

Position papers for European cooperation on MOOCs.

Overview of position papers on the opportunities and characteristics for European cooperation as presented during the HOME conference in Porto November 2014





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MOOC didactics Matters. A hands-on vision for MOOCs and Connected Learning Practices in Europe by Friederike Siller⁽¹⁾ & Jöran Muuß-Merholz⁽²⁾

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Abstract: Demand for MOOCs across Europe both among academics and practitioners is high. Our Interest is in bringing up ideas for conceptualizing MOOCs that focus on the learner and the learning community tending to put lower priority on instructional aspects instead promoting pedagogical approaches to use digital chances for problem-oriented learning, interest-driven learning and collaboration. The pMOOC format introduced in this paper puts collaborative online projects in the center of learning. Openness is described by four factors (1) Enrolment, (2) Licensing/OER, (3) Infrastructure, (4) and Pedagogics. Conclusions are that Open Learning Initiatives in Europe have an immense chance for the support of the development of competencies among its learners by bringing practitioners from the field together with students and academia. Therefore MOOCs have to value the diversity of its learners and help learners to develop digital literacies and connecting practices online.

For many learners not only in Europe but the whole world, using the Internet has become a vital part of our everyday life. We follow our needs and interests when going online, communicate with others and take advantage of the wide availability of information. At least to a specific degree most of us not only retrieve information but we also create, remix, post and share information online. We value the importance of gateways such as search engines, learning management systems and other services tending to offer a central access point to provide and also manage information for learners. These are excellent starting points and offer broad access to informational, educational and engaging content. *But when we are asked to point out to the chances, the possibilities, and also the requirements for being a learner and citizen in digital society, we need to emphasize that learning has to take place in the internet as a whole, not within a 'walled garden'.* Collaboration and informal peer learning, which we assume as being key aspects for learning, quickly come to a limit e.g. in the discussion forum of a LMS. Things do however get interesting when we glance at those places in the digital jungle where subjects are when online in their everyday lives – no matter whether for formal or informal educational reasons. When arranging learning settings in the internet it is not less than the learner's diversity and plurality visible e.g. via social media, digital tools, blogs and websites that have to be taken into account. A concept for MOOC platforms for multi-cultural Europe that shall also function as an invitation to at least potentially ALL Europeans to join in regardless of e.g. age, region, digital fluency or educational background needs to take off from diversity. So it is not about building a new hotel for learners to come in and stay, it is about a journey from the "teachers" to the learners and the inevitable task for them to find ways of smoothly tying learners together to form and build a community of learners. There is a trump card embedded in MOOCs that is the possibility to invite people internationally to a community that shares the same interest! How better can a sound basis for learning be than being led by interest? Of course, challenges are high as we – to mention just one - have to rethink and redefine formal and non-formal education and the demarcation line between both is increasingly about to blur.

There are indeed many ways to conceptualize MOOCs for Europe. We propose a focus on (a) didactics and pedagogy in the context of lifelong learning and (b) communities among learners and community-building elements that deal gently with the cultural, personal and social interactions of its diverse members. What is needed is a shared, European effort to develop standards for open learning in a MOOC format that among others refers to these two aspects in central positions. And let us note right here: A European approach to MOOCs should not solely consider the best and effective instruction of teaching and learning as e.g. getting to know the "learning material"; it is and should be our aim to help learners develop digital literacy in a way that makes them strong

participants of digital and connecting practices to enhance their empowerment to be responsible citizens of Europe⁸.

The didactic side of MOOCs

Due to the rapid growth of large MOOC platforms, a debate about learning and digital media was sparked at enormous speed. New actors are involved. And maybe it was and is for the first time that eLearning via MOOCs is offered some 'mainstreaming' in formal institutions of education. The 'hype' around MOOCs, the prospect of working business models and positive public appearance for MOOC hosts in higher education seem to have helped. Currently, MOOCs prompt universities and other educational institutions to either back out or get started. You have to have a position in this debate. So which horse to bet on? It is, of course, neither nor. We can however aim at better shaping the theoretical and practical needs and digital opportunities for subjects and groups by open online courses in the education sector.

The differences between xMOOCs and cMOOCs have been discussed at large (e.g. DBIS 2013). For Europe in particular, it is still quite unsolved which model of higher education pedagogy MOOCs will apply on the long run. The large MOOC platforms have been criticized for paying only little recognition to the learner. Peer-to-peer learning, interest-driven learning and adequate appreciation for collaboration within MOOCs might be jeopardized and underpart compared to the interest in the 'M' ('Massive') of the courses. "The internet is an amazing place for learning. But recent high-profile forays into online learning for higher education seem to replicate a traditional lecture-based, course-based model of campus instruction, instead of embracing the peer-to-peer connected nature of the web"⁹. (*Reclaim Open Initiative*).

