

## **G. Miquelard-Garnier: MOOC, a tool for developing continuing education in a traditional environment?**

*Voir aussi: <http://alternatives-economiques.fr/blogs/alambic/2014/01/27/les-mooc-un-outil-adapte-pour-la-formation-continue/>*

Most of the recent debate and media attention has focused on MOOC, even though other forms of e-learning, whether they are not “open” or “massive”, exist.

In France, last year, everyone talked about it, and it seemed you almost had to be excited about it.

Because the United States and other countries had already invested so much money and time in it.

Because we, French, as usual were already too far behind.

Because everyone would have access to the best courses of the best universities for free and so on.

The French Ministry of Research invested a lot of money and created a national online platform (France Université Numérique, FUN) where Universities and Engineering Schools could put their new MOOC; we, as Professors, received a lot of emails from our administration to create MOOC and so on.

As a scientist, I like to get excited, but I also like even better to ask myself and others questions. So I wrote, one year ago, an [op-ed that was published](#) in a French newspaper, Le Monde, which basically asked questions about MOOC, most of these questions being so natural that they are also raised on the front page of the Ethical Forum website.

I actually did not provide answers and most of the time did not have firm opinion on what these answers should be, my goal was, as is I believe the goal of this forum, to initiate reasonable discussions (it turned out quite sadly some people in the media and elsewhere believed that asking question meant I was deeply anti-MOOC and the symbol of conservative Professors).

The main question I wanted to raise was probably this one:

“ Is e-learning the right answer for all forms of higher education? Especially, are all students “equal” when dealing with MOOC or other types of e-learning?”

Though the debate finally started after everyone calmed down a bit, and is still going on, it appears, a year after, that we have some elements to answer this first question.

San Jose State University suspended its online courses program for undergrad students after a very high failure rate was observed. It was also found that “poorer” students were the one failing most, sometimes for very basic reasons: because they did not always have proper internet access at home, or a quiet environment to work in using this method. The University partner, Udacity, announced subsequently that it was going now to stop University online courses to focus on short courses for companies which want to train their employees.

A very recent piece in the New York Times, the same journal that said 2012 was “the year of the MOOC”, and which was called this time “demystifying the mooc”, said ““The basic MOOC is a great thing for the top 5 percent of the student body, but not a great thing for the bottom 95 percent” quoting again the founder of Udacity, Dr Thrun from Stanford.

University of Pennsylvania also did a study on 32 of its MOOC (made with Coursera as a partner) and more than 35000 students. It shows that 2/3 of the so-called students are actually more than 25, with a job and already a higher education degree and not often from a “third-world country” (or if they are, from the upper class of the society).

Now what can we say looking at these points?

As you might not know, the place where I teach, le CNAM, or “conservatoire national des arts et métiers”, is not a “classical” University. It is actually mainly dedicated to continuing education for working adults. This public is usually highly motivated, since they decided to go back to school to obtain a better diploma than the one they got when they first graduated (usually a MSc over a BSc). As it was found in the studies I mentioned, they would probably greatly benefit from the MOOC phenomenon, and the CNAM is indeed one of the French leaders for producing MOOC.

Then again, it might be said that e-learning, neither massive nor open, already existed in le CNAM and elsewhere well before the MOOC-mania. In our case, for the last 15 to 20 years, the students have had access to an online platform where they can download documents, whether written or audios or videos. It was a bit rough at the beginning but nevertheless it allowed people from everywhere in France to follow courses given in Paris without having to be physically in the class. Over the last 5 years, the potential of the tool has indeed increased greatly and we can provide much more refined documents.

To conclude, it appears that MOOC probably won't be the universal solution for higher education. It can be of help especially for what is called “reverse pedagogy” as a technological evolution (but probably not revolution) over textbooks. This method has

shown potential but is not well developed in France and its development would imply some deep cultural changes in the way we see higher education. But in some cases e-learning might in fact increase inequalities between students. These inequalities, in terms of wealth, potential, maturity... exist, but I believe a good system should try to lower their effect on the final result, not increase it.

However, it has a great potential to democratize the access to continuing education, for highly motivated people who do not necessarily have the luxury of spending time in a classroom. I think the development of continuing education in institutes such as le CNAM or in "traditional" Universities is of fundamental importance to help rewarding very competent individuals who did not have the chance to obtain the degree they wanted during their youth. Especially, I would like to add that in France, we are still, to me, too much focused on the diploma you obtained when you were in your 20's rather than your life achievements afterward. If e-learning can make us understand that work experience and what you are learning during your whole professional life is at least as important as how you did in school, I will call it a huge success.