

I MOOC: UN FENOMENO MULTI-DIMENSIONALE

MOOCS: A MULTI-FACETED PHENOMENON

Sulla base della recente analisi di George Siemens in merito alle tecnologie per l'apprendimento, proponiamo una riflessione sul posizionamento del progetto EMMA, European Multiple MOOC Aggregator, rispetto al futuro dell'Higher Education in Europa.

Based on George Siemens' recent criticism of educational technology, we propose some reflections on the positioning of the EMMA project, European Multiple MOOC Aggregator, with respect to the future of Higher Education in Europe.

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent keynote speech for Learning with MOOCs at Columbia University, George Siemens (2015a) sought to clarify the current narrative around MOOCs and Higher Education. Using his talk as our basis, we look at the inception of MOOCs and their various evolutions and underlying ideologies in terms of narratives. We try to identify where the EMMA (European Multiple MOOC Aggregator) project that we work on is positioned, and what narrative will characterise the future of MOOCs in Europe.

FIVE NARRATIVES AND A CONCLUSION: WHERE ARE MOOCS GOING?

In order to frame the discourse around EMMA, we have chosen a narrative style as a kind of metaphor, aiming at distancing ourselves from our role as insiders to understand how MOOC narratives have evolved and influenced our project.

The "Opening up" narrative

The early MOOC narrative is something we are all familiar with now. This begins with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Open Course-

ware, whereby the MIT starts to offer some of its on-campus learning content in open access, for the benefit of other educators and learners. The next significant episode is in 2008, when Siemens and Downes create cMOOCs, and attempt to make the whole eco-system of learning, including the engagement and passion, open, not simply the courseware and content. Some years later, many other institutions are on board the MOOC wagon, and by 2013, MOOCs have become mainstream and are enjoying significant, and positive, media coverage (De Rosa & Reda, 2013).

The story tells of democratization of education, offering access to quality learning content to populations who, for reasons of time, money or geography would otherwise be excluded. Significant elements in the story regard the scalability of this kind of education, as a response to the growing need for increasing numbers of highly-educated and mobile citizens in a global, knowledge economy. One leading character in this MOOC narrative is EdX, with its non-profit and open source platform and commitment to research. The happy ending to this narrative is marred only by the references to Gartner's hype cycle¹ and the inevitable trough of disillusionment that follows the enthusiasm, citing high drop-out rates and highly-academic audiences as demonstration of the failure of MOOCs to fulfil their promises.

The Data Narrative

MOOCs can also be seen as an arena for educa-

tional experimentation and research, thanks to their unprecedented potential for producing data. Global providers like Coursera and FutureLearn enable their participating institutions to visualise data including student demographics, drop-out rates, performance on individual learning activities.

According to Siemens, research in the field was not consumed by the same hype as the media and enabled educators to measure the impact of specific educational practices, self-paced learning and learner networks on the learning experience and on learning outcomes. This can affect policy and action in the on-campus as well as the online environment, through positive feedback loops. The data narrative is not without its detractors, however. Justin Reich, from HarvardX, is pushing for an integrated, mixed-method and design-based approach to Learning Analytics (LA), to move data collection and analysis beyond its current level of “sifting through the exhaust” to conclude that online learners who devote more effort to their course and activities are more likely to pass² (Reich, 2015).

As Daniel et al point out (Daniel, Cano, & Cervera, 2015), however, many publicly-funded European universities do not always feel justified in investing in experimentation of this kind, and another unresolved issue is how teachers and tutors can be rewarded for their participation in MOOCs if they are not an integral part of faculty duties. Issues like this mean that the data narrative is currently partial, and input from policy-makers at an institutional, as well as National level, would be required to complete this narrative. It can be taken for granted, however, that LA are an interesting submarket that will be very much developed and exploited in the near future.

