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MOOCS and Higher Education Globalisation: Social Work and Social Education Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

MOOCs can support educational innovation in a wide range of contexts, from formal to informal and from expected to unexpected. This kind of open online courses are often used within campus modules as core elements of their curriculum. This is the case of this experimental study, where we analyse an experiment of HE educational innovation about the perceptions of students around strengths and weaknesses of MOOCs in socio-educational settings. 54 students were surveyed with multiple choice questions around this topic. The results show that HE students of education degrees tend to see the potential of MOOCs to aid the transformation of the classrooms often currently reserved to social elites. They also see that MOOCs can transcend to new learning arenas more ubiquitous, connected, informal and horizontal, which can facilitate the digital inclusion of disenfranchised groups, as well as potentiate the blooming of interactive communities of collective intelligence. However, these students were also aware of important shortcomings such as the lack of monitoring, and MOOC's often unattainable demand of high learner autonomy.

Keywords: MOOCs, education innovation, MOOCs within campus, MOOCs for inclusion

1.1. MOOCs and learning models in Higher education and Society

Conner (2013) suggests that learning in the Knowledge Society occurs in a diversity of contexts, ranging from formal to informal and from expected to unexpected (figure 1).
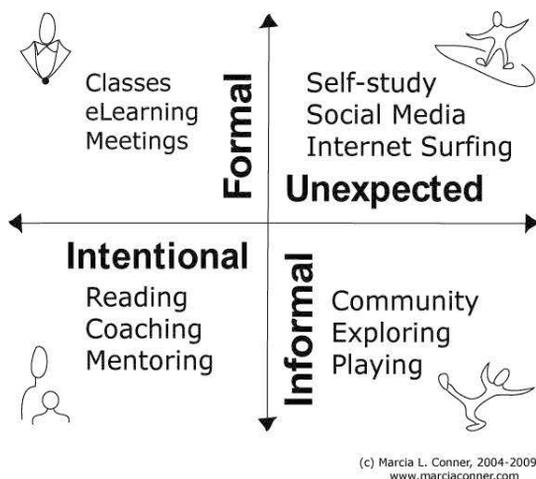

Figure 1. Learning contexts (Conner, 2013).

In this sense, MOOCs are interesting educational approaches to develop in this polychromatic plurality of educational contexts.

MOOC acronym stands for Massive Open Online Courses (Rheingold, 2013). In scientific literature, MOOCs are often portrayed as virtual environments of social connectivity around a particular area of study with an open pedagogical approach (McAuley et al., 2010; Vázquez-Cano, López-Meneses & Barroso, 2015; Aguaded, Vázquez-Cano & López Meneses, 2016). These are in turn offered by many of the top Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide, and have the potential to alter the global Higher Education ecosystems (López-Meneses, 2017). Castaño & Cabero outline the following characteristics of MOOCs:

▸ They are educational resources with certain resemblance to a classroom.

▸ They are events with start and finish dates.
  ▸ They have assessment mechanisms.
  ▸ They are online.
  ▸ They are free for learners to use.
  ▸ They are open, without admission prerequisites.
  ▸ They allow interactive participation at scale of large learning communities.

The MOOC universe is object of pedagogical and educational reflection among many academics in the field (Zapata, 2013; Ramírez-Fernández, Salmerón y López-Meneses, 2015) as well as for HEIs in the globalised world (Haggard, 2013). That entails an innovative model of massive education that exploits the potential of communication and information technologies in a paradigmatic fashion at societal level (Pérez-Parra & Gómez-Galán, 2015). In the same way, massive and open education poses a challenge for HEIs and the HE teaching community, who is pushed to redefine the current methodological paradigm in order to charter new curricular approaches which are more open, interactive, collaborative and ubiquitous, in symbiosis with a more dynamic and holistic assessment, embedded in more flexible and diversified programmes, more adapted to the job market to promote and provide students with the implementation of their own skills and competencies development paths for their academic and professional development (López-Meneses, 2017).

Many attempts have been made at classifying the different types of MOOCs. Perhaps one of the most commented taxonomies is that of Clark's (2013), who identifies seven types:

▸ TransferMOOCs (consisting of taking existing in-campus courses and transferring them to MOOC platforms).
▸ MadeMOOCs (purpose-made MOOCs with emphasis on the quality of the multimedia materials and MOOC-specific tasks and interactions for students).
▸ SynchMOOCs (courses have start and end dates, as well as specific assessment events).
▸ AsynchMOOCs (self-paced, with no dates or deadlines).
▸ AdaptiveMOOCs (using adaptive algorhitms to personalise learning, based on learning analytics insights).
▸ GroupMOOCs (designed for specific groups)

▸ ConnectivistMOOCS (following Siemens' and Downes' connectivist principles).

