to contextualize the story being told about MOOCs by describing a number of unique local factors at play in the current drive for digital learning in Irish HE.

The Irish study draws on a dataset of 77 articles from the NexusUK database, which includes all of the major Irish newspapers [10]. Notably, the number of stories appearing in the Irish media in 2014 (n = 39) increased from 2013 (n = 24) and there is evidence of only a gradual reduction of news coverage in the first half of 2015 (n = 12). Although a single story about MIT’s Open Courseware initiative was published in 2011 [11], the first reference to the term MOOC appears in The Irish Times [12] in May the following year. This is the only mention given to MOOCs in the Irish media in 2012, which is surprising given that this year was described by the New York Times as the so-called ‘year of the MOOC’ [13].

An analysis of the stance adopted in the media towards MOOCs indicates an overwhelmingly positive perspective (78%). Very few articles reflect a negative
perspective (2%), with the second largest grouping classified as relatively neutral (20%). Further analysis of articles by institution type confirms the trend for media sources to focus on reporting initiatives within elite institutions (73%). In many respects, this finding is hardly surprising as the handful of elite institutions generated their own media coverage through press releases, particularly when they announced membership of FutureLearn and offered their first courses. That said, the local profile of ALISON (Advanced Learning Interactive Systems Online), an Irish-based platform, which Forbes Magazine describes as the world’s first MOOC, might have been expected to generate a higher proportion (27%) of non-elite stories.

Another unique feature of the Irish context is media coverage of a high-profile visiting delegation from Tata Consulting Services. Founded by Jamsetji Tata in 1868, the Tata Group “is part-owned by Pallonji Mistry, the richest Irish citizen alive, and run by his son” ([14], p. 1). The Tata Group is a global enterprise headquartered in India, comprising over 100 companies, with operations in more than 100 countries employing over 500,000 people worldwide. In the fourth quarter of 2014, a delegation from India met with senior Irish politicians and institutional presidents with the objective of helping Ireland to sell its university degrees online throughout the world. The stated aim reported by the Irish Independent was to forge “a deal to transform Ireland into the world’s first stop for e-learning and earn millions for the country’s floundering universities” ([15], p. 1).

Following the Tata delegation’s visit, in early December 2014 the Irish Government’s Joint Committee for Education and Social Protection held a special meeting to discuss the future of online learning. DCU (Dublin City University) was one of three institutions invited to prepare a written submission and give a short presentation to the Joint Committee. The DCU submission [16] drew on the Porto Declaration on European MOOCs (2014) [17] to observe:

“The movement is poorly defined and MOOCs are just the latest development in a long history of the use of new technologies in higher education. In many cases this history is littered with old ideas being harnessed to the latest new technologies with limited transformative advantage.” (p. 2)

Although the Tata Group story is still playing out, it is noteworthy that the high-level Roadmap [18] published in April 2015 for enhancing teaching and learning in HE in a digital world makes very few references to MOOCs. Indeed, the term MOOC does not appear in the Executive Summary. Thus a disconnection appears between official policy texts and what the popular media is reporting about the potential of MOOCs. The Roadmap tends to focus on enhancing the traditional campus-based experience and is generally silent in terms of off-campus provision, both nationally and internationally. Arguably, it does little to address the current barrier to growth in online delivery as a result of the restrictive funding model for HE, which in Ireland provides little or no financial support for undergraduate part-time learners studying off-campus.

This gap in the provision of HE is somewhat ironic given the self-proclaimed status of “Silicon Valley of Europe” and the portrayal of the potential of MOOCs in the Irish media. This is not the first time lack of support for part-time flexible learners has been identified, with The National Strategy for
Higher Education to 2030 recommending that “if Ireland is to raise levels of lifelong learning and higher education attainment, more is needed in terms of increased flexibility and innovation, broader routes of access and a model of funding that supports all students equally, regardless of mode or duration of study” ([19], p. 6). Recent high-level reports on the modernization of European HE [20] also encourage national funding frameworks to open up education, to develop more flexible modes of delivery to help to diversify student populations.

In summary, this brief Irish case study raises an important paradox. Despite bold claims about the potential of online learning, including MOOCs, there is almost “no understanding of the private and social benefits of distance and online education in comparison with those of face-to-face education” ([21], p. 208). The truth is that we have limited quantitative evidence of the individual and wider societal benefits of opening up access to HE through new online models of teaching and learning. This gap in the literature highlights the need for both numbers and narrative, supported by more big data, to better understand the public and private returns on investment, especially as the focus in popular media shifts to strategic government-level discussions.

