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Structuring online learning collectivities

Abstract

What appeared to be a technological breakthrough in education is now irrevocably changing the subject itself. The initial goal of equality in education as introduced by Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has been extended beyond the rise in the number of learners to the actual consideration of them as individuals of equal intelligence who are aware of this fact and therefore, emancipated from the traditional forms of education by instruction. The new subject these courses refer to is not simply accumulating knowledge; it is creating it. And by doing so, it is creating the intellectual tools it will be using in the future not just in the educational context but in the real world problem posing and solving.

Introduction

As natural a development as it may seem to those already acquainted with the use of online networking, it was nevertheless a quite radical act to introduce MOOCs to students and Internet users. Never has elite education been intended to be so open and democratic to such a wide public nor have the economic barriers ever been lifted so generously to offer unrequited service for knowledge.

The current evolutionary means disseminate the fruit of elite education by gradually dismantling the dependency on a specific place. University is handling matters again as cooperation as it had in its original formation and can now overcome the limits of spatial anchoring providing system efficiency through the digitization of knowledge in specific teaching/learning formats¹. Along with the spatial, the temporal presuppositions are also renounced. Suddenly physical co-presence is abolished and registrants can now coexist as learners even though they are geographically apart.

Changing lectures

By abolishing the mandatory physical presence in a classroom the student is also released from one's duty to attend to classes of 'face-to-face' lectures. Editing the content of lectures in the form of a video or an audio document has been one of the most welcomed consequences of MOOC's. When Prof. Gregory Nagy of Harvard University launched his course 'CB22x: The Ancient Greek Hero' the team that assisted him in the production of his video lectures had to go through all teaching material from the beginning and redesign the ways the professor addressed his learners by adding animated bits, blinking references, dramatized narration techniques, subtitles and everything that can attribute variety to a class which is no longer live but it aspires to be as lively as possible².

In online learning the teachers address a presumed audience. In fact, they address a generic user with no particular characteristics other than those attributed by the hypotheses data with regard to the participation expected. Even those data often remain to be verified much later. That of course changes both content and manner

and the educational process becomes extrinsic to the learner. The online course setup addresses a possible learner but it doesn't include him/her specifically. In the virtual environment this course is being produced: the audience is either simulated or implied, but in no way is it real. The courses are indeed made for anyone with the slightest interest in the subject without preconditions or further restrictions opening up at a larger audience that their predecessors ever did.

Instead of trying to capture the learner's attention, online courses presuppose that each learner has a different attention span and that it would be more effective to leave it to each one of them to decide where and when they shall attend and how. The knowledge is there in the form of a complete course, like a textbook, a totality, as Jacques Ranciere would name it and the student/learner should find the way to accumulate it alone at his/her own pace³.

So, what MOOCs did was preserve the users' liberty to personalize their own studying habits by attending each course at one's own pace following some of the principles that were shaped in distant learning courses' formats or the blended ones. Each user can join in, in live discussions or not. They can watch the videos and pause and stop at any time and recuperate later. They can watch the same lecture for as many times as they wish in the safety of their own living room. But most of all they, the students, are now subjects free to choose courses from any institution at the same time and thus personalize not just their learning habits but their whole study programs.

The students have been handed a right to learn in a non dictated environment that offers a 'potential for greater integration with the vast creative and educative possibilities of the web'⁴. The teacher is by definition distanced from the learner and can only absorb users' reactions at a later time and in large numbers. Responsibility is shifted from the educator to the learners. It is they now who customize the conditions and the quality of attendance.

This could be a way to share knowledge equally with minimum intervention from the part of the educator. But has equality finally become for education the point of departure? Is the nature of MOOCs based on their potential to challenge traditional disciplinary construction of knowledge? In this case, are MOOCs forms of resistance to educational knowledge/power systems?

Monitoring process outcomes

The unexpectedly high figures of participation noted by the first MOOCs did not correspond with high graduation rates. The people who eventually finished the courses offered add up to a mere percentage of the total number of registrants and MOOCs have thereby sustained a relentless critique on their motives and their means.

The monitoring techniques that have been applied produced a rich data-gathering pool illustrating intentions and actions in diagrams where the behavior of the users is being examined, analyzed and compared⁵. What these diagrams represent is an average of the users' interactions with the course through the computer; when they register; how often they enter the course and how long they usually stay connected; their habits of sneaking in to get previews on the lectures or homework that follow;

their involvement in public discussions about the course and their common misconceptions. All of this data is gathered from the individual profiles of the registrants and is evaluated after the fact.