The authors of this position paper indeed do approach MOOCs in a way that it is not primarily about instruction. Rather than instructional teaching methods via a video-based delivery of information to a high quantity of course participants a didactic model is in need to be promoted that sets the focus on the learner. By offering e.g. case-based or problem-based MOOCs participants work on relevant domain-specific or cross-disciplinary tasks and projects. We hence rely on constructivism as learning theory behind as this is how the digital options for peer-to-peer learning, informal, connected and interest-driven learning can come into practice. At the latest since Seymour Papert's *Mindstorms* in the 1980s multiple different approaches loosely tied to a constructivist perspective on learning is on hand encouraging the implementation of computer technology in education. Among those is e.g. learning by design (Kolodner et al.), communities of practice (Lave/Wenger), case-based learning and problem-based learning (Jonassen et al.). There is no reason to jump over these accomplishments in didactics and learning theory when introducing MOOCs in Higher Education and elsewhere. That is especially valid for open online learning claiming to take connected learning practices and online communities for learning serious. This on the premises, MOOCs have a great potential to change and enhance higher education pedagogy substantially.

Give Europe a "p": The pMOOC Format

Let us showcase in more depth possible implementation strategies for MOOCs from a didactic perspective. We played around with the letter "P" to illustrate our hands-on vision to MOOC.¹⁰

⁸ It is our experience that participants of MOOCs not only value the domain-specific learning outcomes but also the exploration of digital learning tools (Siller et al. 2014).

⁹ <http://open.media.mit.edu/about-us/> (13.9.2014)

¹⁰ These ideas also are the author's result of conducting two project-based MOOCs. At the first one, in summer 2013, more than 250 participants collaborated in the course Good Apps for Children. Within three weeks, participants developed a set of criteria to review apps for children and set up a database with app-reviews. In addition, some participants produced podcasts interviewing children about their favorite apps. In order to

P as in Problem. Participants are challenged to work on authentic tasks and ill-structured problems. They start defining the topics they want to work on as a community. The ‘problems’ are relevant to the learning community and refer to the MOOC title. As participants range from different countries, cultures, ages, backgrounds and languages multiple approaches and perspectives exist when trying to solve a problem. It is the arguments, the disputes and maybe the conflicts that participants value when exchanging their ideas to solve the problems in the community.

P as in Project. Participants work on domain-specific or cross-disciplinary projects (e.g. “create a video tutorial to show us how to save the world”). They submit their own ‘work packages’ or choose one that fits their interests. Usually learners group together, however some prefer to work individually.

Some regularly claim for peer-assistance while others like to lurk or comment frequently. The doors are open so people can jump in and help out or pick the type of task they feel comfortable with while leaving others work on other things to do in order to finish the project. Instructional scaffolding and technical support is offered 24/7. At the end participants meet in the online showroom to present and discuss their project results.

P as in Production. Participants leave the course having produced and published several digital artefacts (e.g. text, video, podcast, mind map, database, wiki). There are multiple ways of contributing ranging from the individual learner, the cooperative work of the learning group and the collaborative work of the community. The work and discussions within the courses are public by default. The digital products document the work of the participants and are there for everyone interested from outside the course. Consequently, artefacts stay public after the end of the course under a license that allows sharing, re-mixing and re-usage.

P as in Participant-Driven. Learners can choose between different levels of involvement and different types of activities. They can leave the structure proposed by the host of the course and continue on their own. It is easy for people with little technical knowledge to participate. English, Spanish or French often are the official course languages. However, learning groups in other European languages have formed as well as groups with learners from different countries.

P as in Partners for Learning. The course is crowded with learners from all over - students, academia and practitioners, young and old, female and male, digital literates and those new to digital technologies participating from all European cardinal points. As many practitioners participate the course also serves as a network to find collaborators and supporters for the own work. The internationality of the course is highly attractive to enhance learner’s professional network. Students appreciate the proximity to the ‘experts’ from different professional fields. Many participants use the results of the course for their further professional life and often use and ask the MOOC community still being loosely connected via diverse social media tools.

Opening Up MOOCs

Openness seems to be fundamental to all MOOC concepts. Obviously, because this is what the first O in MOOC stands for. So far, most of the time the O referred to the Open Enrolment – everyone can take part (though that does not mean at no cost). Recently, one can observe however that some MOOCs try to target specific groups, as e.g. from teacher education and therefore set up some sort

accomplish this, app. 50 teams of mostly four group members formed and started working facing the challenge to match and merge their work with the results of the other groups. This demanding process was supported by scaffolding via e.g. peer-to-peer feedback, peer leading, peer reviewing, coach mentoring and video conferences with the organizing team. A vital role had the course community on Google+. Here participants shared experiences and information, gave each other support and organized peer-to-peer structures. It was interesting to observe that many groups started to leave offered course structures and organized themselves online and offline at places they felt comfortable with (ranging from Facebook and WhatsApp to email, phone and cafeteria).