Kaleidoscope of competing images

The often one-sided and distorted stories being told in the popular media about MOOCs can be viewed and better understood through the metaphor of a kaleidoscope. The rotations of a kaleidoscope help to illustrate key differences in the shapes and shades of colour between a number of competing and coexisting MOOC discourses. This section provides a theoretical lens to help reveal some of the macro-level tensions and contradictions hidden in the current portrayal of MOOCs in popular media, policy texts and new platform initiatives. On the basis of the premise that “it is theory that decides what we can observe” ([22], p. 238), the following discussion serves to remind us that the HE system is made from a colour palette with conflicting ideological, epistemological and pedagogical assumptions. Although overly simplistic, at the root of these assumptions are two primary colours or basic worldviews: (i) the tradition of the Learning Society, and (ii) the influence of the knowledge economy. As revealed through the analysis of the media, and particularly the number of stories in financial newspapers, a strong knowledge economy discourse is woven throughout the MOOC literature. This point is well illustrated by the following quote:

“As Chandra told the heads of the universities and IOTs [institutes of technology] in Dublin this week, we are talking about building an entire economy based on Irish education. These are wise words from a man whose company’s exports are worth more to the Indian economy than their total oil imports.” ([23], p. 15)

As Figure 1 attempts to illustrate, our understandings of the growth of digital technology in HE requires a type of double vision to see the grand narratives, competing and coexisting colours and contrasting shapes imbued in the languages of persuasion surrounding MOOCs. Four distinct languages (discourses) of
persuasion are identified in the framework, along with the meta-language of the new science of online learning as lenses or tools rather than truths to help interpret the different discourses, which reflect quite different understandings and social, economic and educational outcomes.

The Reproducing Discourse (upper left corner of Figure 1) reflects the view that HE institutions are major agents of social and cultural reproduction. Accordingly, the discourse places strong emphasis upon mass education, quality standards and preparation for future employment. HE, including MOOCs, is the producer of human capital needed by the economy in the form of a trained and differentiated workforce. The discourse treats education as an individual commodity through which a competitive global market can help to increase quality, reduce costs and establish a larger pool of ‘high-tech’ workers capable of keeping business competitive in the new Knowledge Economy.

The Reschooling Discourse (upper right corner of Figure 1) reflects efforts to reform the traditional HE system by advancing a global curriculum through the language of disruption, modernization and technology as progress. An inherent contradiction in this discourse is that major changes are advocated to support greater creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, yet initiatives perpetuate relatively ethnocentric, monolingual and instrumentalist views of pedagogy. For example, there is generally little appetite by elite universities to challenge traditional assessment practices. Although MOOCs are framed in the language of ‘learning for all’ they reinforce the message that education is an individual commodity which has a currency measured against conventional qualifications. Arguably, at a deeper level, the reschooling agenda is driven by the goal of recruiting global talent and developing a ‘high-tech’ distributed workforce capable of shifting from one market to another as required, thereby reducing labour shortages.
The Deschooling Discourse (lower left corner of Figure 1) reflects a constellation of perspectives that suggest universities are losing their monopoly on HE. The discourse supports the unbundling of learning and endorses the view that the MOOC movement will eventually break down the walls of the ivory tower. It challenges the traditional status of the academic as the fount of knowledge and advocates education with a strong local flavour. While the language of ‘openness’ promotes active citizenship, liberal democracy and equal opportunities in the tradition of the learning society, the discourse also supports unintentionally the goals of deregulation and the free market in keeping with the “libertarianism of the wired” [24]. For this reason, the term ‘deschooling’ is misleading as there are very few genuine initiatives that challenge the inequitable nature of HE in the tradition of Illich [25]. The key point is that deschooling can embody a set of values quite different from education as a public good in which the state is responsible for reproduction of local culture and heritage and the provision of a strong education system.

