5A   A University of Glasgow Guide to MOOCs

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MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have made a lot of headlines and captured attention from university management. What is a MOOC? Do we care? Should we? This paper offers a briefing on what the first things you need to know are.

This paper explains what the different types of MOOCs are, the different pedagogical theories they assume, and discuss how they might evolve in the future. We identify the various motivations each stakeholder group might have for becoming involved in a MOOC as a learner, teacher or institution. Do MOOCs mark the dawn of a golden age of adult education and free CPD; or the final collapse of large courses into impersonal production lines? We discuss some apparent challenges to "normal" HE standards e.g. attrition rates, likely workloads.

Here are some interesting arguments about MOOCs:

1. The quality of the learning experience will be mainly dependent upon the quality of the peer interaction because with one teacher for thousands of learners, personal interaction with the teacher must be negligible. So if a course is to be different from just buying a book, or a DVD set, then it must have interaction. (But how is this different from large lectures?)

2. What are the learner experiences so far? The main message is: some are absolutely terrible, some are really good. The same informant typically has had experiences of both kinds.

3. There is a gigantic range of degree of engagement amongst the learners on a given MOOC. This is the same issue as actually exists in the University of Glasgow's Level 1 courses but much bigger. The Harvard SPOC (Small Private Online Course) is one way of addressing this: requiring no fees but to write an acceptable essay as an entrance requirement (measures commitment of effort perhaps more importantly than capability: no tourists).

4. We might argue that the real MOOCs are a) Video Games; b) Wikipedia. These are pre-existing, socially important, enterprises which involve even more participants than any MOOC to date, with a large collaborative element, and which at bottom are all about learning.

5. MOOCs as a research stimulus: how would your recommended course design do if it had 5,000 students?

As well as applying well to the overall conference theme, this accords with all of the Learning and Teaching Strategy objectives as it explains how MOOCs can help to shape the University learning community, ensure that we continue to excel in learning and teaching and to deliver an excellent student learning experience.