It is here that some of the users finally meet; in these numerous diagrams that are mapping the unknown, showing the crooked lines of the fragmented and bitty decision making of the user in the Deleuzian society of control where each learner is in continuous flux and no one is ever finished with anything. (Deleuze, 1991) As cleverly put by S.M. Morris: 'Mere freedom to roam the Internet can result in a drowning sensation, and this can be just as debilitating to agency as oppressive leadership'⁶. The information retrieved by the diagrams reveals the users' difficulty to attach to what maybe precious and free but ends up unexploited by the many.

Despite the noble motives that produced the need for change it seems that this first attempt of reorganizing education has not yet found its proper audience. It was intended for the less privileged, yet even the minimum precondition of internet bandwidth has been a negative factor in reaching these masses. It has been more successful with people who already have an advanced education and come from the richest part of the population; yet personal improvement and professional advancement have not yet been directly connected to MOOCs⁷. In fact the multiple types of MOOCs that have emerged express this awkwardness vividly; apart from the main two types the connectivist (cMOOC) and the exponential (xMOOC) there have been other types of MOOCs and MOOCs derivatives that are trying to address the people outside the rather well defined learning community of the Universities and expand on more levels of communication with less likely learners. (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014; Donald, 2014)

Reviews and Critiques

What has been at the core of the relentless critique that MOOCs have sustained is the limited interaction that people share while frequenting them. The learning process became a lonely process. And the low rates of attendance indicate that this maybe one of the most important factors for dropping out.

The scarcity of possibilities in communication has influenced MOOCs performance. In fact, interaction in MOOCs has been possible in mostly written formats. One is encouraged to communicate with the rest of the students and the tutors in written form where he/she can exchange his/her opinions and thoughts. In MOOCs all communication has become verbal and it takes a high degree of verbal skill to be able to keep up with the rest of the participants and express oneself in what is for many a foreign language. In the case when conversation does not occur live, writing can become more methodical but in most cases less spontaneous.

The overall process of written exchange, however, limits collaboration. In the long term this impedes the creation of a learning community that MOOCs aspire to create and maintain. Online learning needs constant interaction between the like-minded individuals who share purpose and commitment to the common goal of learning. (Locke, 2007) So far, this interaction has not yet been established in MOOCs in a sufficient manner, nor have the students entering MOOCs garnered the sense of belonging in an online learning community they can relate to.

Could this awkwardness be solely attributed to students?

Online learning communities' properties and virtues have been scrutinized in order to produce new models of education that would incorporate the use of technology in a massive and radical manner. This quest is common to most Higher Education Institutions all over the globe and has until now produced various models of Internet interaction in learning. Yet, the so needed collaboration as a means of cultivating interest and nurturing relations in online learning communities needs to be planned forward and induced to the candidate members of an online learning community prior to the launching of any course. That way, developers and designers will be required 'to create a shared experience rather than an experience that is shared' (Schrage, 1990: 185), meaning that it should be up to the participants to figure their online learning experience instead of consuming a ready-made one.

In this context, different MOOC setup approaches have already been used to experiment with turning technology into communication and making use of the Internet to engage students in learning. The 'connectivist' ones (cMOOCs) in particular focus upon enabling students on how to create their own spaces of communication instead of using ready-made ones, thereby reinforcing their sense of independence by abrogating most of the central control. But there have also been other more isolated initiatives that although abide to the general understanding of a MOOC setup, are immensely differentiated when it comes to engaging the participants by continuously encouraging all participants to take over and become active in the course.

Leuphana's Digital School and FutureLearn paradigms

A fine example of a practice of this kind was set by Leuphana's Digital University. In 2013 it launched its first MOOC entitled 'Think Tank – The Ideal City of the 21st Century' produced by the famous architect Daniel Liebeskind in collaboration with a series of other professors from various disciplines. The University has already implemented a second MOOC on the 'Psychology of Negotiations' based on the same organizational tactic that focuses on communication and interaction between all parties involved.

The course is organized to last twelve weeks and is structured around six assignments⁸. The people who register are grouped in teams of five and maintain the right to change their partners in case they are not satisfied by their initial grouping or they can form smaller groups. The lectures are launched according to the exercises assigned to the students and are available in the form of video presentations, articles and book chapters. Throughout the course, students can forward their questions to their mentors and their peers in open discussions and are also encouraged to give feedback to their peers' submissions. Team members are asked to interact more thoroughly by meeting online through Skype and exchange private emails regarding the preparation of their own work.

The platform is set up to function through communication practices in various levels. Once the users surpass their initial hesitations and awkwardness it is made possible for them to interact with others and communicate publicly or privately, both in writing and orally.

