

**Making Sense of MOOCs:
Musings in a Maze of Myth, Paradox & Possibility**

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Well, good morning. Sorry for the delay. But at MIT, you've got to get your technology sorted before you start. Thank you, very much, for inviting me to speak at this most interesting meeting. Your invitation shows admirable broad-mindedness because, last year, I wrote a paper called, "Making Sense of MOOCs, Musings in a Maze of Myth, Paradox and Possibility" that was critical of the MOOCs bandwagon. And six months later, despite the media's feverish enthusiasm for MOOCs, I remain a skeptic.

So these remarks will pose the question: MOOCs, what lies beyond the trough of disillusionment? I start by giving MIT a blanket exemption from many of the critical comments that I will make about MOOCs, and this is not just being polite to my hosts. MIT are the good guys because, in fact, as you just heard, ever since you launched your OpenCourseWare initiative back in the late 1990s, MIT's engagement with online learning has been part of a long-term strategy to master this potentially disruptive technology for the benefit of your campus students, and that is laudable. I shall return to the bottom part of this slide later.

Now the flock of institutions that have followed MIT down the MOOCs route have not shown the same level of strategic thinking. For most, it seems to be opportunism, "me-too-ism", or merely confusion about what online learning is. There is a herd instinct here. And since the subject is MOOCs, cows are more appropriately onomatopoeia than sheep.

So MOOCs: what lies beyond the trough of disillusionment? First, I shall recall a little history. You will find that tiresome, because innovators always like to believe that theirs is the only map to the buried treasure. But on the other hand, as George Santayana said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." And indeed, I began my MOOCs paper last year with the famous quote about Freudian-ism from the psychologist, Hans Eysenck, who said, "What is new is not true and what is true is not new."

Second, I shall explore two models that must be standard fare for undergraduate courses here at MIT, namely Moore's technology adoption cycle and Gartner's technology hype

cycle. Few areas are more faddish than educational technology. So the question is, where will MOOCs go after they slide down from the peak of inflated expectations?

Third, picking up on MIT's 15-year-old assumption that online learning is a disruptive technology, I shall speculate about how universities will use online learning as a routine part of their teaching that includes student support and credible assessment for credit. Call this the plateau of productivity in the technology hype cycle. Finally, I shall ask whether traversing the MOOCs maze will lead us to this happy point. Might MOOCs be, at best, a distraction, or at worst a fad, that will actually harm the cause of open, distance, and online learning?

So first, a little history. The older folk among you will remember the moon landing on 20th of July, 1969 and the famous line, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." You do not remember and were not aware that, three days later, on 23rd July, 1969, the Open University held its inaugural charter ceremony. The chancellor, Lord Geoffrey Crowther, articulated the university's mission that endures to this day, "Open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods, and open as to ideas." At the time, this radical, large-scale innovation in higher education made the same kind of hit with the media that MOOCs did last year. Many countries soon jumped in, establishing open universities of their own. And indeed, new distance teaching universities are still being created today.

In the 1990s, I wrote a book about those open universities that achieved respectable scale, which I defined as over 100,000 students taking degree-level programs at a distance. There were 11 such universities in 1995, with an aggregate enrollment of nearly 3 million. Today, there must be nearly 30 mega universities with total enrollments of well over 10 million. And that count includes only the open universities. Today, it is practically impossible to count the total number of students learning at a distance worldwide, if you include distance courses offered by campus universities. But the number is very large. We know, for example, that fully a quarter of all university students in India are studying at a distance.

So what are the key points for my history lesson? Just two. First, attempts to take higher education to scale are not new. Moreover, unlike MOOCs, which are mostly study material and self-assessment quizzes, usually without access to degrees, the open universities offer full-degree programs with student support and institutionally-controlled assessment. Some open universities do it better than others. But those that do it well, do it brilliantly. I take as an example the UK Open University, which now has over a quarter of a million students. The Open University ranked number five in England's aggregated assessments of national teaching quality by discipline, one place above my alma mater, Oxford.

