

HYBRID IDENTITIES & MOOCS



THE IMPLICATIONS OF MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES FOR MULTICULTURAL CIVIC EDUCATION



But this not just about students sitting alone in their living rooms, working through problems. Around each one of our courses, a community of students had formed, a global community of people around a shared intellectual endeavor.

—*Coursera Co-Founder Daphne Koller, June 2012 TED Talk*

Culture alive is always on the run.

—*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*

In outlining educational progressivism, John Dewey underscored the instrumental role of schooling in democratic life and framed education as “a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness” (Dewey, 1897). Foregrounding the relationship between student and curriculum, he presented a pedagogical framework that privileged the child and his experiences and placed the teacher within a facilitative role; the resulting experiential education model inspired theories of active inquiry guiding many contemporary primary, secondary, and higher education institutions.

Similarly, ongoing debates regarding civic education call upon the Deweyan assertion that schools, as community fix-

tures, must teach students ‘how to live.’ In discussing methods for educating citizens, Will Kymlicka notes that the “dispositions, virtues, and loyalties” central to the democratic project constitute not “an isolated subset of the curriculum,” but instead frame educational content and encourage interactivity (Kymlicka, 2001, p. 293).

The potential of interactivity has come to dominate discussions of technology, pervasive in both public and private spheres and increasingly present in learning environments. Technology’s capacity to facilitate distance learning promises to maximize education accessibility, offering students worldwide the opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge while engaging with the ‘social consciousness’ of a collective community of learners.

The popularity of virtual learning environments like Moodle and online hosting of course content has grown rapidly since the 1990s, and analyses of massive open online courses (MOOCs) litter predictions for the future of higher education. Indeed, following the March 2013 “Online Learning and the Future of Residential Learning” summit, hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, *New York Times* opinion columnist Thomas Friedman asserted that “the MOOCs revolution... is here and is real.”

MOOCs, delivered through platforms like Coursera, edX, and Udacity, offer content from well-known universities and professors, at no cost, to students across the

globe.¹ Driven by the connectivist principles of autonomy, interactivity/connectedness, diversity, and openness, MOOCs serve thousands of participants and “are open in the sense that they are free and participants are expected to openly share their expertise, knowledge, understanding, and ideas” (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012, p. 126).

Although they deliver thematically coherent material in instructional videos and supplemental materials, these online courses demand that users “manage their own learning” and take individualized approaches to interacting with the material, instructors, technological interface, and other student users. While unable to perfectly replace traditional in-person institutions, MOOCs adopt the Deweyan legacy of student-centered experiential education.

Humanities-based courses in particular rely for success on interaction between students, including assignment peer reviews (as opposed to the automated grading utilized in programming, modeling, and calculations-based courses) and conceptual discussion. Using three Coursera offerings—“Aboriginal Worldviews and Education,” “Introduction to Engineering Mechanics,” and “Internet History, Technology, and Security”—as occasional case studies, I will suggest that by appropriating a networked learning model and the core principles of connectivism, allowing for the concurrent deconstruction and (re)establishment of user identities, and providing a space for the diffusion of trig-

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gers of difference, such online courses can implement and bolster multicultural civic education.

Networked Learning and Connectivist Theory

A response in part to the inadequacies of prior learning theories, connectivism—associated predominantly with the ‘digital age’—defines “learning” as a “network phenomenon,” or “the ability to construct and traverse connections” (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012, p. 125). Within this framework, students draw on their own experiences to better understand the links between learning communities, or “nodes,” within a resource network that is, much like identity, in constant flux.²

While the connectivist approach to education begins with the individual, it relies on core principles that are predominantly relational: (1) knowledge depends upon diverse opinions; (2) learning is best described as a process of connecting information sources; (3) “capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known”; (4) connections are vital to the ongoing learning process; (5) “ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill”; (6) current knowledge is the goal of activities; (7) decision-making is a learning process (Siemens, 2005).