The Economic Narrative

Yuan and Powell (2013a; 2013b) state that any Higher Education Institution (HEI) will be forced to explore new business models that will deliver online education at lower costs and expand the range of their provision both for strategic reasons and in response to demand from learners. Burd, Smith and Reisman (2015) say that, politically, MOOCs are viewed as a possible way of reducing costs but the thorny issue remains whether, as Boxall (2012) asks, it is possible to invent «*a business model based on giving away your core products and potentially also your intellectual property rights*», remembering that «*in the post-dot-com world, value and profits have come mainly from ownership of the technology platforms through which users access information and services*». Those profits are considerable, however, with Visiongain estimating

growth in the global MOOC market from 0.9 billion dollars in 2014 to 14.2 billion 2020³. Although institutions are exploring a series of monetization initiatives to ensure sustainability, including certification, employee recruitment and third-party accords, Udacity is the main exponent of a real business model. Daniel et al. (2015) state, that the business model is evolving from “freemium⁴” to “premium⁵ – much the same model that other social media startups have adopted” and this is evident in Udacity, who have partnered with Google, Cisco and Facebook rather than universities, and their fee-paying credentialed nano-degree programmes⁶.

The “Disruptive” Narrative

Clayton Christensen (Christensen & Weise, 2014) was the first to write about MOOCs as disruptive innovation, and the potential of MOOCs to radically transform the Higher Education sector and the role of universities in the social system «*as providers of knowledge and innovation and as contributors to development*» was already mentioned in EU documentation in 2012⁷. There is still the feeling that «*their potential to disrupt - on price, technology, even pedagogy - in a long-stagnant industry*» has not been fully realized (Christensen & Weise, 2014).

One thing that can be felt, however, is the unbundling of Higher Education that results from MOOCs, with disaggregation of some or all of the different steps in the education process. One example is EdX proctoring systems for final exams in Pearson examination centres.

Siemens (2015a; 2015b) goes further in his analysis of how MOOCs are breaking down the traditional power structures of education. He cites certificates and badges, along with competency-based qualifications and prior learning recognition, as examples of the way that separate stages in the process of education, like assessment, are being granularised. But he also points out that whenever, and in whatever way, systems change, change always implies the breaking down of the system and a consequent rebuilding of the same, and the creation of a new power structure. This creates a cliffhanger for the disruptive narrative because, to quote Boxall, (2012) «*when the elements*

- 1 Gartner, Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies. Retrieved from
- 2 <https://www.bostonfed.org/education/events/2014/advancing-financial-capability-efforts-workshop/reich.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.asdreports.com/market-research-report-180700/massive-open-online-course-mooc-market>
- 4 Freemium is a pricing strategy whereby basic services are free of charge but there is a cost for additional features, or services
- 5 A premium business model is the concept of offering high end products with clear brand image to discerning customers
- 6 http://www.ilsecoloxix.it/p/magazine/2015/11/17/ASLYbXS-unicorno_educazione_online.shtml
- 7 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. European Higher Education in the World “/*COM/2013/0499 final*/”. Retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52013D0499>

of higher education - content, courses, support, assessments, awards - are all separately available from world-class providers, what will be the role of the university?»?

The “European” Narrative

There is a feeling that the background to the MOOC narrative in Europe is different from that in America. In the free market environment of the USA educational sector, MOOC providers act like universities, able to offer a full range of educational services, whereas in Europe strict policy frameworks govern educational provision, especially as regards credentialing. HE is still largely provided for free by the State in Europe, however, and ideas of common good, quality of life and social benefits frequently inform educational change. The presence and policies of the European Institutions, and their diverse funding programmes, are powerful drivers of innovation and have been key to MOOC development. According to latest Open Education data⁸ there are 17 countries involved in MOOCs and 1,700 courses currently available, UK and Spain offer the highest number of MOOCs, and there is a wide range of key players (public, private, non-profit) and a variety of approaches and models. The latest European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) survey on MOOC strategies in Europe reveals that interest in developing MOOCs is still on the increase⁹. Daniel, Cano and Cervera (2015) believe that the answer to the accreditation and certification issue lies in the European Credit Transfer System (with 53 countries participating) but, as De Rosa and Reda (2013) reported, many of their interviewees were not in favour of offering university credits for MOOCs because of the difficulty in setting common assessment standards to ensure proper evaluation, and the dangers of plagiarism.

