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MOOCs, Ethics and the Economics of Higher Education

Question: Is there something in that exchange between a single caring professor and motivated student that, while impossible to assess, measure or digitize, is at the very heart of what a university tries to be? That is the question.

One cannot open an academic publication these days without encountering an article touting the virtues of MOOCs¹. MOOCs is an acronym for Massive Open Online Courses. The term originated with David Cormier and Bryan Alexander in response to the work of George Siemens of Athabasca University in Canada².

MOOCs are, in the opinion of some, currently in the stage called „inflated expectations” of the Gartner Hype Cycle³. The stages of any new technology often follow this pattern. The cycle begins with a Technology Trigger that gives us a new tool. The next phase is Inflated Expectations where we wrongly overestimate the speed of adoption and the rate of change the new technology will bring. When these changes do not happen on schedule we get the Trough of Disillusionment where we are ready to throw the baby out with the bath water. The next phase is the Slope of Enlightenment where we see both the promise and limitations of the new technology. Gartner’s final phase is the Plateau of Productivity where the new technology is adapted and employed in a realistic and useful way. But MOOCs are a long way from this plateau.

MOOCs are not the first disruption in American higher education but are just the latest entry in an ongoing revolution. Online learning has disrupted American higher education⁴.

¹ V. Strauss, *Are MOOCs hyped?*, „The Washington Post”, 23.11.2012.

² D. Cormier, *Attention les MOOC!?! Mois de la pedagogie universitaire*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAVwQ7RJWqg>, [09.10.2013].

³ J. Fenn, M. Rasking, *Mastering the Hype Cycle*, Harvard Business School, Cambridge MA 2008.

⁴ F. McCluskey, M. Winter, *The Idea of the Digital University*, Westphalia Press, Washington DC 2012.

Clayton Christensen has written widely about these kinds of disruptive technologies⁵. But MOOCs have captured the public's attention in a way that online learning has failed to do in the past. It seems like MOOCs have the potential to turn the university upside down and reshape it in ways never possible before.

Online learning allowed colleges to extend their reach to populations and locations to which they formerly did not have access. It is important to remember that just 30 years ago the majority of colleges had some type of geographic monopoly. College X was the only Catholic college in town. College Y had the only MBA this side of the state. College Z had a nursing program that nobody else had. Another college was the only one with weekend classes. These kinds of geographic monopolies allowed colleges a kind of golden age with no natural predators so they could flourish without concern for containing costs or being efficient. If they got behind on their bills they could just raise tuition, and raise tuition they did. These geographic monopolies gave colleges a sound economic foundation before the Internet age.

The reasons behind the inflated expectations surrounding MOOCs are simple. The claim is that MOOCs can bring the best professors in America to every student in the nation at a small fraction of the current cost of college. If this claim is true, MOOCs are truly revolutionary and will reshape the academic landscape. What much of the recent press fails to emphasize is that the technologies and pedagogical theories that are bundled into what we call MOOCs are not new but recycled.

Online learning gave us the virtual classroom decades ago⁶. Online learning deployed groups and cadres early on. Online learning developed banks of exam questions that were randomly rotated into student exams. Online learning developed peer grading systems and peer reviews to relieve the burden on the instructor and make the class more interactive. Online learning used artificial intelligence to open different pathways to different learning styles long ago⁷. MOOCs can be looked at as a variation of online learning using all of the tools it developed. They are more of the same with two exceptions. The only things new about MOOCs are their size and the prestige of the institutions that are backing them. This large size means that one professor can do the work of hundreds. This is in the tradition of the college lecture hall

⁵ C. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge MA 1997.

⁶ G. Teschner, F. McCluskey, *Hypertext and Semiotics, Proceedings of the Conference on Technology and Education*, George Mason University Press, Washington DC 1990.

⁷ N. Sonwalkar, *Desktop Learning in 21st Century and Beyond*, „The MIT Report” 1998, Vol. XXVI, No. 6.

where one professor taught hundreds of students and graduate students then met with students in smaller groups. This kind of education can be very inexpensive and there is even talk about „free” higher education⁸. The economics of „free” or „almost free” have given politicians and think tanks an incentive to rethink what higher education is and could be.

