

De-Moocifying-Online Learning

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Draft but may be quoted

(This introduction will be abbreviated at the actual panel because as chair I don't want to rob time from the panelists. Perhaps it will point to some areas for reflection.)

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Today's discussion of crowdsourcing and moocs, and of online learning viz crowdsourcing, brings to the issue three individuals with immense experience in the field. Dr Wallace Boston is President, Dr. Karan Powell is the Provost, and Dr. Philip Ice is the vice president for research, of the American Public University System. The discussion possibly may suggest that crowdsourcing and moocs are part of the same crowd. (One might have played with the title and called this presentation "Demystifying Moocs as Part of Crowdsourcing", as a premise is that we should consider crowdsourcing is part of the mooc discussion.)

How appropriate it is that we are here in St. Anne's College, for one side of the college grounds faces the Banbury Road with arguably the most famous letter box in academia . Oxford can truly claim to be one of the original sites of crowdsourcing long before the word was coined and we are just minutes walk from 78 Banbury Road,ⁱ from which the appeal went out for help in compiling the Oxford dictionary. It was there that Sir James Murray built his Scriptorium, a copious shed for the thousands of pigeon holes where he could stuff the word usage reports flowing from his army of volunteers.

This all started in 1879, when Sir James had sent out an initial 2000 copies of his appeal for help, distributed often through booksellers.ⁱⁱ That first appeal brought him over 800 responses and before long as many as 1000 slips a day were arriving from the lexiconic army.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1885, a weary post office installed a red pillar box for the vast amount of daily mail, and the box is still there and marked by a historic tablet.^{iv}

While new words often are the result of new technology, they also fit old situations that are more aptly described by the new coinage. Along that line of thinking, perhaps crowdsourcing, a word only with us since 2005 when it appeared in *Wired* magazine, needs to be thought about expansively in historic terms of phenomenon that have existed for a long time and operated under different names, behavior which is a variant or at least part of what we now commonly consider the process of crowdsourcing.

While a prime example of this is the Oxford dictionary, there are other examples that in some cases long precede the use of the new term but involved and still aspects of what we now recognize as crowdsourcing. Just recall such established aspects of society as bird watching and animal censuses, amateur astronomy as the helpmate of professionals, the naming of zoo animals by legions of school children, and census programs dating to the eighteenth century. This has continued and clearly crowdsourcing is well established in parts of everyone's life by television programs like American Idol, Amazon product ratings, the enormous growth of Wikipedia, and today by our concern on this panel, online education – including moocs.

In respects, moocs represent a way crowdsourcing comes via technology to the process of higher education. Moocs certainly involve crowds and while a case can be made that they resemble the online courses already offered for years, the numbers of students are different and in their size have in some quarters accentuated fears of just what has been suspected for a long time about online education, that it eliminates the teacher-student relationship that bricks-and-mortar institutions assert is part of their genius.

The truth might be more that the learning process is being democratized and moocs are a sign of that The teaching-learning circuitry is being rewired.^v Jeffrey Howe remarks, "This all amounts to a sea change in how we experience the world around us. If ever there was a real in which the expert once reigned uncontested, it was in the selection and organization of the world's knowledge. Yet in a few short years, this function has been largely democratized. And as with all forms of democracy, the positive effects never come without some disturbing consequences."^{vi}

We will put aside for discussion at another time the rebuttal to the alleged lack of individual attention in online courses, a reply which includes the fact that many universities have always had large lecture courses where anonymity was prevalent and the only contact was with a student teaching assistant. Regardless of what one thinks of the success or failure of conventional education in promoting teacher-student relations, online education is grown up and on its own and has to show that it can be personal and transformative. Its success in my view is partly because it is much more conversant with the wise use of technology.

So it is understandable that unless personally observed, the mooc easily could be regarded as another nail in the coffin of individualistic learning – but that is not the case. Recently the American Public University offered its first mooc. It was free, was announced in a low key fashion to avoid being swamped, and used the themes from Harry Potter novels to introduce international relations to beginner students. One aspect that was immediately apparent was the volume of animated response and interaction. Maybe I am an exception, but my own teaching experience with large lecture courses has been that the response was nowhere near the response I observed, varied and various, that came every day from what was, after all, a modestly announced experimental mooc.