▸ MiniMOOCSs (with small numbers and short duration).

However, the most generalised classification is that of xMOOCs and cMOOCs, where the former is a centralised approach with behaviourist pedagogical underpinnings, and the latter is a distributed approach with social constructivist and connectivist pedagogies (Downes, 2012; Karsenti, 2013; Vázquez-Cano, López-Meneses, & Sarasola, 2013).

As Aguaded & Medina suggest (2015) the MOOC movement currently emanates from a process of innovation in the context of open education, oriented by the principles of massive and free distribution of contents, and technologically facilitated by online, interactive and collaborative applications. Gértrudix, Rajas, & Álvarez (2017) note that his movement has significant academic and journalistic attention, as evidenced by the bibliometric analyses of academic (López-Meneses, Vázquez-Cano, & Román, 2015; Aguaded, Vázquez-Cano, & López-Meneses, 2016; León-Urrutia, Vázquez-Cano, & López-Meneses, 2017) and non-academic literature (White, León, & White, 2015; Kovanovich *et al.*, 2015). This attention is also reflected in the institutional policies that stimulate MOOC production (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014), and the analysis of their pedagogical quality (Roig-Vila, Mengual-Andrés, & Suárez-Guerrero, 2014; Aguaded & Medina-Salguero, 2015), among other areas. MOOCs can be therefore considered as a new learning path for universal education.

1.2. The setting

In this study, we analyse an experiment of HE educational innovation about the perceptions of 54 students of an Education degree module named "Information and Communication Technologies" in the double degree of Social Work and Social Education, from the cohort of February 2016-17, in the University Pablo Olavide of Seville. One of the core contents of these modules are MOOCs and their social and educational impact (see module in <http://bit.ly/2xwjh4x>).

This experiment encourages first-year Social education students to reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of MOOC in socio-educational settings. For this, every student would produce a personal *edublog* for the module, keeping record the activities carried out in it. One of the tabs would be a record of the MOOCs where they would contribute with their reflections. In figure 2, two exemplars are displayed.

Edublog 1
URL: http://laurayebenestic.blogspot.com.es/p/mooc.html

Edublog 2
URL: http://educametetic.blogspot.com.es/p/mooc.html

Figure 2. Personal edublog exemplars

1.3. Aims

The structure of this study was devised in attention to its main aims, which are the following:

▸ Analysing how students perceived the advantages of MOOCs in socio-educational settings where students of this particular module operate.
▸ Determine the main weaknesses of MOOCs as seen by the students of the module.
▸ Enhance our understanding of *edublogs* as educational resources, and find how to best use them to support the professional development of the social educator.

1.4. Methodology

This research Project used qualitative and descriptive methodological approach. The sample was formed by 54 students of the double degree of Social Work and Social Education, in the Faculty of Social Science of the University Pablo Olavide, cohort 2016/17.

To analyse the different students' outputs (comments made in the individual edublogs) throughout the module, a reference framework was taken from the guidelines established by Bogdan & Biklen (1992); Miles & Huberman (1994), and Monje (2011).

The first stage of the data analysis process consisted of data reduction by categorising and coding the information obtained. The categorisation involved simplifying and selecting the information in order to make it more manageable. For this, the following steps were followed:

‣ Units were separated to identify relevant instances about reflections on advantages and drawbacks of MOOCs in socio-educational settings.
‣ These units were grouped in themes.
‣ The instances were synthesised and classified into those different themes.

During the coding stage, each textual instance was identified and inserted into its corresponding category through a mixed inductive-deductive procedure, to then perform a statistical analysis of the counts obtained. Finally, the analysis process was completed with a second stage in which the different instances were interpreted and categorised, in order to facilitate the inferences and interpretations of the results, as described below.

1.5. Results

This section starts with the analysis of the study participants' reported perceptions with regard of the strengths of MOOCs in socio-educational settings. More specifically, Table 1 displays the frequencies of participants' responses around this topic. From the table it can be inferred that most students saw gratuity as one of the main advantages of this approach for knowledge expansion,

followed by 46 students who thought that its greatest advantage is the flexibility that MOOCs provide, adapting to the learners' availability and ability to devote time to those courses. It is also worth highlighting the 33 responses stating MOOC's ability to create learning communities and networks, from pools of massive numbers of participants, facilitated by discussion forums (32 responses specific to fora). Moreover, 31 students highlighted the inclusive nature of MOOCs, enabling access to disenfranchised groups.