According to Tschofen and Mackness (2012), MOOCs have served as a “testing

ground” for connectivism, providing an experimental setting for new forms of active learning. Within a MOOC interface, “learners may transverse networks through multiple domains..., allowing for interdisciplinary connections” and connections across cultural discourses (Kop & Kill, 2008, p. 2). For this reason, online courses lend themselves to multicultural education, which seeks to affirm cultural pluralism and stresses the importance of “cultural diversity, alternative life styles, native cultures, universal human rights, social justice, equal opportunity, and equal distribution of power” (Leistyna, 2002, p. 12).

MOOC platforms often include such visions of equal distribution (in the form of education accessibility) in their mission statements: Coursera claims its goal is general empowerment of individuals to improve their lives and the lives of others in their communities, indicating awareness of the interface’s civic potential, and edX seeks to “build a global community of online students” and “reach out to students of all ages, means, and nations, and to deliver these teachings from a faculty who reflect the diversity of its audience,” according to its online mission statement.

By implementing a positive feedback loop of knowledge creation, MOOC environments permit everyone to “get a say” and stimulate collaborative problem-solving tools, such as the editable wiki of resources at work in “Internet History,

Technology, and Security,” based at the University of Michigan.

Broadly speaking, these online communities are rooted not merely in content mastery, but also in critical thinking. If, as Gutmann posits, institutions of higher education sustain democracy “as sanctuaries of nonrepression,” MOOC platforms carry nonrepression to an extreme (perhaps with the caveat that not all ideas expressed within online education forums are intellectually ‘valuable’) (Gutmann, 1999, p. 174). Indeed, she cites the Open University in England—a precursor to online classrooms that sought to maximize higher education accessibility among adults by making available textbooks, television and radio programs, and other audio-visual aids—as a useful addition to democratic education.

Taking critical thinking to be central to the enterprise of a “good liberal citizen,” civic education must, as MOOC platforms do, impart and encourage reflection on “personal and public commitments,” perhaps better defined as the values and actions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ (Macedo, 2000). Because “the good society is not simply marked by toleration and cooperation, but also real (if not violent or destructive) conflict and contestation among communities,” civic education must prescribe not a particular set of cultural convictions,³ but an approach to conflict resolution (Macedo, 2000, p. 246).

The liberal citizen, even with individual beliefs in place or cultural norms

at work, must turn to a critical thinking methodology inlaid with openness to communication. Cultural exchange in a networked learning environment, capable of provoking appreciation of more than superficial differences, builds student communities around pathways of understanding and social responsibility (rather than “freedom of choice” between cultural options). When translated to social participation in a local or national community, the result of this exchange is a “truer vision of toleration, and a more judgmental [i.e., ‘critical-thinking’] form of pluralism” (Macedo, 2000, p. 252).

Civic education, then, is fundamentally compatible with—perhaps even reliant upon—the connectivist philosophy that frames MOOC development. Prioritizing the four principles of networked learning, connectivism amplifies understanding in a virtually unlimited nonlinear space.⁴ Additionally, it accounts for shifts in communicative norms caused by trends like globalization and technology integration, often poorly reflected in traditional learning environments. As well as enabling new user relationships to space and time, virtualization “implies a reconfiguration of the boundaries between public and private, personal and shared” (Lai & Ball, 2004, p. 27).

Just as culture can never be truly removed from civic education, the private life of an individual will almost always influence his behavior in the space of appearances; the private-public divide becomes a version of Kymlicka’s “myth of ethnocultural neutrality” as public interaction increasingly takes place in forums considered “private.” While the traditional student “alternates between a private home and public classroom... [t]he online student transforms a private home into a shared public classroom upon logging in” (Lai & Ball, 2004, p. 27).

The MOOC user gains an education transferable to both non-virtual and other virtual arenas, noteworthy given the growing role of technological mediation (whether of news dissemination or entertainment) in liberal societies. His educational interface represents an exercise in democratic education beyond the logistic and theoretical limitations of traditional schooling: “A single response can be as long as the student wants it to be without being interrupted... Online, a discussion facilitator can let various threads continue indefinitely” (Lai & Ball, 2004, p. 28).

Cultural Hybridity, Self-Creation, and Nation-Building

In his exploration of the role of public

schools in the democratic state, Stephen Macedo presents two primary goals for children’s education, both more aptly applied to computer-mediated spaces. In asserting that the “shopping mall high school... stands for mutual respect for students of different religious, racial, and cultural backgrounds,” Macedo seems to assume that physical juxtaposition of difference entrenches respect of the other. However, that the “whole society is there” (Macedo, 2000, pp. 232-234) does not automatically imply meaningful interaction among its representatives.

