A Case Study—The Ethical Use of Massive Open Online Courses

Amy Nelson

North Carolina State University

EAC 555: Fall 2013

Abstract

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are college level courses designed and developed by university faculty. They were originally intended to make higher educational content open and available to a wide audience at no cost. With the financial landscape of universities changing for the worse, universities are making a push to incorporate MOOC content into current courses and to build MOOC courses to replace or supplement current course offerings. University faculty are beginning to see the writing on the wall and are pushing back against the wide use of MOOC content. The need for policy to protect faculty and students will be required to regulate the use of MOOCs.

A Case Study—The Ethical Use of Massive Open Online Courses

Discussion

MOOC's or massive open online courses are relatively new on the scene. The name MOOC was not even introduced until 2008 (Clarke, 2013). MOOC's are open educational resources (OER). Meaning they are free and readily available for public consumption. Since first coming on the scene, the courses have become ever more popular and increasingly debated. Advances in distance education technology have hastened the discussions and the urgency to explore what MOOC's were, what they are and what direction they are going.

MOOC's began as open online enrollments offered in conjunction with credited university courses. This concept is very close to the process of auditing a course at a brick and mortar institution. No credit was given for completing the course, no admission credentials were required and no attention was paid to retention. For the most part, MOOC's were usually associated with university level education. Specifically, MOOCs began with prestigious universities offering high quality educational resources in an open manner for wide use. The potential for knowledge sharing reaches a global level with MOOCs.

The current practice of these massive online courses is changing and is under scrutiny by university administrators and professors. University administrators are being accused of leveraging MOOCs as a cost saving strategy. University Professors fear that the development of MOOCs from prestigious universities will allow administrators to replace professors with a video screen (Philosophy Department, 2013; Kolowich, 2013a; Kolowich, 2013b; Kolowich, 2013c). The fear is real but it is not the stated intent of the faculty designing the widely used courses (Clarke, 2013; Sandel, 2013). The issue is that once a course has been made available by a third party like edX, Coursera or 2U, the intended use no longer has relevance.

It is important to note a fundamental change in the treatments of MOOCs. The root of MOOC creation was to create and open resource to become widely available to multiple populations. Universities are beginning to consider using MOOC's as credit bearing offerings. This flies in the face of the original intent of the design (Phelan, 2012). They are becoming pre-packaged distance education and not the OER meant to education the world.

Case Study

San Jose State University (SJSU) initiated a contract with edX to expand the use of online material in courses at their university. EdX is an online platform offering MOOCs developed by MIT and Harvard professors. Mohammad Qayoumi the head of SJSU, envisions universities becoming more like big business. He would like to follow the "Walmart model" and have universities expand past their brick and mortar buildings into the virtual environment (Young, 2013) just like Walmart and other retailers moving a large piece of their sales online. Qayoumi believes it is a model that can boost revenue without compromising educational quality.

The SJSU Philosophy department was asked by the SJSU administration to pilot one of the edX courses. The Philosophy department's faculty refused to use or pilot the online resources based on their professional ethical beliefs. The refusal was elevated when the faculty issued a public open letter to Professor Michael Sandel the author of the course in question (Philosophy Department, 2013; Kolowich, 2013c). The open letter outlined their reasoning. First they believe SJSU is piloting the courses for the sole purpose of long-term cost savings. Second, the quality of education would be reduced as the interaction with professors would be compromised. The course they were asked to pilot was a videotaped lecture series offering no opportunities for teacher student interaction. Third, they believe that using and teaching the same material to students across the country does not offer the opportunity for diversity of thought. It homogenizes the higher education system. Finally, purchasing online content does not allow for development and modification based on professorial discretion, expertise or observance.

The San Jose State University professors finalize their objections with a very real fear. The purchase and use of pre-packaged college courses could and would eliminate the need for college professors. The fear was supported by a speech made by the Lieutenant Governor of California upon signing the contract with edX. The Lieutenant Governor stated "the old education financing model frankly is no longer sustainable". The contract with edX was meant to help restructure the current financial model of the California University system.