Once institutions such as Stanford, Harvard and MIT put their brands behind MOOCs, the attention of the media and the public was immediately grabbed. For those who have been doing online learning for last several decades all of the media hype was surprising. It was as if online learning did not exist before the conversations about MOOCs. The feeding frenzy in the press over MOOCs may be because while the technologies and pedagogies are not new, they are timely⁹. The Zeitgeist finally seems ready for online learning and the prestigious colleges that have often been sitting on the sidelines in the past are now seated front and center.

The economic environment and the press around MOOCs have created the perfect storm in which politicians and the public can call for an overhaul of higher education from the outside. MOOCs have been met with enthusiasm by a coalition of cash strapped college administrators, politicians with limited funds to support higher education and students who have been burdened with huge debts as the government has shifted the payment of tuition from the taxpayers to the students. It would seem that MOOCs now have the support of the oldest and most prestigious universities in America and are poised to remake the entire educational landscape. Claims about what they will do have been over the top in the popular media. It would seem that they have arrived at exactly the right time and place.

But while MOOCs are popular with the politicians and press, their reception by the academy has been anything but smooth. While politicians and journalists are cheering the idea of MOOCs, many professors, educators and theorists have raised questions about their efficacy and the motives behind their deployment.

While a number of the issues raised about MOOCs are technical and pedagogical, there are issues around MOOCs that have traditionally been considered in the realm of ethics. We will look at a proposition that summarizes the MOOCs controversy and explore its ethical implications. The aim of this short article is not to support or oppose the deployment of MOOCs

⁸ D. Kurtzleben, *Three Ways MOOCs Will Change Colleges*, US News and World Report, 2013.

⁹ M. Barber, K. Donnelly, S. Rizvi, *An Avalanche is Coming, Higher Education and Revolution Ahead*, Institute for Policy Research, London 2013.

but to clarify certain ethical presuppositions that underlie much of the discussion without being made explicit.

Let us invent a proposition that paraphrases many of the claims in support of MOOCs and analyze it in a philosophical manner.

The Proposition: It would be unethical to oppose the deployment of MOOCs because they will give more students access to the best professors at a reduced cost.

This argument recalls the Principle of Utility advocated by Bentham and Mill that we should seek the „greatest good for the greatest number”¹⁰. It would seem that to oppose this proposition would violate the Principle of Utility. To violate this principle would be „unethical”¹¹.

But if we are to be good philosophers we do not accept propositions *prima facie* but dissect them. We begin this dissection by identifying and questioning the proposition’s presuppositions. Our proposition has some presuppositions that must be unpacked before we can be clear about its ethical claim.

First, we must ask if it is true that MOOCs will give hundreds of thousands of students worldwide „access” to the best professors in America. Is that access comparable to the access of Harvard or Stanford on-campus students? Are we really extending an Ivy League education to everyone or are we offering something else? Is this Harvard or Harvard Lite? Is there data to show the long-term differences between a MOOC student and an on campus student in the same course? Is this the perpetuation of a two-tiered educational system that mirrors income inequality?¹²

Second, there is a tacit presupposition that the motive for the deployment of MOOCs is the expansion of opportunity, something noble and woven into the fabric of higher education. If this were truly the case, it would place MOOCs in the tradition of other expansions of access in higher education such as the establishment of the Land Grant Universities, The G. I. Bill and the establishment of local community colleges. These were established with the expressed intention of expanding access to higher education as a public good. Can we say it is the „intention” of MOOCs to expand access and make it more affordable? This is a difficult point to make. Let us take a moment to think about the term „intention”.

¹⁰ J.S. Mill, J. Bentham, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, Penguin Classics, London 1987.

¹¹ J. Rachels, S. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, McGraw Hill Publishers, New York 2011.