Primary and secondary schools often lend themselves to self-segregation, with the interaction between groups characterized by civility (if that) rather than mutual respect. The involuntary and didactic nature of schooling minimizes the real availability of autonomy and cross-cultural civic participation, calling into question Macedo’s second assertion that common public schools are a good vehicle for “freeing children from the inevitable limitations of the particular families and communities into which they are born” (Macedo, 2000, p. 237).

While a child’s ability to make truly meaningful and autonomous cultural decisions is questionable—Spinner-Halev insists that children “not raised with any values” and encouraged to choose freely between them are a much greater concern than children indoctrinated by parents or cultures—the value of educational autonomy for an adult citizen is very high. Given that students’ enrollment in a humanities-based MOOC presupposes (varying) willingness to think critically and often requires formal agreement with respect-based usage policies, the learning interface operates much like a multicultural liberal democracy.

While government-run primary and secondary education seeks to facilitate the creation of a common civic identity, higher education and adult distance learning fortify this identity by transcending its borders. In *Democratic Education*, Amy Gutmann stresses the importance of improving early education rather than “extending compulsory schooling into college,” but notes that

... schooling does not stop serving democracy... when it ceases to be compulsory... Learning how to think carefully and critically about political problems, to articulate one’s views ... before people with whom one disagrees is a form of moral education to which young adults are more receptive. (Gutmann, 1999, p. 173)

Less intent than formal university environments on ‘scholarly standards of inquiry,’ MOOC “classrooms” lower the bar-

rier to entry to informed social criticism; threaded discussions and perpetually-open forums complicate the boundaries of “legitimate” inquiry, operating within a paradigm of knowledge exchange whose borders are porous and untidy. In the University of Toronto’s “Aboriginal Worldviews and Education” course, hosted by Coursera, one native Canadian student expressed disappointment with his limited knowledge of Aboriginal Canadian history, illustrating the critical-thinking potential of a MOOC interface:

My ignorance is so obviously blinding to me. Even as a child I was always very interested in Aboriginal peoples and cultures and we did study them in Social Studies. But now I realise we studied in the interests of non-Aboriginals. Of course Hollywood plays an influential role but that’s not a good enough excuse. I guess I’d never thought about it or simply assumed a certain level of accuracy in what we were taught in school. But now, thinking back, what we were taught was so stereotypical and generalised, it shouldn’t have been taught. (“Aboriginal Worldviews” discussion forum)

The student’s observation that “I’d never thought about it or simply assumed a certain level of accuracy” typifies the “intellectual failure [that] morally damages democracy by conveying a false impression that members” of minority groups have not contributed to their respective multicultural democracies, whose histories are written by and for dominant cultures (Gutmann, 1999, p. 305). The combination of course content—in the form of professor lectures, supplementary materials delivered from other perspectives, interactive resources, and academic scholarship—and peer contributions to discussion forums encourages a sort of “insurgent multiculturalism,” destabilizing the dominant discourse and stripping “White supremacy of its legitimacy and authority” (Giroux, 1994, p. 326).

This breed of critical self-consciousness, more common in environments dominated by student-student, rather than student-teacher, interaction, gives life to responsible citizenship. Where “quaint liberalism” falls short by “acknowledging difference” but ultimately stripping discourses of real cultural particularism, critical multiculturalism (and multicultural education) “means understanding, engaging, and transforming diverse histories, cultural narratives, representations, and institutions that produce racism and other forms of discrimination,” rejuvenating the democracy by “reexamining the strengths and limits of its traditions” (Giroux, 1994, 328-335).

Regardless of content, the MOOC experience begins almost invariably with

a discussion thread for introductions, with some courses featuring built-in “Participant Bios” sub-folders. Whereas “face-to-face, students perform and interpret each other’s cultural backgrounds through a variety of mechanisms utilizing many of the senses,” asynchronous online introductions require a process of textualized revealing (Lai & Ball, 2004).