Refusing to produce content and use MOOCs is becoming a trend. Duke University and Amherst College professors are also using great care when considering the publication and use of MOOCs (Kolowich, 2013a). Many professors consider the use of MOOC's the first step off a slippery slope. "Collaborating with an outside vendor might pose a threat, in the long term, to

their principles" (Kolowich, 2013a, p2). The principles they refer to are those of interactivity between professors and students and the responsibility of teachers to produce their own classes and content. The Duke Professors believe using video lectures gives students a less rich experience. Students are not able to take advantage of self-paced learning like other instructional technology or enjoy the "responsiveness of a professor who teaches to the passions and curiosities of students" (Kolowich, 2013a, p2). The Duke situation brings a new dimension to the situation. The Duke Professors are railing against the development of credit bearing MOOCs. This is a step farther than the SJSU situation where MOOCs were to be incorporated into the current curriculum as a blended experience.

Influences

There are many variables to consider in the discussion about the ethical use, development and distribution of MOOC's. First, the idea of globalization as it pertains to knowledge sharing. Hatcher (2002) says "globalization is a fundamental transformation of many diverse economies into a single integrated 'free' market and subsequent organizational and social responses to this transformation". MOOCs have the ability to share knowledge on a global scale, as they are free and open. The limiting factor of their distribution is the technological capabilities of the global population. The potential of educating third world populations is cruelly tied to their ability to gain access to and use technology, the very thing they need the knowledge to attain. Willems and Bossu (2012) introduce the term glocalization into the open education discussion. This is the joint consideration of local and global interactions. They go further to explain that the glocalization of education can "perpetuate the status quo of existing power relations" (p186). The globalization or glocalization of education, if implemented correctly, can educate the global economy and provide an equalizing effect. However, if not implemented correctly, the

globalization of education can progress the marginalization of economies and populations. Willems and Bossu (2012) advocate that there is a social responsibility to reach marginalized populations.

A second influence in the ethical use, development and distribution of MOOCs is technology. Technology is the driving force behind the globalization of knowledge sharing via MOOC. But with technology comes many considerations. As Hatcher (2002) states, "developing and less advanced countries are not reaping the full benefits of technology", It is fair to draw the conclusion that they are also not reaping the full benefits of MOOCs. Other technological considerations include privacy and ethical research issues. Companies such as edX, Coursera and 2U are also gathering data on the use and success of MOOCs. Robbins (2013) explains "at this moment it is like a big research project, with the special benefit of not having to get IRB approval and informed consent, search or pay for research participants, or worry about pesky privacy regulations"(p1).

Ethical Dilemmas for MOOC's

The first step in any moral or ethical judgment is to evaluate and determine if there is a true moral dilemma or just an apparent one. A true dilemma is a choice between two alternatives, if there is a third choice; then there is no true moral dilemma (Ruggiero, 2011). The first two issues to consider are, (1) Can a university force their faculty to use MOOCs to save time and money and (2) Can a professor defy the university administration or state government and refuse to use purchased course content? In conflict are the professors' professional ethics against the financial considerations of the University and University system. Stated in the letter from the SJSU Philosophy department, professors are realistically concerned about the reduction of student-professor interaction, the potential replacement of and reduction of university faculty

and the homogenization of education (Philosophy Department, 2013; Kolowich, 2013a; Kolowich, 2013b; Kolowich, 2013c; Malesic, 2013). The universities and the university systems claim the reasoning is to enrich current course offerings by blending current courses with content from prestigious universities and famous professors. These claims are weakened by university system officials and government officials who reference the use of MOOCs in while highlighting the financial difficulties facing state university systems.