The different levels of participation are something that departs from our usual view of the educational process. We are used to people going through all the paces, so to speak. We are not used to thousands of people simply dropping by and whether that informality can be good in an educational sense remains an open question. It is the pedagogical equivalent of open access publishing,

The APU experience was akin to the crowdsourcing results noted in other fields, with many observers and limited numbers of active participants, or perhaps more accurately, concentric rings of participation. The new phrase for this is collaborative filtering, but it has been going on at Oxford since students compared notes with lecturers in the twelfth century.^{vii}

Moocs are not intimidating to those with experience in the online field. In terms of execution, in some respects, if you are conversant with online learning you are already conversant with moocs, and the argument can be made that a mooc uses the already tested features that constitute good online practice. At its best, online education displays many of the more positive characteristics associated with crowdsourcing such as the ability to mine lots of data to see how effective the classes are, how long do students spend on a unit, how many times do they reread an assignment, and so on.

If I were to single out one feature that the APU mooc experience brought home, it was that thanks to the technology the students could and did interact. The focus is on learning. Importantly, as in well done online education in general, it was possible to know what the average time spent on readings was, which readings and quizzes got the most play, and in many ways because of the technology to judge just how the course was going. That is not news to anyone familiar with a quality online program. A premise is that the students have a lot to say and that benevolent dictatorships are not a good pedagogic model, no matter how long they have been around. Possibly a better phrase than crowdsourcing is people sourcing, because the reference to a crowd can imply less of a critical and useful process than is really the case.

What is different is that the large amount of data which is collected offers a surer base for evaluating the course because there is so much more information available about student reaction. But just as the captain of a ship brings to the helm skills which apply to different sized vessels, the use by a skilled teacher of mooc tools parallels that of those tools used in smaller classes.

Having put crowdsourcing into a historic framework that somewhat reduces its uniqueness, it is important to add that it may not be a marginal development. Charles Hugh Smith warns, “..social and technological innovations can be adopted and go mainstream with remarkable rapidity. The Pareto distribution is a useful guide to this process. As an example, when only 2% of Adult Americans were Internet users, the technology had little effect on the overall society and economy.

But when 4% became users, this had an outsized influence on 64% of the populace. Once 20% of adults obtained an Internet connection, within a few short years 80% were on the Internet. We should be cautious about dismissing emerging trends as inconsequential, for they often follow the Pareto distribution of building momentum very gradually and then suddenly becoming influential once the trend hits critical mass. This dynamic mirrors Hemingway's famous response in *The Sun Also Rises* to the question, how did you go bankrupt? "Two ways," Mike said. "Gradually and then suddenly."^{viii}

So I am not so sure that crowdsourcing is just the fortuitous coining of a word. It may be the harbinger of things to come. I was a student of the celebrated behavioral scientist B.F. Skinner at Harvard and didn't enjoy at all reporting to his machines in the basement of Emerson Hall. I now realize the idea was good but the means of delivery were so primitive that it was impossible to see where his work would lead. It may be that because of the advances in technology, crowdsourcing is part of an emerging educational model of which moocs are a complementary part. One thing I do know is that Sir James got fairly tired of creating his great dictionary with just a pillar post box.

Notes

ⁱ Up the Woodstock Road past St. Antony's College, turn right on Canterbury Road and go to its intersection with Banbury and turn left – and there you are. Look for the red pillar post box in front of the house.

ⁱⁱ Simon Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*, HarperCollins, New York, 2005 (1998), 127.

ⁱⁱⁱ Winchester, 130, 150.

^{iv} "Sunnyside, 78 Banbury Road Pillar Box", in "Victorian Post Boxes", http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM9TXQ_Sunnyside_78_Banbury_Road_Pillar_Box_Oxford_Oxfordshire, acc. 16 September 2014.

^v Michael Nanfito, *MOCS: Opportunities, Impacts, and Challenges*, CreateSpace, North Charleston (South Carolina), 2013, 167.

^{vi} Jeffrey Howe, *Crowdsourcing*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2009, 241

^{vii} "The crowd expresses its judgment as part of its natural behavior. In the process, its collected actions become a database of knowledge in itself." Howe, 237.

^{viii} Charles Hugh Smith, *The Nearly Free University & the Emerging Economy*, Oftwominds Publishing, Berkeley (California), 2013, 159.