Unlike in a traditional higher education environment, where students typically reside on or near the campus, the students participating in a MOOC hold “geographical location-based cultural identities (e.g., local, regional, national; rural, urban, suburban)” that emerge only through dialogized textual interaction (Lai & Ball, 2004). Similarly, users rely on written cues to perform their own ethnicity, race, religion, class, gender, and sexuality, establishing culture as an ongoing iterative practice that is always multifaceted and unstable.

In Coursera’s “Introduction to Engineering Mechanics,” taught by Dr. Wayne E. Whiteman of the Georgia Institute of Technology, students generally presented brief geographic and occupational descriptions. One student, in a thread entitled “Hi, from Valencia (Spain),” offered:

Hi everyone, I’m from Spain and I’m a Technical Architect specializing in infrastructure. I hope and wish to share this great experience with the other colleagues.

In addition to creating for himself a regional identity (Valencia) situated within that of a nation (Spain), the participant’s use of English suggests a certain level of comfort and proficiency. His status as a “Technical Architect specializing in infrastructure” in part explains his enrollment in the course, used by engineers and engineering students as a supplement to further their careers. The approach to self-revealing in courses with culturally-driven curricula proved more elaborate, with students drawing on personal and family histories and expressing a range of motivations:

I am a U.S. citizen but am originally from Nova Scotia, Canada. I moved to Florida as a child, and as an adult have lived [sic] in New York (USA), Dublin (Ireland), Moscow (Russia), Devon (England), Caracas (Venezuela), and Santiago (Chile). My family is very multicultural, including Chinese, Quebecois, Venezuelan, and White American. I am currently living in the regional capitol of rural area in Chile, and am very interested in how the aboriginal culture here relates to the popular culture, especially because I facilitate creative projects in contexts like public schools and prisons, and I feel like a complete foreigner myself. (“Aboriginal

Worldviews” discussion forum, “Where are you from?” thread)

The author identifies herself as an American citizen, only to immediately complicate the concept of “Americanness” as a cultural category. If, as Bhikhu Parekh writes, the “prevailing view of a national identity should allow for multiple identities” not necessarily at odds, each individual participating in the discussion thread reveals herself as a sort of self-contained multicultural society (Parekh, 2006, p. 231).

For this reason, ascribing a single cultural context of choice to each individual ignores the fact that cultural lines of demarcation are difficult to establish, particularly given that “most individuals rely upon many cultures, not only one, in living their lives” (Gutmann, 1999, p. 304). The post’s author permits the ethnographic split of self into object and subject (other and self, foreign and familiar), favoring “a signifying space of iteration rather than a progressive or linear seriality” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 159). Her professed hybrid identity—and, indeed, the identity of many individuals in contemporary societies—mirrors the connectivist networked learning model, occupying the physical space of a web.⁵

As a 2005 case study of another online university course found, students quickly identify the shortcomings of “essentialized models of national culture,” turning instead to textual performances of cultural fragmentation and newly synthesized identities, like the post author’s description of a “multicultural” family (Macfadyen, 2009). She describes her impetus for enrolling in the course in terms of both instrumental and ideological value; although the MOOC is rooted in studies of Aboriginal Canadians, she recognizes that relevant approaches may be transferred to “how the aboriginal culture here [in Chile] relates to the popular culture” and can inform her own civic responsibility as a facilitator “in contexts like public schools and prisons.”

The “set of repeated performative utterances” executed at the start of and throughout course conversation falls within the hermeneutics of selfhood, serving two primary functions (Macfadyen, 2009). The first is provision of critical distance that makes possible the realization of ignorance or faulty understanding, as described above. The second is ongoing renewal of national membership. Students, “faced with the task of (re)building and (re)presenting a virtual identity,” undertake a process identified by Paul Ricoeur as “attestation,” or a “form of self-witnessing that is performed through repeated (ritualized) speech acts by the individual self” (Macfadyen, 2009, p. 107).

The nationalist project infiltrates transnational MOOC discussion forums as individuals identify in repeated and ongoing ways with particular nationalities, even while undermining static or rigid definitions of culture. The nation itself, invoked in the online realm of identity-building, becomes “a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of culture difference” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 148).

