

Some Critical Observations on *Massive Open Online Courses*

Intervention: *Ethical Forum* November 20th 2014

Bart Pattyn, KU Leuven

When new technologies are launched, priority tends to be given to their potential positive contribution. The reason for this, of course, is that the potential negative side effects of the said positive actualisations have not yet revealed themselves. And it takes a degree of ill-will to call attention in advance to where such negative side effects might emerge. In order to prevent the praise of MOOCs from degenerating into melodrama, however, let me offer some suggestions in this short intervention as to where these negative side effects might indeed bubble to the surface.

MOOCs are not developed in a vacuum. They are created and managed in a specific context. It goes without saying, therefore, that MOOCs will have an influence on practices that existed within that context prior to their creation and evolution. We can make the comparison here with the introduction of bibliometric systems for the evaluation of academics, an innovative technique that made it possible to compare the academic quality of given academics in an objective manner. This positive innovation has led to a change in existing practices, some of which are no longer tolerated. While there used to be professors who preferred to give priority to reading everything they considered relevant because they did not feel obliged to publish, many young academics today consider it necessary to restrict themselves to a rigidly defined research domain, because only such a limited expertise offers them the possibility of publishing a sufficient quantity of material. Innovation within the academic world, in other words, can occasion creative destruction.

There are substantial reasons to believe that MOOCs will have a similar effect and that they will marginalise a string of existing practices. MOOCs have the potential, for example, to create a situation in which:

1. the transfer of knowledge is gradually monopolised by 'star' professors, thereby jeopardising the pluriform wealth of intellectual styles and approaches that already exists within our university faculties and departments.
2. conversation, internal debate and informal dialogue within faculties and departments become less and less relevant.
3. subjects that can only be taught in an evocative and highly personal manner will be forced to make way in the future for subjects that lend themselves to a detached, rational and objective transfer of knowledge.

4. the aforesaid accent shifts will mean that a number of intuitive reflexes that determine the moral objectives of scholarly research will no longer be passed on from one generation of scholars to the next.

Let me explore these statements in a little more detail.

One of the characteristic features of MOOCs is that they can reach a mass audience. We know that the number of people giving their attention to a practice, object or person is determinative of the respect that practice, object or person enjoys within a given group. Well known media personalities are a perfect example. The fact that they regularly attract the attention of massive numbers of people is responsible for enshrouding them in a special charisma, no matter what the said individuals represent or have to say or whether the attention they attract is warranted. It is not beyond the realms of the imagination that something similar might take place with those who teach successful MOOCs. Whether they like it or not, the large-scale attention their MOOC solicits will surround them with a special aura that will increase their self-confidence and reduce their self-criticism. Success and popularity are like a drug. Social attribution theory teaches us that it is very difficult for successful people to keep a level head. There is a good chance, therefore, that the success of 'star' professors will reduce their readiness to subject themselves to the critique of their less successful colleagues in the context of debate and informal discussion. As a result, the self-purifying capacity of the pluriform and critical atmosphere that exists between academic colleagues will be diminished. Sooner or later, and perhaps without realizing it, 'star' professors will start to behave like prima donnas, backed up by efficient and well-oiled cabinets of redactional staff and editorial assistants, cabinets that will ultimately function as highly profitable and competitively powerful states within the departments and faculties of our universities.

What we understand today as the 'ideal lecture' is also likely to shift under the influence of MOOCs in the direction of a well-staged theatre piece with trendy illustrations and perfectly timed examples. MOOCs, moreover, have a number of features that a course taught by a physically present teacher does not. If they are professionally edited, they will likely be hitch and inconsistency free, and slips of the tongue, hesitation and error will have been erased. The same can rarely be said for classes taught in real time and on the spot. If successful MOOCs are upheld as the criteria of excellence, then there is a real chance that all those professors who don't have a slick and polished teaching style and who don't use well streamlined and logically constructed presentations will be expected to step aside.

An additional but no less important difference is that a MOOC's audience is not present, while those attending a traditional lecture are. This implies that the person teaching a MOOC cannot appeal to the particular presuppositions or transitory emotional condition of a limited group of real listeners. A presentation intended for a 'universal' audience cannot focus on culture-specific or group-related presuppositions. As a result, a MOOC may be more polished, but it is also more remote and indifferent when compared to a traditional

classroom experience with a speaker and a real audience. The detached and unbiased character of a MOOC may be considered by some as a plus, certainly if one accepts that a scholarly presentation should never be rooted in implicit culture-bound presuppositions. For disciplines such as mathematics, physics and biology, with a high level of abstraction and with formal and universal frames of reference, this seems indeed to go without saying. If you teach chemistry in Japan, Kenya or Krakow, water is and always will be H₂O. For subjects that acquire their relevance from the meaning granted them in a given culture – poetry, for example, or art, or ethics, or history – the value of abstraction is far less apparent. An appeal to pre-reflexive aesthetic or moral intuitions would seem to be indispensable in such circumstances.

When we make abstraction of intuitions of this kind within a university and limit ourselves to a rational transfer of knowledge, we are faced with a genuine possibility that scholars in the future will no longer be able to prevent scholarship from being deployed as a means to acquire more wealth and more power, or to pursue a fanatical political agenda. Rationality on its own is an unguided projectile if it is not deployed in function of human intuitions cultivated within a **shared moral context**, such as the intuition that peace, security, equality and solidarity are important.

The way we pass on humanising intuitions and moral sensitivity – or wisdom, if you like – differs profoundly from the way we might show someone how to demonstrate a mathematical theorem or illustrate how to splice a foreign gene into the DNA of a plant. The transfer of intuitions presupposes the style that Heraclitus ascribed to the ruler of Delphi: "The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but gives a sign." It is often via strictly personal body language, paradoxes and satire that teachers appeal to their pre-reflexive intuitions during lectures and seminars. Where MOOCs prevail as the guiding ethos, such style figures might easily come across as subjective, obscure and unscientific. Many of these style figures only function, moreover, where a sort of private complicity is cultivated between teacher and student. In a culture that insists on casting everything in pedagogically justifiable formats and MOOCs, irrationality of this sort will demand disinfection. For some disciplines, disinfection may bring nothing but advantage, but there are disciplines in which critical reflection is often most effectively encouraged by this sort of irrational and aberrant behaviour.

For these reasons I would prefer to err on the side of caution when innovation generates such promising expectations.