Table 1. Participants' responses on MOOC strengths

MOOC advantages	FREQUENCIES
Gratuity	47
Higher education content	24
Flexibility	41
Width of choice	18
Education for the disenfranchised	31
Employability	9
Support to traditinal education	10
Discussion forums	32
Multimedia materials	4
Introductory topics and life-long learning	19
Online education	12
Collaborative social networks	33
Certification	14
Unlimited enrolments	9

24 responses agreed that MOOCs offer Higher Education contents, signed off by prestigious universities. 19 of the responses indicated that MOOCs can introduce learners to scientific topics and disciplines, as well as providing live-long learning experiences, with a wide variety of offerings (18 responses).
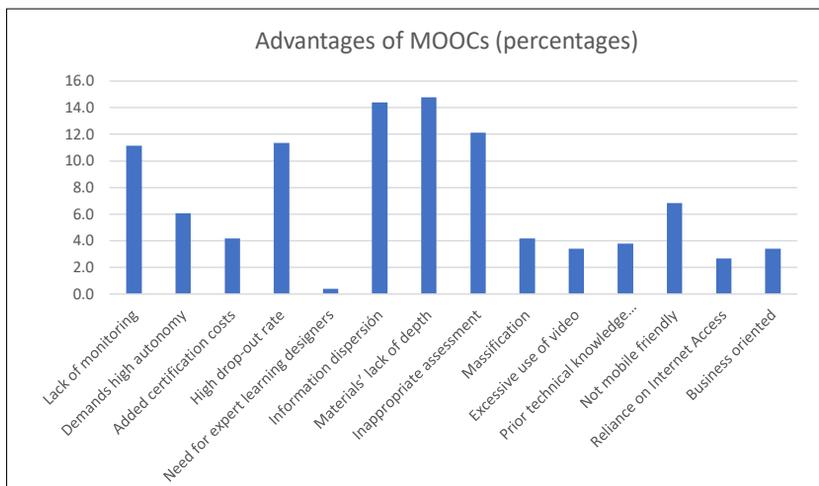
Chart 1. Percentages of responses from participants about advangages of MOOCs

In light of the results obtained referring to the advantages of MOOCs, it can be inferred that these courses have a significant potential to offer affordable and accessible education to everyone regardless of their background, as others have already suggested (Christensen et al., 2013; Daniel, 2012). The results show that this is also true in our social and educational settings, where these courses can support the digital inclusion of disenfranchised groups (Vázquez-Cano, López-Meneses, & Sarasola, 2013). Finally, in consonance with Moser-Mercer (2014), learning in "fragile" contexts is fundamental for an equal societal development, as well as the internalisation of HEIs (Teixeira *et al*. 2016).

With regard of the main challenges and dificulties of the MOOC movement in socio-educational settings, Chart 2 higlights a 15% of participants noting a lack of depth in the contents and materials offered in MOOCs. To this respect, as pointed out by Daniel, Vázquez-Cano, & Gisbert (2015), too many MOOCs are designed as a collection of videos with a discussion forum, which involves a traditional distance learning model that does not promote personalised learning. This in turn leads to a unidirectional teacher-centred content-based communicative design, with serious issues in attending individual differences, in a tendency to standardise learning (Valverde, 2014). In this sense, other authors (Lane & Kinser, 2013; Aguaded, Vázquez-Cano, & Sevillano, 2013)

use the term McDonalisation of education to refer to the distribution of standardised educational packs at global scale. Also, over 10% of the participants expressed that these courses lack appropriate and quality-ensuring assessment systems.
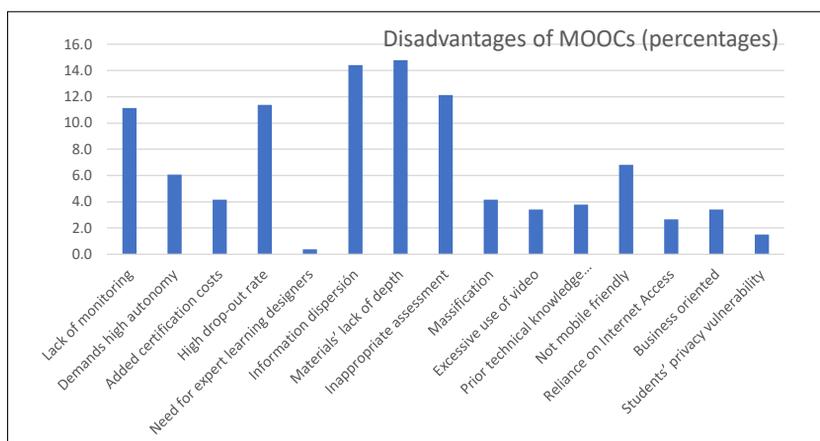