Now this slide is dated simply because, in 2004, the presidents of Britain's elite universities, who hated this type of ranking based on teaching, successfully petitioned

Prime Minister Blair to stop it. However, England's annual national assessment of how satisfied students are with their universities was not so strangled. This year, the Open University came first and has never ranked lower than third. It is surely remarkable that a distance teaching university with a quarter of a million students can give its students a better experience than elite campuses claiming to offer tender, loving care and a thrilling intellectual environment. I conclude that the universities offering MOOCs are short on ambition. It is possible to offer degree study at scale and do it well. Mass enrollments and quality degrees can go together.

My second historical point is that MOOCs may be evolving in ways that obstruct the development of open education. That is the view of George Siemens, who was involved in the world's first MOOC back in 2008. And again, I exempt MIT from this criticism. MIT led the world into OpenCourseWare, leading directly to the UNESCO forum in 2002, which coined the term, "open educational resources" for materials that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared. To celebrate the 10th anniversary of that event, a World Congress on Open Educational Resources was held in Paris last year. And it's approved by acclamation, a declaration that governments and others should encourage the development of OER in every way possible, which included, with a final statement urging governments to encourage the open licensing of material produced with public funds. The Congress also commissioned a survey on government policies on OER around the world and a text on the business case for OER.

So thanks to MIT's pioneering work, OER are developing nicely, and governments are using them to widen access to education at lower cost. Just one example is my home province of British Columbia, Canada, which is offering students free open textbooks online for the 40 most popular post-secondary courses. Now many people, and I think of Martin Bean, the current Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, present MOOCs as a further step in the evolution of OER. But in his upcoming keynote to the International Council for Open and Distance Learning Conference in China, George Siemens questions this in a paper entitled, "How MOOCs are Derailing Open Education." His speech points out, quote, "The original MOOCs," like yours at MIT, "were 'open' in two respects."

First, they were open to enrollment of students from outside the hosting university. That is open, as in "open registration." And second, the materials of the course were licensed using Creative Commons licences, so their materials could be re-mixed and reused by others. That is open, as in "open license." Siemens continues, "The new cohort of MOOCs are distinct from the original MOOCs in that they are 'open' thus far, in only one aspect, they are open enrollment. The new MOOCs have not yet openly licensed their courses." And he adds, "As MOOCs continue to develop course content and experiment with various business models, we think it's crucial that they consider adopting open licenses as a default on their digital education offerings. In general, the value proposition is enhanced for the new MOOCs and their users if the MOOCs openly license their courses."

I turn now to the technology adoption cycle and the technology hype cycle. These must be well known to you. Regarding the technology adoption cycle, we can ask two questions about MOOCs. First, will there be a gap between the early adopters and the rest? We can't answer this question yet, because there are 10,000 universities in the world. And, so far, fewer than 100 are offering MOOCs.

The second and more important question is, will most universities decide to offer MOOCs? Is this a must-have technology for universities as mobile phones are for people? And that brings me to the hype cycle. To judge by the number of invitations that I receive about MOOCs, we are now sitting on the peak of inflated expectations. My friend and fellow panelist who will be talking in a moment forecasts that we shall sit on this peak for the rest of 2013, before sliding into the trough of disillusionment as evaluations come in and even the institutions with the deepest pockets begin to ask what MOOCs are doing for their bottom line. The important questions are, how will the slope of enlightenment lead us out of the trough and what a plateau of productivity for MOOCs will look like.

So let me now shift focus and apply these cycles to online learning and teaching in regular degree programs. As regards the technology adoption cycle, we have seen a steady rise in the adoption of online teaching. It has been slow. And many online courses have been mediocre. But there have been few hiccups or retreats and certainly no chasm. And in his yearly survey of the scene, Professor Tony Bates considers that this is the year when online learning comes of age. This maturation is helped along by the likelihood that nearly all institutions will gradually move much of their regular teaching online either as purely online courses, or as a hybrid of face-to-face and online.

Why will they do this? Four important reasons: that the student body is changing; that students are choosing online in ever larger numbers; that institutions threatened by reduced state grants and the bursting of the tuition fees bubble simply must get their costs down; and, finally, and most importantly, as we were hearing from Sanjay just now, when we finally master it, online learning may prove more effective than lecturing.