The “national sign” grows in strength as MOOC users choose to associate with their respective nations. However, each iteration refines and amends, a process facilitated by removal of pre-determined educational spaces and times and the development of non-synchronic time: “hybrid sites of meaning open up a cleavage in the language of culture which suggests that the similitude of the *symbol* as it plays across cultural sites must not obscure the fact that the repetition of the *sign* is... both different and differential,” enriching and tangling national identity rather than destroying it (Bhabha, 1994, p. 163).

Engaging the Other

Michael Walzer writes in “Education, Democratic Citizenship, and Multiculturalism” that the politics of difference “is both a product of democracy and a danger to it. That is why education is so important” (Walzer, 1998, p. 160). Although his discussion is one of multiethnic civic education in Israel, Walzer’s insistence on a common civic curriculum for coexistence and democratic citizenship translates to any multicultural democracy, in which a balance must be established between collective identity and particularism.

By virtue of their vast accessibility and the notion that “the Internet is an unprecedented compendium of viewpoints and perspectives,” MOOCs create a useful space for cross-cultural exchange, the cultivation of empathy, and critical cultural analysis (Gorski, 2010, p. 38). With participants in nearly every country, MOOC platforms and discussion boards (particularly in humanities courses) function as repositories of conflicting values and opinions.

When Professor Jean-Paul Restoule of “Aboriginal Worldviews and Education” assigned an activity about personal loss, students’ public posts demonstrated striking sincerity and willingness to present sensitive narratives. One participant in the activity’s forum shared the impact of childhood trauma:

I suffered sexual abuse as a child and continue to try to deal with the impact of that loss on a daily basis. And I lost my family. A doctor once said, "if the Holocaust victims can get over it, you should be able to". I told him that it diminishes one's own personal experience to compare lives on a tragedy scale to determine how you should feel. However, I know that I was born with what I taught my son was a "backpack full of privilege". I did the exercise and it provoked some strong feelings but one of the strongest was regret that I may have ever imagined that I could "relate" to the struggles of our aboriginal people. ("Aboriginal Worldviews" discussion forum)

"Thank you for sharing" and "I appreciate your post" recur in the thread that follows, heavy with intimate accounts of grief, fear, abuse, and healing that, while all contextually specific, elicit empathy from fellow students. Many of these accounts are posted in anonymity, perhaps reflective of the relative safety afforded by virtual interaction.

While "White students, male students, and socioeconomically-privileged students" often possess the social confidence to dominate conversation in traditional classrooms, the power to speak is here appropriated by the anonymous victim (Clark & Limburg, 2006, p. 49). Although the post's author feels guilt at the thought "that I may ever have imagined that I could 'relate' to the struggles of our aboriginal people," his/her openness to reflection, albeit painful, leads to a recognition of the gravity of the Other's pain. While individual participation and interactions are always informed to some degree by power dynamics, "open-minded learning in a multicultural setting" is the necessary precursor to "democratic deliberation in a multicultural society and world" (Gutmann, 1999, p. 307).

In this respect, MOOCs succeed where face-to-face interaction fails, due in part to the suspension of visual and aural signals. "When they hear a Chinese accent, see a Jordanian woman's head cover, observe a Brazilian's body language,... some Americans automatically register a consciousness of difference that may trigger discomfort... or recognition of their own ignorance," compelling them to remain closed to potential learning and reflection (Merryfield, 2003, p. 160). By diffusing what Merryfield calls "triggers of difference," MOOCs permit participants to interact more fluidly, "learn from the experiences and knowledge of people from other cultures," and work alongside the Other without experiencing overwhelming discomfort or reverting to xenophobia (Merryfield, 2003, p. 161).

Only once physicality is subordi-

nated to experience can citizens of multicultural societies truly oppose oppression and defend equal rights of all individuals, behaviors at the root of liberal democracy (Gutmann, 1999). Suspension of triggers of difference—which becomes possible in face-to-face interaction once an individual recognizes the importance of mutual exchange—reinforces community even as it celebrates particularism, reformulating the nation-state project and rejecting "the 'generous' inclusion of outside groups into a hegemonic" infrastructure built upon an "us-them" distinction (Mitchell, 2001, p. 71).