of restricted access. This might be at least partial a result of didactic considerations and thoughts. I mean, what do you do as a teacher in higher education with a 'massive' learning group? As soon as you make the smallest step away from a video-based delivery of your lecture in a MOOC, you do have a very confusing situation when you try to figure out who actually wants to learn something in your course. Putting this aside, advocates for open education are claiming that open does indeed mean much more than open for everyone to enroll (see *Reclaim Open Initiative* 2013). As this paper focusses on MOOCs more from a didactic and pedagogical perspective, we find the following aspects from 'open' for relevant to discuss. (1) *Open Enrollment* offers the explicit chance to bring together formal learning groups e.g. from Higher Education and Professional Development with practitioners from the field. For Higher Education, this is fabulous. The development of competencies is only partial the acquisition of domain-specific knowledge. It is likewise the ability to perform and transfer your knowledge in real-life. MOOCs offer a high potential to discharge universities while connecting their students to people from their professional field (and beyond). (2) *Licensing and Open Educational Resources (OER)*. The content and resources provided and even more important the materials and artefacts developed throughout a course can be published under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) which explicitly encourages further processing and use. If that is the case course participants have to agree right away with the registration that the results of the individual, cooperative and collaborative work are published under a CC BY License. It is only then that everyone can reuse, revise, remix and redistribute the course results. That would be a big step forward for the allocation of Open Educational Resources, however, that also would keep many potential interested person and parties away (think e.g. about a topic like entrepreneurship) (3) *Open Infrastructure*. Digital resources and practices do not have to be incorporated via a single platform. One can argue against a central platform referring to the digital practices of learners which we already described in the introduction. Furthermore, a European way for MOOCs could mean to follow a design principle that upholds open formats, standards, and software. Then there would be no 100% closed shop, instead some sort of Open API would allow connections to other projects and platforms via e.g. EU partner networks. (4) *Open Pedagogics*. Open learning in Europe should claim to allow different styles in participating and contributing for every participant. In doing so open course organization reflects the pedagogical perspective of an *inner openness for learning* allowing a high degree of freedom for the learner.

Connected learning practices among Europe – a Conclusion

Digital technology offers the chance of connecting people. They can choose to connect e.g. based on shared interests. A basic principle for learning is that it is social no matter whether offline or online. MOOCs can play a vital role in serving as a professional network based in a shared interest. Then they can claim to also being a social movement, for it is about connected learning practices. Learners can be very active players in the digital world, and chances are fairly good that the artefacts they present and share online will find an audience. These audiences can be individuals (my neighbor, my hero) and it can be institutions. Wisely put together, institutions of higher education (and beyond) throughout Europe could be cooperating in MOOCs and thereby make the learners in its institutions visible outside its own lecture hall.

Our educational systems in Europe do not need MOOCs for information retrieval. We already have the internet for that. So MOOCs are nothing fundamentally new in the field of teaching and learning with digital media, but they can offer an attractive space for learners to explore digital media for learning in a connected way. It is crucial though that MOOCs focus on the learner and learning community rather than on the delivery of facts. Communities unite people who are curious and interested, often enthusiastic and passionate about a specific topic. So as MOOCs are so strongly obliged to peer-to-peer learning, collaboration and interest-driven learning there are immense

chances not only for informal learning but also and especially for institutions of formal education. It is an interesting fact that participants of a MOOC hardly know each other in person. Still, the network offered to subjects in a MOOC can be a very exclusive starting point to match a person's interest with that of others internationally. That's a strong anchor for learning in a global world eager to find connections to each other – in formal and non-formal ways.

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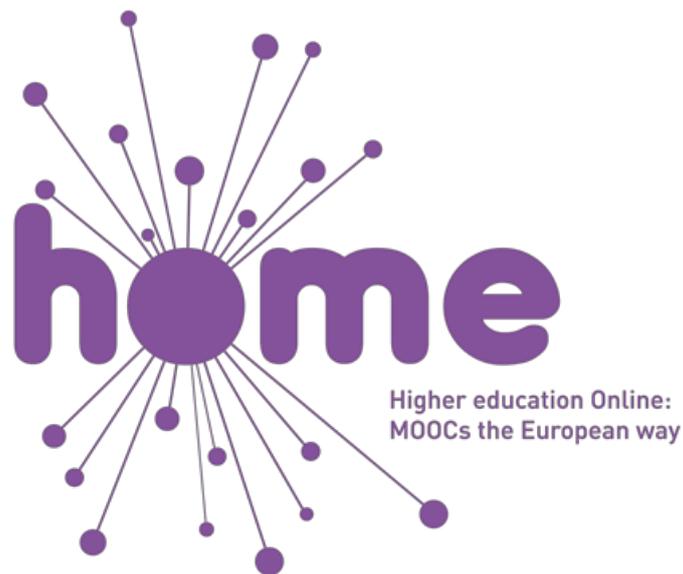
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