

Will universities survive the e-learning revolution?

Selective synthesis and personal conclusions of the 13th Ethical Forum
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Prologue

Ever since their medieval birth, universities have been communities of scholars and students sharing a place and a time for the sake of teaching and learning. 21st century technology has made physical proximity unnecessary for instantaneous verbal communication and multiplied the ways in which learning can be organized and supported. Sophisticated MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) constitute only one, among the most glamorous, of the many manners in which this potential is being exploited.

Can this and other forms of e-learning be expected to keep growing at the expense of traditional face to face teaching? Will they gradually turn the university into some form of Open University? How will they affect the role and status of local university professors and their relationship to their students? How can they be coupled with a fair and efficient assessment of student performance? Will they lead to the equalization of higher education thanks to costless access to up to date high-quality courses? And/or will they deepen the gap between top and peripheral universities: whereas the former would gain attractiveness by increasing the fame of their star professors and mass revenues by delivering certificates for the courses they provide, the latter would be turned into their sheer intellectual subsidiaries?

For short: does e-learning provide a fantastic way of making high-quality higher education available at all times, at all ages and in all places? Or will it irreversibly undermine some essential aspects of university education and life, inseparable from a shared space and time, while further boosting global inequalities?

These are the many questions guest speakers and audience were invited to think about at the 13th Ethical Forum of the University Foundation.¹ It quickly became clear that the real subject of the day was a three-dimensional space, with the MOOCs in the strict sense occupying one of the angles. The first dimension relates to the "M": how massive a Massive Open Online course is can vary greatly: from tens of thousands of students scattered around the world who stick it out to the end all the way down to a captive audience of a couple of dozens local students obliged by their professor to watch

¹ The present text is an edited version of the oral conclusions improvised at the close of the Forum, on 20 November 2014. I am particularly grateful to Michel Gevers and Georges Van der Perre, who master-minded the event itself and its connection with the "Denkers" programme of the Flemish Academy of Sciences, selected first rate contributors and framed the event in such a way that it could provide a well informed and fruitful discussion of the most fundamental issues raised by the e-learning revolution. I am also most grateful to all speakers and to several other participants for many valuable insights, only some of which are explicitly echoed in this selective and subjective synthesis.

him on a screen. The second dimension relates to the first “O”: how *open* a Massive Open Online course is can also vary significantly, for example in terms of constraints motivated by privacy concerns on the public identification of students who participate actively in the course, with a major impact on potential interaction between students and on data mining for the purpose of educational research. Finally, the third dimension relates to the second “O”: how *online* a Massive Open Online course is can vary greatly, depending on the extent to which the online aspect is *blended*, i.e. supplemented by face-to-face interaction in the auditorium or the class room.

1. Community

What are the most fundamental issues that arise as our higher education system is tempted to move closer to the MOOCs angle of this three-dimensional space? The first one relates to *community*. Decennia later, I remember vividly the charm of belonging to a real community of scholars and students. In my Oxford College, even graduate students had to ask permission from their “moral tutor” if they wished to spend a night more than ten miles from Carfax (the town centre) at any point during the three times eight weeks of every year of their compulsory residence period. You saw the dons (the fellows of the College) and your fellow students at lunch and dinner in Hall, you ran against them among the shelves of the cosy College Library, you met them at regular sherry or garden parties, and you participated in an intense social life largely structured by segregated Common Rooms and college sports teams.

Thanks to proximity and simultaneity, this is what you could really call an academic community, creating tight intellectual and personal bonds that may last for life. MOOCs, by contrast, entail what Diana Laurillard aptly described as “the irretrievable loss of shared time and place”. Is this a real loss? Undoubtedly. Is it worth paying? Yes, I have been persuaded that it is. Why? For one fundamental reason: our higher education will need to be increasingly designed primarily for life-long learning rather than for a few cohorts of young adults. Unlike the latter, those involved in the former cannot plausibly be expected to study full time in a shared location.

Why should we expect such a shift? Why should we promote it? For the three interrelated reasons usefully listed by Olivier De Schutter: the speed of technological change, the instability of the international division of labour and the growing discontinuity of individual careers. And also, arguably, for a fourth one: the rise in life expectancy. As Diana Laurillard and Peter Sloep emphasized and documented in light of their personal Open University experience, any major new step in information and communication technologies was eagerly seized by people involved in continued education, and MOOCs will not be an exception. For people wishing to benefit from higher education without relinquishing their professional and family obligations, commonality of space and time is generally a luxury they cannot afford.