Chart 2. Participants'opinions about MOOC weaknesses, in percentages

There was also a 14.39% who stated that most MOOCs, due to their massiveness, come with an information deluge that could lead to dispersion and disorientation. In this sense, Calderón, Ezeiza, & Jimeno (2013) pointed out that some learners who feel disoriented and overwhelmed have low probabilities of interaction with tutor or expert co-learners, little meaningful socialisation in the MOOC, and little depth in their interactions.

12.12% of the participants also identified the predominance of multiple choice questions in the MOOC assessment methods as one of their main drawbacks. Another widely criticised aspect of MOOCs (11.36%) was the high attrition rates, in line with Fidalgo, Sein-Echaluce, & García Peñalvo (2013). Also, almost 11% expressed that MOOC lacked an appropriate follow up of the learning process.

Other reported weaknesses worth mentioning were MOOC's non-mobile friendliness (18), a high reliance on students' autonomy (16), and additional costs for certificate obtention (11). See table 2 for all the results about MOOCs' weaknesses.

Table 2. Frequencies of participants' responses in relation to MOOCs' weaknesses

MOOC weaknesses	FREQUENCIES
Lack of monitoring	29
Demands high student autonomy	16
Added certification costs	11
High drop-out rate	30
Need for expert learning designers	1
Information dispersión	38
Materials' lack of depth	39
Inappropriate assessment	32
Massification	11
Excessive use of video	9
Prior technical knowledge requirements	10
Not mobile friendly	18
Reliance on Internet Access	7
Business oriented	9
Students' privacy vulnerability	4

Another 10 participants indicated that MOOC often required too much previous technical knowledge to get started with the course. Also, 9 of the participants expressed that there was an abuse of video materials in detriment of other formats, an unbalanced that affected the quality of the courses (Zapata, 2013; Vázquez-Cano, López, & Sarasola, 2013).

Finally, seven participants indicated the indispensability of a working Internet connection as a significant weakness. One of the students also expressed that quality MOOCs could not be delivered without specialist learning designers. In this sense, León-Urrutia, Vázquez-Cano, & López-Meneses (2017), suggested that MOOC designers must provide a more comprehensive and adaptive design to cater for different socio-educational realities, in order to address the diverse training and educational demands.

1.6. Discussion and conclusion

One of the most salient features of the current Information Society is the relevance that Information and Communication Technologies have been gaining recently, becoming elements for exclusion and discrimination in a wide range of social contexts (Cabero-Almenara, & Ruiz-Palmero, 2018). Martín-Padilla (2017) indicates that this is especially true for MOOCs.

Moreover, universities are socio-technical pillars for the expansion and dissemination of global knowledge, as well as for the empowerment of citizenship, educational innovation, knowledge transfer. Universities are also catalysts for professional development, social cohesion, and an integrating agent for the economic and technological fabric of the knowledge society and human development (López-Meneses, 2017). Under this socio-technical and educational perspective, MOOCs can aid the transformation of the classrooms often currently reserved to social elites. MOOCs can transcend to new learning arenas more ubiquitous, connected, informal and horizontal, which can facilitate the digital inclusion of disenfranchised groups, as well as potentiate the blooming of interactive communities of collective intelligence. However, we must be aware that, after of a first phase of effervescence in HE, a set of shortcomings have become evident, as participants in this study have identified, and other authors have corroborated. These are, among others, the high attrition rate, the scarce interactivity of MOOC participants, the weaknesses in the official recognition through creditation, and the tendency to monetisation over quality (Aguaded, Vázquez-Cano, & Sevillano, 2013; Daniel, Vázquez-Cano, & Gisbert, 2015; León-Urrutia, Vázquez-Cano, & López-Meneses, 2017). An awareness of these shortcomings, as well as these advantages, can support a transformation towards more horizontal, connected, informal, and inclusive educational offerings, creating virtual habitats for sustainable educational development for the *Homo Conexus/digitalis* in the path of globalised knowledge (Vázquez-Cano, López-Meneses, & Barroso, 2015).

Acknowledgements

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