This situation logically leads to another set of related issues. Is it ethical for universities to offer pre-packaged materials instead of traditional classroom, blended or distance offerings for credit? The values in conflict here relate back to the first set of dilemmas. The university system, especially the public systems are unable to sustain the current model of university education. The need for cost savings is vital to maintain the university. On the other side are the professors, students and industry. Professors have a need to uphold their professional ethics and produce unique and quality educational experiences. Facilitating another professor's content is not in line with those ethics. Furthermore, universities will most likely not fund faculty to solely facilitate, that can be done by someone with significantly less content knowledge, if there is a need for facilitation at all. The students have an expectation for a unique learning experience. This includes interaction with professors and other students to advance their knowledge and learning. Finally, the industry relies on the university system to produce graduates with transferable and reliable skills and knowledge.

The final issue is related to offering MOOCs for credit at universities. When offering a MOOC instead of an interactive experience with a professor, will a student pay the same amount? Charge a student the same fee for a less interactive, less unique, more homogenous,

pre-packaged course would surely solve a financial crisis and add to the coffers, but the student experience would be altered. Is it ethical to treat MOOCs and traditional in equality?

To summarize the ethical issues, they are listed below:

1. Is it ethical for universities to offer pre-packaged materials instead of traditional classroom, blended or distance offerings for credit?

2. Is it ethical for a university to force their faculty to use MOOCs?

3. Is it ethical for a professor to defy university administration or state government and refuse to use purchased course content?

4. Is it ethical for a university offer the same credit and tuition for a MOOC over a traditional course?

Analysis

Ruggiero provides a step by step process to analyze ethical issues and begin to make judgments. First, is to study the details of the case and consider all the circumstances that make it unique. Second is to identify the relevant criteria and determine what values are in conflict. Third, is to weigh the obligations and consider consequences. This will lead to the fourth step of making a judgment.

In this case study, the details have been outlined and the criterion has been identified. The third step is to determine a course of action by examining the obligations, contributing factors, potential consequences and the criteria one should use to make the decision. Ruggiero (2003) hastens against the use of feelings and conscience to make ethical decisions. Analyzing and judging a situation with feelings does not provide a reliable solution. Feelings are not impartial and should not be used to measure ethical behavior. Conscience does not provide any better measuring stick than feelings. Conscience is shaped by a person's social conditioning and

is inherently different from person to person. Conscience can vary greatly from person to person and what one finds immoral another may find acceptable. Given the variability of feeling and conscience, they will not be considered in the judgments of this situation.

Considering the dilemmas, is it ethical for universities to offer pre-packaged materials instead of traditional classroom, blended or distance offerings for credit? Can they force faculty to use them, can faculty refuse and will the MOOC courses be held in equality with traditional offerings. There are four interested parties in the dilemmas the universities, the professors, the students and industry. Each will be examined for consequences.

First, consider the university and the administrators. They are faced with a financial crisis and are swiftly becoming unable to sustain the current model of business. Tuition hikes are opposed by students and may reduce enrollment by pricing out qualified students. The changing needs of learners and the advancement of technology are increasing the cost of doing the business of higher education. This leaves administrators with a need to cut costs without compromising quality. One answer to the need is to incorporate MOOCs. This will reduce the class burden on professors allowing more time for academic research or to teach more sections. Thus, they will increase revenue by an increase in enrollment.

The next player in this dilemma is the faculty. The professors are bound by their professional ethics to provide a service to the university and the students. They are caught in the middle serving two masters. The first master is the university and their obligation to follow the university policy. The second master is the student body. They are the customers and have an expectation of a high quality and unique educational experience. Professionally, the faculty are ethically bound to provide a high quality learning experience. Currently the faculty are the loudest voice in the debate and are staunchly defending their ethical rights and behaviors.

Faculty also have a real fear that they will be replaced by less expensive facilitators and MOOC content (Philosophy Department, 2013; Kolowich, 2013a; Kolowich, 2013b; Kolowich, 2013c; Malesic, 2013).