The teachers' presence and contribution is planned to be discreet. Apart from the lecture material which is designed to be short and dense, the students are invited to sustain their thoughts and examine the thoughts of others by themselves and are encouraged to take on their new responsibilities:

Remember that *there is a learning community* who is willing to help you and who is *counting on* those interim submissions and *anxiously waiting* to give you feedback on your work. Consider that by browsing through other teams reports, you will gain new insights yourself, and other teams will profit from the different perspectives and ideas of their peers.⁹

Learning in these platforms can be described as a process of reciprocity; the students no longer rely on a certain master to decide upon the falsity or the correctness of one's work, rather they alone evaluate their work. They are asked to think critically and they are asked to verify the quality of the knowledge produced by their teams and others by themselves. Knowledge is thus acquired by attention and comparison and is not instructed but produced from people in collectivities that share a common interest on a matter and they exchange their opinions on that matter, freely.

Likewise, in the English platform 'FutureLearn', the people attending the course of 'Decision Making in a Complex and Uncertain World' brought about by the University of Groningen were repeatedly asked to check on the opinions of their peers to the various questions posed by the teachers at the end of each unit. With the simple advice to: '*not forget to like answers of your fellow students that you agree with*' learners were encouraged to read through their fellow students' answers before responding to the questions posed by the tutors and also directly comment on their peers' opinions if they wish to¹⁰. This way, they had the opportunity to verify where they stood and broaden and deepen their understanding on each issue by just checking in with the answers of hundreds of other individuals with whom they were free to communicate and even start a conversation. The method used by the course designers depended on the kind of interrelations that were formed between participants and their involvement in group discussions and only a few answers out of hundreds disregarded previous peer comments on the same matters.

Remembering Joseph Jacotot

When Ranciere wrote the book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* as homage to Joseph Jacoto's educational experiments in the turning of the 19th century, he described the revolutionary activities of a master who decided to teach a course he ignored. But he also described the activities of this master's disciples, an emancipated class of individuals who took on the challenge to attend this course and try to learn without being instructed. Jacoto's Dutch students explored the unknown (in their case the French language) by themselves, using the only means available at their disposal: the book of Telemachus that bore the text in both languages (Dutch and French) that their teacher suggested they should retrieve; their intention to learn; their attention; and their ability to compare.

Ranciere used Jacoto's experiments to demonstrate his belief that everyone is of equal intelligence and that emancipation comes from the consciousness of that equality (Ranciere, 1991: 101). In the most recent and elaborated examples of

MOOCs like the one of Leuphana Digital School and the FutureLearn platform courses mentioned above, the people involved in organizing them have done more than taking into account the initial MOOC setup for its technological importance. Nor have they just decoded the discipline involved in their course to facilitate understanding. Rather they took into consideration an alternate model student, the emancipated one who is willing to contribute, participate and thus actively engage in the learning process with others.

In this aspect, these all so old yet all so new strategies of learning that reemerged after the massive impact of the newest technologies used in education have dramatically changed the way education is perceived and practiced in matters of human intelligence. In these examples the dynamics have shifted from the self – always inferior within an Institution, to the self always equal to others – within a learning environment that the learner alone helps shape with others.

It is this involvement that helps learners to gradually disengage from traditional forms of University governance towards a new educational topography that has not yet been completely mapped but equally addresses to all its participants the right to shape it and help sustain it. This has been eloquently expressed by Emily Schneider of Stanford University, when asked about the benefits of peer grading as: ‘turning down the authority that lies in the hands of the instructor and the TAs, and turning up the authority that lies in the hands of the other students’ (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014:108).

The emancipation as in the equality of intellect is not solely intended in the educational context; it is a goal in itself as it constitutes the actual ‘matheme’ with which the student learner is to face up to the world in the future¹¹. Emancipation is thus the prerequisite for both a creative problem-posing and a problem-solving mind, otherwise the learner will always depend on authorities and experts and be subject to external schemata of interpretation.

Conclusion

What has started as a huge advancement in educational technology has been proven to attribute unprecedented equality between learners. People can now overcome the schemata of instruction as introduced in the 19th century and become involved in online learning communities where knowledge is produced and not transmitted.

Changes in the University come hand in hand with the debate on knowledge itself, especially after designating knowledge to be the core around which any further development is to be expected of societies. Universities along with other great institutions have naturally had to reconsider their role towards the production of knowledge and their ways of communicating it with others according to the new technologies of information.