By encouraging interaction and connectivism, MOOCs seek to reconcile the local and global, demonstrating that "democratic education is... compatible with egalitarian cosmopolitanism" (Gutmann, 1999, p. 311). The perceived tension between cosmopolitanism—which favors no geographic locality but features an attachment to human beings and equal respect—and patriotism—which privileges national identity—reflects the tension between the universal and particular, best negotiated via schooling.⁶

Couched in the hermeneutics of civil equality, connectivism and civic education should "not insist on teaching students that all moral beings must identify themselves in any single way, whether as citizens of the world, Kantian ends-in-themselves, Millian progressive beings, or cosmopolitan patriots" (Gutmann, 1999, p. 315). With "meetups" in over 2,000 cities worldwide, Coursera localizes the online education experience with face-to-face interaction, providing opportunities to pursue social participation and the conscious social reproduction of society that accompanies cultivating liberal values.

Furthermore, user comments and interactions often reflect a "learning culture in which [students feel] able to take risks and make mistakes, or express dissent." The student-centered philosophy and decentralized nature of MOOCs permit users to apply critical discourse to the courses themselves. An Irish student commenting on "Aboriginal Worldviews and Education," for example, posted in the general discussion forum his objections to the material being taught:

Littlebear's article claims that "One can summarize the value systems of Western Europeans as being linear and singular, static, and objective." The supposed linearity of 'Western' time has been challenged for well over a hundred years by 'Western' philosophers and physicists... In both the lectures and other resources, the Aboriginal worldview and science are regularly contrasted, as if they are some-

how opposed. While clearly traditionalist creationist views are incompatible with contemporary science, this doesn't mean that the entirety of First Nation cultures are anti-science. ("Aboriginal Worldviews" discussion forum)

Self-identifying as a "White West European male," he acknowledges his association with an oppressive majority discourse while simultaneously setting himself apart from it ("spent all my working life struggling for cultural democracy"). In an elaborate critique, the student takes on what he perceives to be cultural essentialism and a lacking account of history, prompting a discussion of over 60 posts about the complicated nature of identity and epistemology. The student adds in a subsequent post that openness to critique and challenge go hand-in-hand with respect: "I believe that it is through dialogue and debate that we will learn, not just by nodding and smiling at each other politely."

While a traditional classroom may leave students wary of criticizing an instructor's material, the MOOC platform allows students to express constructive opinions with less fear of negative reception: the result echoes Gutmann's definition of a democratic education, which "should introduce students to competing perspectives, and... equip them to deliberate" (Gutmann, 1999, p. 308).

The civic educational space becomes its own public sphere in which "democratic participation can occur between all citizens," empowering students to question meta-narratives and content, as well as logistics that inevitably carry cultural weight (such as systems of measurement and "graded" participation, the latter of which reflects a cultural preference for visible participation) (Mitchell, 2001, p. 57).

The MOOC Reality: Shortcomings and Concerns

Criticisms of online education fall within six varieties: student-related issues, discrimination and access, pedagogical effectiveness, computer compatibility, development-related issues, and political economy-related issues (Navarro, 2000). Relative to civic education, critics of MOOCs tend to identify five major shortcomings, which involve manifestations of these six themes, and which I will address in turn:

1. Barriers to universal accessibility limit the diversity of MOOC users.
2. The technological interface and connectivist principles favor a certain cultural ideology, so that MOOCs can never be culture-neutral.

3. Pedagogically, the use of MOOCs for civic education fails to recognize that K-12 schooling and one-on-one educational models are more important when preparing individuals for citizenship.

4. MOOC discussion platforms, particularly in courses with culture-based curricula, encourage essentialism.

5. It is not obvious that the benefits of MOOCs outweigh the financial strains they produce.

Barriers to Accessibility

For those who have access to the Internet, the “sheer volume and divergence” of individual viewpoints becomes clear in myriad media forms, including photography, graphic art, music, animation, video, and text (Gorski, 2010). However, these viewpoints are inevitably limited to those reflecting Internet users, who share a minimum level of physical and technical privilege.

Critics of MOOCs often worry that socioeconomic diversity in particular is compromised in the online education setting, given that the poorest households or individuals are least likely to own computers. Similarly, physical access requirements discriminate against rural and developing populations, as well as against those without the technical know-how necessary to navigate the Web (often a matter of age).

