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Dimensions of openness in MOOC environments (0207)

Programme number: H7
Research Domain: Digital University

To MOOC, or not to MOOC? That is the question facing many institutions and many academics within those institutions as the popularity of 'open' approaches to course delivery gain a foothold in the global education market. Recently, MOOC's have attracted a fair amount of negative publicity e.g. (Cusumano, 2013)(Farin, 2013)(Mackness et al. 2010), but the potentials for global open courses seem evident (Kolowich, 2013). One of the issues relating to the development of the concept is the wide variety of courses classified as MOOCs and the flexibility that existing definitions of MOOCs provide. In particular in this study, flexibility in relation to the meaning of 'open'.

Definitions of MOOC's tend to emphasise openness in relation to the ability of learners to be able to access content through web based platforms, openness in terms of cost, openness in terms of the use of open courseware, or openness with respect to learner collaboration (McAuley, A. et al.,2010) (Yuan and Powell, 2013) etc. However, without a very clear definition of the meaning of 'open' there is a clear dichotomy. This dichotomy ranges from existing institutional courses which have simply been translated into a web based environment and made available to all, through to courses delivered by consortia of institutions as open courseware environments, to community constructed and driven online courses.

Individuals have recently worked to categorise and generate taxonomies for the different types of MOOC's that are available. A basic categorisation (Daniel, 2012) would see MOOCs developed as either: courses with an emphasis on connectivist ideals (cMOOCs) with students learning from educators and each other in online course environments; or as courses involving more individually focused learning (xMOOCs) following traditional behaviourist approaches to learning, with traditional course structures, content and methods. This categorisation is further explored in Yuan and Powell (2013) charting the history of MOOC development and outlining the roots of the original MOOC in the *"ideals of openness".* Wiley (2012) as cited in Yuan and Powell, outlines the threat posed to the concept of open education through problems in the flexibility of the definition of MOOCs, with the concern that *"The MOOCs which are "massive but not open" pose a special threat to the future of OER, but no one seems to be paying attention… Before long the general public will feel that "free" is good / innovative enough, and no one will care about "open," permissions, or licensing."* Recently early taxonomic work by Clark, 2013 with his presentation of a taxonomy of eight different forms of MOOC, and work by Conole in presenting her development of twelve dimensions through which to classify and categorise existing and future MOOC's at least begin to question existing methods of understanding existing MOOCs. This existing work raises questions that are not yet fully explored given the emergent nature of the MOOC movement.

In the work presented by Conole there is a suggestion that the degree of openness that a MOOC may provide should be evaluated. It is this dimension that forms the focus of interest for this research. The categorisation of openness as a low, medium, or high value by Conole may well be a straightforward mechanism for evaluating a MOOCs degree of openness, however, as previously mentioned openness can take many forms. Therefore it is useful to establish a more sophisticated understanding of the meaning of 'open' for MOOCs.

In this research we analyse existing MOOCs' across a selection of MOOC platforms (e.g. UdaCity, Coursera, Wikiversity, and edX) and establish dimensions of openness in MOOC environments. The

analysis approach taken involves detailed review of elements of MOOC courses including design strategies, materials, delivery, community, assessment etc. In addition, relations are drawn to existing ideas of openness as they apply in relation to Open Source Software (Open Source Initative, see http://opensource.org/osd) and Conole's dimensions are examined for the selected courses. Review of such elements enables the development of more critical perspectives on dimensions of openness, including how these are and could be conceptualised in MOOC environments. It is posited that MOOCs developed along the line of comparable open collaborative platforms such as Wikipedia, offer the most potential for global educational development, rather than less open xMOOC environments. In addition, subject community work to establish content areas and curricula, linked across to existing subject area benchmark statements offers opportunities to establish frameworks through which open community driven MOOC structures can be combined with xMOOC environments, creating a framework for knowledge and accreditation.

Since the establishment of the first MOOC in 2008, the terminology and definitions thereof have enabled a wide variety of different developments to take place. Taking time now to consider further ways in which institutions can collaborate in the generation of MOOC environments can drive us closer to platforms where higher levels of openness exist, with learners and educators co-creating across institutional boundaries, and global education providers co-existing through a mixed economy model to monetising the MOOC model.

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