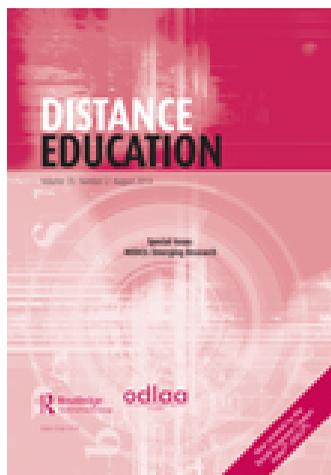


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### MOOCs: emerging research

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## EDITORIAL

### MOOCs: emerging research

Few phenomena in recent memory have rocked the boat of higher education generally, and the field of distance education in particular, more than the advent of massive open online courses (MOOCs). Supporters of these online courses, which are aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the Web, hail it as a true, disruptive innovation (Christensen, 2013), as well as a means of democratizing access to education and as promising new insights on teaching and learning from analytics on tens of thousands to millions of students (e.g. Picciano, 2012; Siemens & Long, 2011). Critics of MOOCs cite concerns about homogenization and depersonalization of education, about corporate influences on the academy, and about the lack of attention to the findings from decades of research on distance education and online learning.

Some MOOCs are designed to enable anyone anywhere to study free university courses or pursue their interests by taking taster courses. Some are intended primarily as “digital storefronts,” designed to market institutional brands globally. Some are aimed at openness and access; others at economizing or profiteering. Some providers are elite institutions, while others are for-profit start-ups. The so-called cMOOCs use constructivist principles, but the majority, referred to as xMOOCs, employ a knowledge transmission model using video recordings of classroom lectures or custom-produced mini-lectures. Regardless of type, Bates (2012) sees MOOCs as a retrograde step, observing that it is as if distance learning had just been invented and nothing was known about the need for quality in instructional design and learner support. With high non-completion rates also being reported, Yuan and Powell (2013) suggest that the issues of quality, sustainability, pedagogy, completion rates, and awarding of credit in MOOCs are of major concern for higher education, and that if their use is to take hold, some form(s) of quality assurance will be needed to ensure that they conform to best practice.

Regardless of our views on MOOCs, it is clear that we find ourselves in a place where practice is leading theory (or at least the application of theory), and meaningful research findings are sparse. Moreover, as the articles in this special themed issue make abundantly clear, we are also seeing MOOCs being adapted in a diversity of ways. Firmin et al. (2014) describe MOOCs that are not massive and are targeting on-campus students. Li et al. (2014) describe co-located viewing of MOOC videos that is squarely an in-person rather than an online learning experience. Clearly, treating MOOCs as a monolithic, homogenous practice is unhelpful in advancing our understanding or in even agreeing on a shared vocabulary with which to discuss and debate.

Our goal in compiling this special issue of the journal has been to provide a forum to help close the gaps between theory, research, and practice on this topic. The response by the research community to the call for papers for this issue of the journal was overwhelmingly strong, and it is likely that a growing number of

MOOC-related studies will continue to be published in subsequent regular and special issues of *Distance Education*.

Some of the big questions we have sought to explore in this special issue include, but are not limited to, the following:

- *Pedagogical innovations.* What are the theoretical frameworks underpinning the pedagogical approach instantiated in MOOCs? With what degree of fidelity are these pedagogical design elements being implemented in MOOCs? In what ways does the “massive” enrolment meaningfully change the possibilities for individual and collaborative learning in MOOCs as compared to other course designs and modalities? On balance, is “massiveness” helping or hindering student learning, as Knox (2014) explores? What lessons can existing online and mainstream distance education research contribute to the design, implementation, analysis, and/or evaluation of MOOCs? How do we balance the use of “big data” analytics as used by Firmin et al. (2014) with the more learner-centered methods illustrated in the articles by Andersen and Ponti (2014), Li et al. (2014), Knox (2014), and Adams, Yin, Madriz, and Mullen (2014)?
- *Reframing the definition of efficacy.* Do the standard definitions of efficacy apply to MOOCs or do we need new metrics with which to evaluate the success of a MOOC relative to the goals it seeks to achieve? Compared to more traditional face-to-face or distance education courses, if participation in a MOOC is completely voluntary and no money is changing hands, can we use the same standards to evaluate the quality of a MOOC? (For example, Firmin et al.’s (2014) sample includes both tuition-paying undergraduates and area high school students enrolled for enrichment.) As MOOCs proliferate, how will prospective students be able to evaluate which MOOC to enrol in based on expected learning outcomes? How should the research community respond to this new form of learning online at a distance?
- *Technological innovations.* What are the unique technological innovations that support the design and delivery of MOOCs? In what ways does the massive aspect of participation drive innovations that are qualitatively different from traditional online learning management systems? For example, Andersen and Ponti (2014) examine the experience of learning in a course where students contribute to the course design and content and note some challenges that arise. Adams et al. (2014) describe a “tutorial sphere” that some MOOC participants experienced when watching MOOC videos, a surprising, non-intuitive finding in an otherwise impersonal, massive learning experience. How widespread is this effect and is it something we can count on occurring? How might it best be facilitated?
- *Systemic innovations.* At the level of educational systems and policy, to what extent are MOOCs serving as agents of change in learning and teaching in higher education? What evidence is available to support the many claims around the role of MOOCs that have been made in this regard, such as opening up access to higher education and open educational practices including the use of open educational resources? In what ways are MOOCs causing a reexamination of more traditional campus-based and located learning and teaching practices (see Fischer, 2014), and how can these effects be characterized (as Firmin et al., 2014, explore)? What research findings can serve as

guidance for individual faculty members or higher education administrators when considering whether and how to implement MOOCs in their organizations? And more importantly, what ethical considerations must guide their decision-making (Marshall, 2014)?

There are three solicited commentaries and six feature articles in this issue. Both the commentaries and the articles were chosen to represent a broad set of perspectives, topics, and research methodologies. We include articles using big data learning analytics (Firmin et al., 2014); ethnographic (Li et al., 2014) and phenomenological approaches (Adams et al., 2014), and studies of both xMOOCs (Li et al., 2014; Knox, 2014) and cMOOCs (Andersen & Ponti, 2014). Also included is Marshall's (2014) essay on the ethical considerations of this new approach to education, encouraging all who participate in developing, administering, and studying MOOCs to pause and consider the many important implications of this new technology and associated practices and policies.

The three invited commentaries offer very different perspectives and raise many thought-provoking questions. Bates (2014) provides a useful starting point by summarizing the articles in this issue and drawing some lessons learned from them. Fischer (2014), viewing MOOCs from the perspective of the learning sciences, raises some fundamental questions about learning and wonders whether we have over- or underestimated the MOOC phenomena. Fisher also speculates on the core competencies of residential universities from the lens of MOOCs, while Baggaley (2014) raises the concerns that many educators and education researchers share, drawing a powerful analogy between the supersizing of food courses (McDonald's) and educational courses (MOOCs). Taken together, these three commentaries provide a compelling framing of the special issue, and for the broader community of researchers, instructors, developers, and administrators involved in MOOCs.

As professionals committed to distance education, we are keen to explore the theories that drive practices, and we hope that this special issue will help frame and inform the discussions, debates, and decisions regarding MOOCs that are taking place worldwide, that this early round of research on MOOCs will begin to fill the gaps in our understanding of learning and teaching with MOOCs, and inspire our colleagues in the research community to fill in the many others that remain.

As editors of this special themed issue, we are grateful to the researchers who have joined us in this quest, and to the associate editors of this journal, Colin Latchem and Wallace Hannum, as well as all other reviewers, for their substantial time commitment in reviewing the contributions for this issue. So, enjoy, and we shall look forward to your own commentaries on the topic.

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