The third interested party is the student body. So far they are one of the quietest groups in the debate. This may be because the use of MOOC content has not yet been widely incorporated into the traditional university course catalog. Parr (2013) cites a reason students should be worried, "MOOCs fail to support students and offer outdated pedagogy". The primary worry is that the massive courses do not support inexperienced and struggling students. This sentiment is further stated by Malesic (2013) "you take the MOOC, but you're on your own in figuring out how your learning fits in to the rest of your life." Malesic's sentiment offers one of the best arguments that faculty cannot and should not be replaced by MOOC facilitators. The link between theory and practice is crucial to applying new knowledge and is key to the fourth interested party, industry. The universities are clearly considering this move in part to relieve labor costs. Students may begin to have a voice if they are expected to pay the same tuition for MOOC courses versus traditional offerings. If they are missing the all-important link between theory and practice, is it worth it?

Industry is the fourth party to consider in the MOOC debate. Industry expects the university system to provide graduates that are skilled and knowledgeable enough to perform the jobs they have openings for. This relates back to the students interests. If a student earns a degree from MOOCs will they be able to apply that knowledge to the workday. Will they be able to convert the theory to practice?

Judgment

Is it ethical for universities to offer pre-packaged materials instead of traditional classroom, blended or distance offerings for credit? The answer is no at this point. The companies offering the courses have not done enough research yet to determine if the quality of instruction and learning is equivalent to traditional classroom, blended and online offerings from universities. Is it ethical for a university to force their faculty to use MOOCs? Again, I have to answer no. University administrators are not the content experts and therefore should not be making course content decisions. These choices should be delegated to departments, their heads and faculty. Is it ethical for a professor to defy university administration or state government and refuse to use purchased course content? Yes it is ethical for a professor to refuse to use the content. I must add that it is also ethical for a professor to ignore the professional ethics and comply with the situation. A professor would be clearly putting their neck on the line if they refuse to comply with the administration. This is where May (1996) comes in with sound reasoning. "The socially responsive professional is one who understands that only in the most extreme situations should he or she feel compelled to sacrifice personal security for the common good" (p.121). Finally, is it ethical for a university offer the same credit and tuition for a MOOC over a traditional course? Again the answer is a resounding no at this point. Like the reasoning for the first dilemma, there has not been enough research and proof that students learn as well as they do from interactive courses offered with a professor. The very name of the course type indicates massive enrollment. For a typical online course, there are discussion forums, group projects, graded papers and reflections. The workload is far too great for one or two facilitators. There is no way to interact with and provide meaningful feedback to thousands of students in one course.

Conclusions

What happens now to MOOCs? Clearly the debate is just heating up, pitting administration with a need to save on labor costs against the faculty with a need to preserve their professional integrity. Jaschik (2013) points out that "many college presidents have said that they consulted with faculty leaders, but didn't necessarily let the faculty hold a vote on whether to start offering MOOCs" (p. 2). One solution proposed in a letter drafted by 58 Harvard faculty members is to put together a committee to watch over the ethical issues related to edX (Jaschik, 2013). The letter recommends that the committee be comprised solely of faculty actively teaching. Considering the changing landscape and the technological advances making MOOCs a viable consideration, input from faculty committees can provide a balance to the administrative actions.

Using MOOCs instead of instructor led courses "violates a basic premise of college teaching—that every professor should create and deliver his or her own lectures" (Young, 2013). Even if the numbers prove that basic courses like Algebra are taught just as well via a MOOC, how do departments address the professional integrity questions that will crop up? More discussion is the key. University faculty professional organizations need to address the issues surrounding MOOCs.

If MOOCs are implemented widely in universities, what happens to the struggling students without any resources to turn to? Considerations have to be made in MOOCs to address the struggling and inexperienced student. This will cause a shift in the current model of university education and needs to be thoughtfully addressed before there are vast populations of students dropping out and failing at higher education institutions.

Finally, the quiet groups need to find a voice in the debate before it is too late. University faculty are voicing their concerns and objections. Industry and student bodies may be affected in negative ways if the implementations of MOOCs into the curriculum go forward. Educational access will not be any more available (Anderson and Simpson, 2007). Students would not have any more access to education than they did before. Students need to become vocal on what they will and will not pay for. Is a traditional class worth the same as a pre-packaged MOOC? Is it worth the same tuition and further is it worth the same credit? Industry has a vested interest, as the graduates of these programs will be their new employees. There is a need for applicable skills and knowledge.