While it is true that accessibility to online education is limited in these ways (as well as by the expectations of connective learning and visible participation), MOOCs remain immensely more accessible than traditional higher education, which requires commuting to physical campuses and often payment of fees, not to mention the completion of secondary education. And, as Internet connections and portable technologies become cheaper and more ubiquitous, the potential of MOOCs to serve larger populations will continue to grow.

The potential of MOOC platforms to deliver content and civic education to new populations is perhaps best evidenced by their popularity among individuals between the ages of 30 and 50, many with families and (multiple) jobs. In a post entitled “Study tips requested,” one student of “Internet History, Technology, and Security” explained that:

I am 35 and only ever finished High School... I am finding it difficult to retain/remember new info... I do suffer from mental illness, that sometimes can get in the way of accomplishing my goals.

In the thread that followed, high school students, stay-at-home parents, non-native English speakers, and professionals with multiple degrees offered a range of learn-

ing strategies, including the use of the Coursera learning community itself, exemplifying the ability of MOOCs to reach and support unprecedented populations.

Favoring Certain Ideologies

Concerns regarding the cultural saturation of MOOC environments are sensible insofar as the content of each course remains subject to the instructor’s didactic inclinations. However, because the institutions paired with organizations like edX and Coursera exist beyond the realm of governmental standardization, a cross-section of courses reveals that the only collective “culture” of MOOCs is one of intellectual curiosity and critical thinking. Because the average MOOC student strives for voluntary self-enrichment and implicitly ascribes to connectivist principles, the pedagogical culture of online education cannot be meaningfully labeled “intolerant.”

Much as “it would not be simply boring, but unimaginable for one’s moral compass to be set entirely by liberal democratic convictions,” the connectivist MOOC user maintains his particularisms while demonstrating an interest in student-centered learning and problem-solving (Macedo, 2000, p. 246). Even linguistic hegemonies are diffused: Coursera, founded in California, now hosts courses in English, Spanish, French, Chinese, and Italian, and partners with universities as diverse as Hebrew University of Jerusalem, National University of Singapore, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and Berklee College of Music. Each course welcomes non-native speakers, and permits the use of countless tongues in its discussion forums (which, due to asynchronicity and access to external tools like online translators, also better empower non-native speakers to engage in the dominant course language).

Role of K-12 Schooling

Amy Gutmann proposes that toleration, truth-telling, and a predisposition to nonviolence must be cultivated in the primary and secondary levels of education; schools “can teach students to engage together in respectful discussions in which they strive to understanding, appreciate, and, if possible, resolve political disagreements that are partially rooted in cultural differences” (Gutmann, 1996, p. 160). Because MOOC participation depends on a voluntary decision to exercise this desire to understand and participate, it depends also on relatively effective primary and secondary civic education.

In this sense, MOOCs can do little to promote civic responsibility or cross-

cultural exchange among those unwilling to opt-in in the first place (although use is likely to grow quasi-exponentially once several members of a community have opted in). Just as adult online education cannot ameliorate the shortcomings of incomplete or ineffective K-12 education, neither can it perfectly replace face-to-face education. Charles Ess observes:

To overcome ethnocentrism and thereby avoid colonization requires us to know the Other as ‘the Other’; that is, in ways that recognize, respect and foster the irreducible differences that define us as distinct from one another. So far, at least, this is done more easily and directly by encountering the Other face-to-face—ideally, within his or her cultural context, rather than our own—so as to minimize the temptation to impose our own cultural values and practices, as ostensibly ‘universal’ upon the Other. (Ess, 2009, p. 28)

In addition rendering invisible the markers of difference available in face-to-face interaction, MOOCs also eliminate the real-time connection with an instructor and small group of fellow students—it is for this reason that online education is best considered part of a hybrid education solution or a resource for those otherwise unable to access in-person education. However, while textual representations of ‘the Other’ in discussion forums are viewed always from one’s own cultural standpoint, Ess overestimates the ease of suspending ethnocentrism in face-to-face encounters.