As life-long higher learning takes precedence over starting-block tertiary education, universities will need to abandon the model of the medieval *universitas* of teachers and learners from which any deviation required an excuse, and embrace wholeheartedly a technological potential that would arguably provide only a marginal improvement for a starting-block audience but offers a mind-boggling tool for life-long learning. What universities should adopt as their ideal, in this perspective, is no longer to offer their students the temporary proximity of useful books and caring tutors but to enable students worldwide to appropriate, use, process throughout their lives the ever

growing mass of knowledge that is available at little or no cost on the internet. This mass of knowledge is incomparably broader and richer than anything the best library and the best tutors of the best college of the world could ever have provided to their privileged students. E-learning is essential to exploit its potential to the full far beyond a small circle of privileged people in privileged countries.

2. Quality

This directly leads to a second issue: *quality*. Throughout the Forum, speakers have stressed that the effectiveness of MOOCs, i.e. their quality as a teaching method, is enhanced if they are coupled with face-to-face local interaction. Why is this the case? Not because the reliable evaluation of student performance necessarily requires some physical presence: Pierre Dillenbourg assures us that online student identification will soon be safer than identification in our examination rooms. Rather because because the effective assimilation of what is available online works better if it is locally “orchestrated” (Laudrillard) by teachers one can talk to, and perhaps also, as pointed out by a participant from the European Commission, because some types of skill or competence (as opposed to sheer knowledge) can only be learned through face-to-face interaction. Optimal onlineness, in other words is not maximal onlineness. It is blended learning.

Beyond this consensus, disagreements subsist regarding the advantages of onlineness for the online part of the learning process. On the one hand, live interaction with class mates and teachers who are real persons can make a difference to the quality of the learning process. As forcefully put by Bart Pattyn, an extremely valuable part of the pedagogical relationship of connivance and trust is unavoidably lost when teachers address an impersonal camera and students watch them miles away on an impersonal screen.

On the other hand, Diana Laudrillard pointed out that students are less inhibited on the web than in the class, and Olivier De Schutter mentioned the pedagogical interest of an online forum for a course on human rights with participants from all over the world. More generally, the sheer fact that a MOOC is durably visible by anyone, from the teacher’s multinational peer group to his/her rector, immediate colleagues and children, is bound to elicit greater effort into a MOOC than into a course that is attended just once and behind closed doors by a handful of students, or at most a few hundreds. Moreover, owing to self selection and selection by users, the average pedagogical talent of the teachers who go and remain online is bound to be higher than average.

3. Equality

This takes us to a third theme: inequality, and first of all inequality within institutions. Only some teachers will provide courses online and a subset of them will be particularly successful at it. This will lead, Bart Pattyn argued, to a salient hierarchy with a new upper class of potentially arrogant star professors. I believe he is right. Worse still (certainly in his view), the easy availability of quantitative data will quickly lead to the computation of more or less sophisticated indices, just as happened in the case of research: number of students registered for a course, number of students completing it, ratio of the latter to the former, rate of increase of this ratio, etc. And once such indices are at hand, rankings are around the corner, with all the usual perverse effects in terms

of neglect of the other dimensions of our jobs that do not enjoy the same level of salience. All this may well be true, but it is not as negative as it sounds. As we well know, such an academic star system already exists, but it is dominated by research performance (or whatever is being measured under this label). All things considered, therefore, the extension of stardom to good teachers may help correct a regrettable imbalance. It may induce a long overdue redirection of valuation and motivation towards the teaching part of our academic job. If you want to be famous — and useful — beyond the walls of your own institution, you will no longer need to neglect your teaching.

What about inequality between institutions? Some participants suggested that MOOCs will reduce it. Most universities, they argue, are bound to provide first-rate teaching at some level and in some domain, and MOOCs will enable them to show it to the world. They may not be able to boast top researchers, but teaching, possibly only at basic levels and in a subset of subjects, is something all of them can be expected to do well. Perhaps, but is this not a short-sighted view? The reason why top universities attract top researchers is that having top researchers is very visible, which makes it easy for them to spot them and important for them to snatch them. Thanks to MOOCs, it is not only top researchers that will become very visible, but also top teachers. And there is therefore every reason to expect the magnet mechanism to start operating far more than now in this dimension too, thereby deepening further the existing hierarchy.

More important than the issues of inequality between the individuals and institutions that provide higher education, however, is the issue of inequality between the latter's (potential) recipients. MOOCs, Guillaume Miquelard-Garnier argued, are good for a minority of better students, but worse than traditional teaching for all others. Various statistics were cited at the Forum about the educational and economic bias among the beneficiaries of MOOC courses. Student Sarah Cardinal's experience at the Hainaut campus of the University of Louvain is instructive in this respect. She mentioned that she spent over six hours watching each weekly instalment of the MOOC she followed, as she kept pressing the pause button in order to take notes and better absorb the material. She could do so comfortably in her home environment. What about students without a personal computer or without an internet connection? There is a computer room at their disposal on campus, she explained, and access to each week's MOOC instalment is thereby guaranteed, but — needless to say — not quite as comfortably as in the tranquillity and cosiness of one's home, with a good computer and a good connection.