National initiatives

There are two main threads running through the European narrative. The first is pride in Europe's rich history and cultural and linguistic diversity, and the consequent desire to preserve and valorise it by showcasing examples of excellence in the public arena of MOOCs. The use of national languages is an important part of this narrative. One example is F.U.N, the French government-led MOOC platform launched in 2013 where all courses are in the native language only. Interestingly, the language can

become the defining feature, with platform use expanding outside national boundaries but “geo-linguistically” rather than geo-politically. So F.U.N.

is widely used in francophone Africa and the Spanish platform MiriadaX in Latin America. The second thread is about achieving greater European unity and collaboration, which implies a need for better language and translation skills to broaden access to diverse cultures and knowledge and promote citizen mobility. It also implies a need for pan-European education initiatives. Several MOOC projects (ECO, HOME, MOOCKnowledge) have been launched in response but EMMA is the only TransEuropean platform.

Trans-European initiative

The EMMA project partnership comprises a mix of Open and Public Universities, and SMEs with expertise in tracking, profiling, dissemination and sustainability from 7 different nations, which reflects the transcultural nature of the initiative. Together they are creating and testing an innovative learning environment for the delivery of MOOCs, called the European Multiple MOOC Aggregator or EMMA for short. It is a 30-month action funded by the European Commission, in line with the European narrative mentioned above and EU strategy for social growth, inclusion and mobility. The project aims to offer a wide cross-section of European Institutions, even smaller and lesser-known institutions, the opportunity to showcase teaching excellence and experiment with MOOC delivery free of charge, and to offer learners a multilingual, cross-border, building block approach to MOOCs.

The influence of the Opening up Education narrative can be felt throughout, with free access to quality content, CC licensing of courseware, and metadata providing embedded links to Europeana and other OER sources throughout the MOOCs. There is also a range of interaction features for social and networked learning, including peer review. However, the main thrust of the EMMA story is to go beyond national boundaries, and provide a genuinely trans-European approach to learning. EMMA aims to embrace diversity - of pedagogic approach, instructional design and language - within a single, agile, technological artefact. Access to the learning content is facilitated through multiple translations of the MOOCs with 8 European languages currently on offer (Catalan, Dutch, English, Estonian, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish). The effectiveness of the translation systems has been improved through specific training for EMMA with in-domain language samples and retraining of the machines after human correction in continuous cycles of improvement. Forum activity can also be multilingual or translatable, helping to improve language skills as a by-product. The other main thread in the EMMA

⁸ <http://www.openeducationeuropa.eu/>

⁹ http://www.eadtu.eu/documents/Publications/OEenM/Institutional_MOOC_strategies_in_Europe.pdf

narrative is to offer students the opportunity to create their own learning journey through related content from diverse institutions. Content is offered in clusters according to disciplinary area such as the social sciences and education. Using the translation feature, learners can save selected chunks of content in their EMMA coursebook, add personal comments and links in a multi-cultural approach, and share their virtual classrooms with a wide cross-section of students from around the globe.

The data narrative has also had a role to play. EMMA has developed a series of tools to enable the collection of a mix of ethnographic, survey and LA data that should enable the project team to measure satisfaction with the platform and services on the part of providers and learners, and to see whether the multilingual and multicultural aspects of EMMA represent added value for users.

The platform went public in beta version in October 2014 with MOOCs from 5 partner nations on board. The platform has now evolved to present a dynamic and appealing interface, an advanced learning environment and a variety of integrated webservices. 25 MOOCs were launched in the autumn and EMMA is now in its deployment phase, with streamlined, scalable procedures in place to offer hosting to MOOCs from external providers. The first of these will launch in February 2016 and include courses for teachers on Coding, Philosophy

for Children, 21st Century Learning, E-portfolios as well as MOOCs with a more cultural bias like the Wine University.

Although funding obviates the immediate need for monetization, the team is exploring ways of sustaining the platform beyond the project lifespan.

CONCLUSIONS

George Siemens would like to take advantage of the current rearchitecting of Higher Education to take the emphasis off the cognitive (Siemens, 2015a; 2015b) and incorporate the opportunities for personal and social learning that MOOCs offer in a narrative about fostering understanding, to “create better and kinder citizens”. This is clearly an admirable transversal goal for European MOOCs in the current climate, but it is also necessary for platforms like EMMA to find some means of support to carry them forward. This will require clear focus on the financial as well as the cognitive. The current impression is that the MOOC system is developing as a parallel alternative to the institutional education system. The economic narrative seems to emerge as the dominant one, and this is certainly not a European narrative, but we are seeing that more platforms are positioning and branding themselves as “European”, which could indicate that there will be a more consolidated response from European MOOC providers and institutions in the future.

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