So if we imagine a hype cycle for online regular learning, it would be unlike the one we had earlier and might look more like this. There were certainly inflated expectations, although nothing like MOOCs. But in this case, there is a sense in the academy that there is no alternative. So institutions, students and faculty are climbing a steeper slope of enlightenment with determination. The plateau of productivity is still in the distance. But institutions realize that they must reach it. So the key question is which way should we head through the MOOCs maze?

Will the current expansion of MOOCs offerings help the development of online learning as a regular method of offering undergraduate and graduate degree programs? Or will it cause the image and the reality of open distance and online learning to regress? Again, it is too early to say. But what are the factors in play? There is good news and bad news on

several fronts. The first potentially good news is that the excited press coverage of MOOCs has created a greater public awareness of open distance and online learning, at least among people with an interest in higher education. If Harvard and London are doing it, it must be OK.

However, this could become bad news, as people discover that very few people complete MOOCs successfully. And even those who succeed do not get credit. Further possible good news is that we finally have a new pedagogy in higher education to augment or replace the millennial tradition of lecturing. But this requires that MOOCs faculty work at refining their online pedagogy as a mainstream activity, rather than as a public relations sideline. Cynics see the little videos that are a standard feature of many MOOCs as massage for faculty megalomania, rather than a serious aid to student learning.

Institutions that make a serious commitment to MOOCs will, of course, improve their performance, which is good news. However, while the commercial interests that offer MOOCs have a business model, there is no obvious business model for the institutions themselves. Attempts to monetize internet activity usually degrade the user experience. Copyrighting MOOCs content, rather than making it available as open education resources, is a good example.

These upsides and downsides bring us back to the fundamental contradiction of MOOCs, which is the tension between offering these so-called courses openly and recruiting regular students selectively. To use a final farm analogy from my late colleague, Dan Coldeway, elite universities admit students on the venerable principle of good little piggies in make good bacon out.

The key to getting a degree from elite institutions – and I went to two of them – is to get admitted. Call it a system of difficult in, easy out. For such institutions to adopt the opposite Open University principal, easy in, difficult out, and to get serious about helping large numbers of their MOOCs students to get credit would require a tremendous paradigm shift. And I conclude that offering MOOCs is not the best route to developing an institutional strategy to offer regular degree programs online with student support and assessment for credit. That is a separate challenge and must be tackled as such. MOOCs will not bring you to that destination.

Here, I declare an interest, just as various companies, such as Coursera, edX and FutureLearn, are helping institutions offer MOOCs, others are assisting institutions with the wider challenge of offering regular degree programs online. I'm a senior adviser to one of them, Academic Partnerships, which has enjoyed considerable success here in the US and is now spreading its wings abroad. That company's aim is to help their partner universities lead students into online award-bearing programs and have them graduate at rates at least as good as their fellow students on campus. The company offers institutions a range of services in pursuit of this goal: help with course conversion; provision of a

technology platform, if they don't have one; student recruitment; and the organization of student support.

As a service to all those contemplating offering regular programs online or doing so already, Academic Partnerships published last week, in both English and Chinese, “A Guide to Quality in Online Learning.” And it was issued under Creative Commons CC-BY-SA license, so you could do whatever you like with it. Hard copies of the English version are available free at this conference, and both versions are downloadable online. However, I don't think we catered for 300 delegates, so please only take one copy, if you want to take this guide.

I was very proud to be part of the international team that developed this guide, which draws on examples of online learning practice from all over the world. Structured as 16 frequently asked questions, it summarizes the key quality issues in online education in a concise and accessible manner, with an annotated reading list and an extensive bibliography to help you pursue particular topics further.

So my title was, “MOOCs, What Lies Beyond the Trough of Disillusionment?” My hope is that we can climb the slope of enlightenment and online learning and reach a plateau of productivity. When we get there, millions of students all over the world will be highly satisfied with their online degree programs. And moreover, institutions will have stopped complaining about lack of resources, because they will once again have a viable business model. Thank you, very much.