Encouraging Essentialism

Indeed, to understand difference in its own cultural context is immensely difficult in traditional education, which, more often than online schooling, favors norms of a dominant societal majority (or minority, in the case of some parochial or private schools). Furthermore, proponents of MOOCs have suggested that “the lack of social cues in an online learning environment means students are more likely to pay attention to the content of the message,” actually improving the quality and ease of cross-cultural exchange (Lai & Ball, 2004, 29).

Because online educational interfaces encourage students to identify with particular national, regional, ethnic, and/or racial groups, MOOCs pose the risk of enabling an environment in which individuals serve to “represent” entire groups and cultures. Categorical identifications may also motivate students to call on stereotypical understandings of ‘the Other’ or oversimplify the complexity of individual identity, a phenomenon that sometimes produces hateful commentary exacerbated

by the option of authorial anonymity. As we saw, Macfadyen's study of "Perspectives on Global Citizenship," an online university course offered in September 2005, found that "very quickly, however, student communications fulfill the claim that essentialized models of national culture are insufficient markers of individual identity. Students begin to challenge the utility of such categories by troubling their neat borders," (Macfadyen, 2009, p. 103) qualifying and reconfiguring their identities while seeking to better understand those of peers. The disembodied nature of online communication seems to prioritize the individual over ethnic or national membership, compelling users to "clarify or trouble the identity they possess through a range of other group affiliations" (Macfadyen, 2009, p. 110).

Costs and Benefits

Finally, costs of implementing online courses, especially outside membership in a large-scale consortium like Coursera or edX, are high: faculty must be trained in online curriculum development, technological support must be made available for both faculty and student users, and staff must monitor tool functioning, discussion boards, blogs, social media supplements, and document sharing (all while some fear traditional professors will be in even shorter demand and may face job losses) (Skorton and Altschuler, 2013).

Moreover, maximizing cost efficiency requires that online instructors implement assessments that lend themselves to automated grading or peer review, and the ability to provide accreditation for completed courses remains shaky amid fears of plagiarism and lack of accountability. Still, given their focus on voluntary enrichment, MOOCs are unlikely to threaten the job security of faculty members teaching in brick-and-mortar institutions. Placement services like the one instituted by Coursera could prove an economic asset, enabling employers to reach potential employees and inspiring individuals with limited options to develop skills and acquire knowledge transferable to new careers.

Endless Possibilities

Ultimately, as massive open online courses continue to evolve within a global educational network, they promise endless possibilities for self-motivated study, improved quality of life, and the growing possibility that users will, as Dewey envisioned for students of effective education, "have the full and ready use of all [their] capacities."

Notes

¹ As of June 2012, Coursera (which offers courses in five languages) served 640,000 people in 190 countries, with Stanford University's "Machine Learning" course alone attracting over 100,000 students. Similarly, approximately 150,000 users registered for MIT's "Circuits and Electronics" course in its first cycle.

² Pre-technological theories utilized in instructional design are behaviorism, which asserts that learning is only understandable via behavioral change; cognitivism, which applies computer information processing to cognitive recall; and constructivism, or the theory that learners create meaning as they process experiences.

³ Broadly, I take "culture" to mean, as Amy Gutmann summarizes, a collection of "patterns of thinking, speaking, and acting that are associated with a human community larger than a few families."

⁴ In "Connectivism in Postsecondary Online Courses: An Exploratory Factor Analysis," Nanette Hogg and Carol Lomicky define these four principles as follows: (1) diversity exposes students to decentralized and varied perspectives; (2) autonomy ensures that students are in control of their learning outcomes and engage in a decision-making process when analyzing ideas and concepts; (3) interactivity describes the level of connection between students, instructors, content, and information; and (4) openness refers to the technological tools and interfaces that eliminate boundaries to information or communication.

⁵ The weblike nature of any MOOC community is often illustrated at the course's outset, as students are encouraged to add their locations and connections to a world map.

⁶ Gutmann writes, "Schooling should make our particularistic cultural identification more well informed and should also demonstrate that particularistic identifications are no excuse whatsoever for oppressing or otherwise denying the equal rights of individuals with other particularistic identifications" (p. 316).

⁷ The case could be made that democratic governments should choose to fund or subsidize highly-accessible online education (as it does "cultural" institutions like museums) in an effort to boost the qualifications and civic education of citizens.

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