This local experience provides an insight into a mechanism through which the generalization of MOOCs may tend to increase inequalities between students. But it should not make us lose sight of the broader picture. In less developed countries, according to Olivier De Schutter, the easy availability of high-quality courses shows signs of generating more demand for higher education and of triggering a pressure for more investment in the material infrastructure required to benefit fully from what is made available in this way. More generally, as awareness and mobilization of the new technical possibilities spread, the wish and capacity to take advantage of the supply of MOOCs and less ambitious forms of e-learning should quickly trickle down, and — largely but not only thanks to continued education — less advantaged sections of the population, locally and worldwide, should gradually become their main beneficiaries.

4. Diversity

Last but by no means not least present at our Forum, there is the issue of *diversity*. Note, first of all, that the spreading of MOOCs is bound to boost and depress diversity at the same time. It will boost diversity in the sense that the variety of courses available at any particular institution will grow as a result of no longer being limited to the local supply of teachers. But it will depress diversity in the sense that the distinctiveness of the various institutions will pale as a result of a growing overlap between what is available in each of them. Average local diversity will swell for exactly the same reason as inter-local diversity will shrink. This forces us to think — as we also need to do when we say that we value linguistic or cultural diversity — about whether it is local or inter-local diversity that we find most important.

What is denounced as a threat generated by the MOOCs, however, is probably less the shrinking of inter-local academic diversity in itself, than the specific form it takes: “Americanization”. Pierre Dillenbourg tried to convince us that this is not what is happening, by showing on a striking map how many people located in North America have been following MOOCs produced by the Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), whether taught in English or in French. The map persuasively showed that an EPFL-ification of the world is also on the way. What it did not show, however, is how much the EPFL had to teach in the American way (not just linguistically) in order to achieve the level of penetration shown. Nor did the map show how little trans-Atlantic MOOC travelling there was in the East-West direction, notwithstanding the EPFL’s impressive achievements, compared to the truly massive West-East traffic. The accusation of Americanization, therefore, cannot be so easily dismissed. Nor can the even more damaging accusation of neo-colonialism, as proffered for example by the South African authorities when they decided not to join the MOOCs initiative.

Yet, the strength of these accusations should not be overstated. For what “Americanizing” or “neo-colonial” MOOCs are competing with and at risk of erasing often does not consist of valuable cultural specificities, but rather of no less “American” or “colonial” knowledge, simply outdated in both content and form. To the extent that this is what is going on, it must be regarded less as a reduction of diversity than as an improvement in quality, by the very standards of what is being replaced. Analogously, the transnational convergence of view that Olivier De Schutter said could be observed in the forum of his Human Rights MOOC may admittedly be interpreted as a loss of diversity, but it is arguably not one that should be deplored.

Nonetheless, there are losses of diversity that may be regarded as regrettable. For example, in the French-language Political Science MOOC which Sarah Cardinal followed, any parochial reference to Belgium’s institutions and political life had to be omitted, so as to make it intelligible and no less relevant to students located anywhere in the *francophonie*. More fundamentally, there is the loss induced by the tendency to adopt the same language as the medium of instruction. To be truly massive, a MOOC cannot be taught in Danish, Dutch or even French. It needs to be taught in English, with reading lists often consisting exclusively of English publications. In some domains this is anyway unavoidable as all the relevant literature is in English. In other domains, the expansion of MOOCs will further increase the overexposure of what is written and written about in English relative to what is written and written about in other languages. This will involve a genuine and no doubt regrettable loss.

Epilogue

Decrease in community in some sense, in some aspects of quality, in equality within and between institutions, in diversity between institutions and countries, these are all likely effects of the spreading of MOOCs which one might sensibly deplore. Are these just collateral damages of an important step forward or are they decisive objections that justify fierce resistance? In the light of the Forum's rich discussion, some core elements of which I tried to summarize above, I incline towards the former. Why? Essentially, as explained above, because of the great importance I attach to the development of lifelong learning.

For MOOCs to play their role well, they do not need to be very massive, nor to be entirely open. And they certainly do not need to be exclusively online. They will constantly need to be designed and redesigned, blended and re-blended. Until when? Until when we get them right? We shall never get them right, if only because what is right for one subject for one audience at one time is not right for another subject, a different audience, at a later time. This should not stop us experimenting, reflecting on new developments and discussing them in the light of our ultimate objectives — as we did at this Forum. But whatever unexpected new forms technological innovation will give to our teaching, they must never be allowed to spoil the pleasure we take when we manage to get our pupils, strong or weak, to grasp what we sometimes had a very hard time understanding ourselves.

This is the pleasure that keeps making our job as teachers — all the way from the *kleuterschool* to the *université des aînés* — one of the world's most wonderful jobs. This is the pleasure that must enable our universities to survive all upheavals, including the e-learning revolution.