References

Anderson, B., & Simpson, M. (2007). Ethical Issues in Online Education. *Open Learning*, *22*(2), 129-138.

Anitha, C., & Harsha, T. S. (2013). Ethical perspectives in open and distance education system. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*. 14(1). P193-201.

Clarke, T. (2013). The advance of the MOOCs (massive open online courses): The impending globalization of business education?, *Education + Training*, Vol. 55 (4/5), 403 – 413.

Blackall, L. (2008). Open Educational Resources and Practices. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language.* 11(4).

Esposito, A. (2012). Research ethics in emerging forms of online learning: issues arising from a hypothetical study on a MOOC. *Electronic J. e-Learning*,*10*(3), 315-325.

Hatcher, T. (2002). Ethics and HRD: A New Approach to Leading Responsible Organizations. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Jaschik, S. (2013). Inside higher ed: Harvard professors consider MOOC ethics. *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved from: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/inside-higher-ed-harvard-profs-consider-mooc-ethics/2004244.article

Kolowich, S. (2013a). Faculty Backlash Grows Against Online Partnerships. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: http://chronicle.com.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/article/Faculty-Backlash-Grows-Against/139049/

Kolowich, S. (2013b). MOOC professors claim no responsibility for how courses are used. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/mooc-professors-claim-no-responsibility-for-how-courses-are-used/43881

Kolowich, S. (2013c). Why professors at San Jose State won't use a Harvard Professor's MOOC. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Professors-at-San-Jose/138941/

Malesic, J. (2013). A catholic case against MOOCs. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: http://chronicle.com.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/article/A-Catholic-Case-Against-MOOCs/141611/

May, L. (1996). The socially responsive self: Social theory and professional ethics. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Parr, C. (2013). Will Moocs fail to give students help they need? *Times Higher Education. Retrieved from*: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/will-moocs-fail-to-give-students-help-they-need/2001478.article

Phelan, L. (2012). Politics, practices, and possibilities of open educational resources. *Distance Education.* 33(2), 279–282.

Philosophy Department of San Jose State University. (2013). An open letter to professor Michael Sandel from the Philosophy department at SJSU. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retreived from: http://chronicle.com/article/The-Document-an-Open-Letter/138937/

Robbins, J. (2013). The Ethics of MOOCs. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from: www.insidehighered.com/blogs/sounding-board/ethics-moocs

Ruggiero, V.R. (2003). Thinking critically about ethical issues, (8th ed.). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.

Sandel, M., Bass, A.T., & Bass, R.M. (2013). Michael Sandel responds. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: http://chronicle.com/article/Michael-Sandel-Responds/139021/

Willems, J., & Bossu, C. (2012). Equity considerations for open educational resources in the glocalization of education. *Distance Education*, 33(2), 185-199.

Young, J. R. (2013). Learning from big business. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: chronicle.com/article/learning-from-big-business/13881

Lessons Learned

MOOCs, are they open and free or are they distance education for a massive audience? Phelan (2012) pointed out one of the most important point, I believe. MOOCs original intent is being overlooked. Originally they were intended to share knowledge with the world as an open and free resource. I feel like higher education can quickly fall down the slippery slope. Will the profession of knowledgeable college professor go away? Great caution needs to be given here, the need to save a dollar here and there cannot supersede the need for a unique educational experience.

Without some checks and balances I can see a future where higher degrees are offered online and graded by computers with algorithms. The interactive learning process will go away and education will be homogenous and will lack diversity. Essentially, an assembly line process for higher education will take over, resulting in decreased original thought and no new ideas. Every single MBA graduate will learn the exact same curriculum and think the exact same way. Problem solving skills will take a dive as all entire industries will be taught the very same strategies with no room or opportunities for new ideas. This may seem a bit extreme but I do not think you can understate the greed and need to pursue cost savings in any industry, higher education is not left out of that model.