¹² P. Brown, H. Lauder, , D. Ashton, *The Global Auction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

In her 1957 monograph *Intention*, the Cambridge philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe, the most famous student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, argued that any intentional act was one about which we can ask the question „What is the reason an actor is performing this act?“¹³ Ms. Anscombe pointed out that we might be surprised to find out that the actor performing the act may or may not be clear about their intention. While we often ascribe intentions to others it may be that they are performing the action for absolutely no reason at all. It may also be the case that we can ascribe an intention to someone that may be at variance with their own understanding of why they are performing the action or what they are trying to accomplish.

Let us take, as an example, the development of online learning in American higher education. A number of well-intentioned and intellectually curious professors, operating in relative isolation from one another, saw online learning as a way to improve their pedagogy. Online learning was incubated in many colleges all around the world. Some of these colleges were large and well known and others were small with little prestige. These experiments were often done without much of a thought about profit or deployment of new technologies to the classroom. The universities in which these pioneers labored, however, did not rush to take advantage of online learning. Faculty Senates debated their worth. Senior professors doubted their efficacy. There were questions about how much time creating and managing these classes would consume. There was trepidation about their educational value. Colleges were generally slow to adopt computer technology for the classroom.

However, it was a very different case with the businessmen who founded for-profit universities. They immediately saw the profit that could be made. They could attract a whole new class of students. They saw how to extend their reach. While there have been for-profit universities for more than a hundred years, the digital age gave them the power to become mega universities. So the intention that created online learning and the intention to deploy it came from two very different groups of people with different aims and different results. Can we say the same thing about MOOCs?

The Chronicle of Higher Education surveyed those professors who create MOOCs¹⁴. Why did they do it? Their answer seems to lend support to the presupposition that MOOCs were designed to expand access and level the playing field. It is worth quoting in full: *Professors who*

¹³ G. Anscomb, *Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2000.

¹⁴ S. Kolowich, *The Professors Who Make the MOOCS*, „Chronicle of Higher Education“ 2013, Vol. 3, No. 21.

*responded to The Chronicle survey reported a variety of motivations for diving into MOOCs. The most frequently cited reason was altruism – a desire to increase access to higher education worldwide. But there were often professional motivations at play as well*¹⁵. This seems noble enough. But what are the intentions of the administrators who will deploy the MOOCs? Recently the philosophy department at the University of California at San Jose rejected the idea of using a MOOC by professor Michael Sandel of Harvard University as part of the philosophy curriculum. In a letter signed by the entire department, they ascribed an „intention” to the UCSJ administration in making this decision. They said: *Let's not kid ourselves, administrators at CSU are beginning the process of replacing faculty with cheap online education*¹⁶.

The stated „intention” by the creators of the MOOCs was to find a way to educate more students. Conversely, the philosophy department at San Jose sees the „intention” of the administration that will deploy MOOCs as a way to control costs and diminish the power of the faculty in a way that will further weaken academic quality.

In the last eight years there has been a similar debate about profiteering and unethical intentions in the debate about for-profit higher education. This debate contains almost identical terms, complaints and players. The terminology, ethical presuppositions and arguments could be seen to make MOOCs Act II of the same play. Questions about the compatibility of academic values and profit have a long history in philosophical discourse¹⁷.

It has been argued that those who are deploying these technologies did not share the intentions of the innovators¹⁸. Professors have many questions about MOOCs. Many see the claims about „access” to the best professors in America simply means they will be exposed to their lectures and will have the opportunity to interact with other students. This is not in itself a bad thing. John Henry Newman in his book, *The Idea of A University*, tells us that peer-to-peer learning is essential to university life¹⁹. But is lecturing all a professor does? Should not a professor's advanced training and years of practice give him or her an ability to model more things?

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ T. Lewin, *Professors At San Jose State Criticize Online Courses*, „New York Times”, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/education/san-jose-state-philosophy-dept-criticizes-online-courses.html?_r=0, [10.10.2013].

¹⁷ A. Flew, *The Profit Motive*, „Ethics” 1976, Vol. 86, No. 4, pp. 312-322.

¹⁸ S. Kolowich, *Why Some Colleges Are Saying No to MOOC Deals, At Least for Now*, „Chronicle of Higher Education”, <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Some-Colleges-Are-Saying/138863/>, [10.10.2013].

¹⁹ J. Newman, *The Idea of A University*, Notre Dame University Press, South Bend IN 1982.