It was not so long ago that Universities’ attention was directed to interdisciplinary studies, as a result of acknowledging the students as different in their learning methods and their interests. The outcome of the Boyer Report in 1998 emphasized on removing barriers between disciplines insisting on the fact that: ‘customizing interdisciplinary majors should be not only possible but readily achievable’ (The

Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998). It was then believed that research would flourish by allowing access of all disciplines to all disciplines.

But in a complex environment such as this, it was the gravitational shift in the consideration and the profiling of learners themselves that has set a new dynamic to the complex equation of today's educational realities. It is not anymore a matter of adjusting to the students' habits but rather renegotiating who the learners are in the contemporary world. 'Disciplines need to be more involved in the research on how people think and how students learn' whether it is the disciplines themselves that need to be reflected upon here or the classroom practices (Middendorf, 2004: 2). And by admitting to this the model of Jacoto's emancipated student reemerges as a more definite possibility.

Both the educational issue of learning in open communities and the possibility of access to a multiplicity of different disciplines before that are addressed to the very constitution of the subject. The learners are no longer asked to accumulate knowledge but are learning to structure their own intellectual mechanisms for understanding, using intrinsic or extrinsic intellectual tools – their own 'weaponry' – for the detection, the representation and the management of the real. This is just like in the two courses previously mentioned, where the participants had to draw examples from their own experience and relate the course material with their own understanding of how they can use these resources in the real world. Education in these cases is not therefore a predetermined entity to be absorbed by already formed individuals but the process of the individuals' evolvment into distinct subjects.

But still, the maturing of the individual learner can only be implemented when the learning process becomes a collective one as everyone's performance relies on that of others. The learning community as a dynamic agent reenters the educational landscape and is equally considered responsible for the integrity of knowledge, making the whole process as democratic as it has ever been.

Notes

1 A thorough look into the genesis of the University as an Institution can be found in Mark Wingley's: 'Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture', *Assemblage*, No 15, p.p. 6-29, The MIT Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171122> (last access: 23/07/2012)

2 Prof. G. Nagy's on line course 'CB22x: The Ancient Greek Hero' is described in the article of Nathan Heller published in 2013, entitled 'Laptop U: Has the future of college moved online?', *Annals of Higher Education*, *The New Yorker* http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/05/20/130520fa_fact_heller?currentPage=all (last access: 23/07/2012)

3 The term totality is being used here as is in Jacques Ranciere's book: 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster' to illustrate how a book can serve as an entity of knowledge complete in itself.

4 This position supported by S. M. Morris differentiates MOOCs from the rest of the online courses that are just mimicking an 'off the internet classroom' as he claims in his article: A Misapplication of MOOCs: Critical Pedagogy Writ Massive, (2004) <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/misapplication-moocs-critical-pedagogy-writ-massive/>(last access: 20/12/2014)

5 An interesting analysis from the examination of some of MIT and Stanford University MOOCs can be found in: De Boer, Jennifer and Ho, Andrew D. and Stump, Glenda S. and Breslow Lori, (2014), 'Changing "Course": Reconceptualizing Educational Variables for Massive Open Online', Educational Researcher. https://tll.mit.edu/sites/default/files/library/Changing_Course.pdf (last access: 26/04/2014)

6 Again, in Morris's article entitled 'A Misapplication of MOOCs: Critical Pedagogy Writ Massive' special mention is made to how multiplicity of choice ultimately prevents the user from choosing. <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/misapplication-moocs-critical-pedagogy-writ-massive/>(last access: 20/12/2014)

7 A profiled analysis of the MOOC user can be found in Susan Adam's 'Are MOOCs Really A Failure?', The Forbes Magazine, published on 12/11/2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/12/11/are-moocs-really-a-failure> (last access: 26/04/2014)

8 Leuphana's Digital School official site: <https://negotiations.digital.leuphana.com/course/pages/info> (last access: 03/07/2014)

9 The extract is taken from the correspondence that was exchanged between mentors and students during the last course carried out by Leuphana's Digital School: 'Psychology of Negotiations', currently unavailable online. Unpublished.

10 University of Groningen, Course: Decision Making in a Complex and Uncertain World, 15 September 2014, Week 4:Self-Organization and History, <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/complexity-and-uncertainty/steps/17041/progress>(last access: 28/12/2014)

11 The term 'matheme' is used here as in the Greek word that stands for lesson. The term was introduced in that sense by Jacques Lacan in 1971.

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Biography

Olga Ioannou was born in Thessaloniki and studied Architecture at the 'Sapienza' University of Rome. She received her diploma in Architecture in 2002 from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. As a freelancer, she has been involved in numerous design and construction projects. In 2012 she received her M.Sc. in Architectural Design from the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) where she now is a teaching assistant and a Ph.D. candidate researching architectural education.