The Reconceptualizing Discourse (lower right corner of Figure 1) reflects a holistic view of education that values lifelong learning and acquisition of skills and understanding for active participation in all aspects of society. In the tradition of the learning society, it seeks to address fundamental questions about the purpose of education itself. The discourse supports the view that HE is a longer-term investment where people need to be educated so they can not only participate as future citizens and workers, but also actively shape a more equitable and socially just world. This wider societal view recognizes that the world faces a number of wicked problems and failings of the HE system are not amenable to improvement through technology alone. There is a basic need to reconceptualize the HE system and the role of technology around ethical, moral and political principles. Such principles would ground new models of online learning and the use of MOOCs in efforts to promote an active citizenry capable of transforming society to ensure a more equitable HE system and socially just future for all.

In summary, the above discourses help to reveal how different interest groups and stakeholders borrow the same pedagogical ‘language of persuasion’ around the growth of MOOCs to legitimize their own agenda. Extending the kaleidoscope metaphor, the third primary colour in the mixture is the language of ‘open, online, digital, anytime, anywhere, technology enhanced e-learning’ (in the centre of Figure 1) that acts as a meta-discourse, which simultaneously infuses the other discourses. As this metaphor attempts to illustrate, the different shapes, colours and patterns of the competing and coexisting discourses described above all occupy and funnel through the same technology. In so doing, they adopt similar language and insights from the new science of online learning, but with very different intentions. Thus the concept of hegemony – in which dominant groups in society seek to establish the common sense, define what counts as legitimate areas of agreement and disagreement, and shape the political agendas made public and discussed as possible [26] – is central to understanding the growth of MOOCs within the bigger picture of educational reform. Although the MOOC should not be viewed as a single entity, the truth is that most major online learning initiatives championed by the big platforms reflect the interests of the Knowledge Economy (upper centre in Figure 1). The risk is that innovative educators re-imagining
HE in the tradition of the Learning Society (lower centre in Figure 1) may end up collaborating with the enemy. In plain language, what this means is that the MOOC movement is simultaneously both good and bad, and far more complex than reported in the media.

**Refocusing on preferred learning futures**

Whereas the above discussion highlights the need to move beyond crude dichotomies, the current preoccupation with HE in change would benefit from a paradigmatic shift to the language of HE for change. This point recognizes a key distinction between being a ‘future maker’ as opposed to ‘future taker’. Toffler [27] stated long ago:

> “All education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future. Thus all education, whether so intended or not, is a preparation for the future. Unless we understand the future for which we are preparing we may do tragic damage to those we teach.” (p. 3)

This quote is just as relevant today and requires us to address the fundamental question: what type of HE system do we want new and emerging models of teaching and learning to serve in the future? The answer to this question is unavoidably linked to broader social imaginaries: our thinking about the role of technology in HE is shaped and reshaped by our ideas about what constitutes the ‘good society’ ([28], p. 5).

An emphasis on building good societies refocuses our attention on the reconceptualist language of the Learning Society and the goal of creating a more socially just future for all. In this respect, the four ‘Pillars of Learning’ proposed by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century [29] provide a powerful language for thinking about the future of HE. The pillars of (i) learning to do, (ii) learning to be, (iii) learning to know, and (iv) learning to live together, with the addition of a fifth central pillar of (v) learning to change and transform, offer an enduring framework for preparing critical thinkers, critical consumers and critical citizens. Notably, to date, these overarching pillars have not figured prominently in thinking about MOOCs, which is a major oversight that we need to address in re-imagining our preferred learning futures.

In conclusion, the study of MOOCs is not trivial work. This chapter has shown that the MOOC movement is inherently political and part of wider social practice. The MOOC is not on an independent trajectory and cannot be uncoupled from wider debates over issues of power and privilege and the struggle to win control of the HE system. Powerful forces are at play as the MOOC movement is entwined in a long-running ideological battle with deep roots in global capitalism, neo-liberalism and the decline of influence of the small nation-state. On another level, this battle involves a clash between Silicon Valley values and ideas of openness, democratization and re-imagination. Although MOOCs have not proven to be as novel or disruptive as originally claimed, they provide a gift to educators, institutional leaders and policy-makers committed to matters of equity, social justice and the Millennium Goals of widening access to education. There is a lot that
we can still learn from the MOOC movement, as it provides an unprecedented opportunity to engage in critical debate over the future of HE in the context of serious challenges facing humanity. Although we cannot predict the future, the important thing is to refocus our attention on where we want to end up, so that MOOCs help to serve big ideas rather than being the big idea in itself [30].

References

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