Is it then unethical for us to say MOOCs should not be deployed? The professors of philosophy at San Jose may be on to something. We are in an age where it is popular to say the cost of higher education must come down. MOOCs can do this easily. We can easily replace the first two years of core courses in any university with MOOCs. But for those who know the economics of universities this is where colleges make the money to keep scholarship and learning afloat. For example, a professor of philosophy in a small university may teach three sections of Introduction to Philosophy with forty students in each section so that she may have the luxury of teaching her fourth class on Kant to seven students. The core courses have bankrolled smaller major courses in colleges for generations. What if the MOOCs give us our first two years for free or at almost no cost? It will certainly be cheaper. It can lower tuition. It can cut costs drastically. It will also change the economics of higher education in a way that will defund scholarship, research and the time professors can spend outside of the classroom with students. We realize not all full time faculty are available outside of class, but these kind of informal exchanges have in the past been essential to university life.

Teaching has always been a labor-intensive profession. This means it has taken money to support the lives of faculty who are often free to read and think about matters that often have little practical application. It had been a place where sabbaticals, leisure and time to reflect were the hallmarks of the place. It was a place where Immanuel Kant thought about his first major book The Critique of Pure Reason and did not publish it until he was fifty-seven years old. It was a place where students like Gates, Jobs and the founders of Facebook and Google had the time to sit around and play with ideas without making a profit while they incubated their thoughts. This is what we used to call a university. Discussions about cost are at the heart of many of the disagreements about MOOCs and their place in the university. Make no mistake about it, universities that rely upon expensive professor labor to mentor and teach students were, and will be in the future, expensive. One way to mitigate that expense is to digitize learning.

How will digitizing learning hold costs down? Let me give an analogy. A forty-five rpm single record cost 89 cents in the 1960s. The same song today on iTunes is 99 cents. Compare that rate of inflation with a ticket to a live string quartet in 1965 that cost \$15.00. The same ticket today costs \$100.00. Why did one price barely move and the other go up substantially? The digital revolution lowered the price of production of recorded music. But the second, a live string quartet, is labor intensive. We are paying for the practice time and lifestyle of those who give us

Beethoven live. Is there any difference, quantitative or qualitative, between a recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and a live performance of the same piece? Why do people now pay a fortune to see live music when then could afford the recorded music at a fraction of the cost? The answer to this question is important because this is a question about both the future of the university and the professorate.

The reason why colleges have resisted the digital revolution that has decimated the labor force in banking, finance, magazines and newspapers is that colleges are labor intensive. In the past, colleges have not seen themselves like fast food. They are places of slow cooking. It is place where the magic of professor-student interaction may not be completely captured by the data of assessment²⁰.

One wonders in the age of MOOCs, where a few star professors will teach all of us, what will be left of the professorate? What will become of scholars and scholarship? Who will fund research? What will be left of the university? In the age of „edutainment” and quick thinking talking heads on television what will be left for a thoughtful and careful professor of philosophy? In light of these questions, what do you think our ethical duty should be?

Online learning has two very separate futures. In one, it can present content digitally, which frees the professor to spend more time interacting with students in a way that mirrors the tutorial system of Oxford. In another future, it makes the professor obsolete in the same way technology did to toll collectors, bank tellers and railroad conductors. We advocate of the first future but not the second.

MOOCs have the ability to significantly lower the cost of higher education. But as we argued in our book, *The Idea of the Digital University*, there are ways to reduce costs that will not damage the professor-student bond²¹. We have spoken of the ethical duty to give more students access to education at a reduced cost. But what ethical duty do we have to preserve the university that we remember? What duty do we have to thinking, to one on one questioning, to poking holes in arguments slowly one at a time? What is our duty to the future?

That leaves us with one question. Is there something in that exchange between a single caring professor and motivated student that, while impossible to assess, measure or digitize, is at the very heart of what a university tries to be? *That* is the question.

²⁰ A. Austin, *Assessment for Excellence*, Jossey Bass, Hoboken NJ 1991.

²¹ F. McCluskey, M. Winter, *op.cit.*

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