

The Tolerable Contradictions of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and the Potential Role of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

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In 1998, Alan Thomas wrote a book chapter entitled *The Tolerable Contradictions of Prior Learning Assessment*. He opens the chapter with the following statement:

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), or Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) as it is more commonly known in Canada, is potentially the most radical innovation in education since the development of mass formal education during the last century. (p. 330)

Thomas is referring to the disruptive notion that learning and knowledge can take place *outside* of the formal classroom and yet still be recognized and accredited by the formal education system. For those of us in the recognition of prior learning community, the controversial nature of Thomas' statement is now something of the past, as we move forward with scholarly research and the establishment of policies and standards of quality in what is now a legitimate field of research, practice and work. The current radical innovation in contemporary education is open education resources (OER) and the disruptive implications this holds. This essay will begin to explore the potential role of prior learning assessment as a mechanism to recognize formal academic credit from a specific OER, the massive open online course (MOOC) and the implications for practice.

The Theory of Disruptive Innovation

In a report for the Center for American Progress and Innosight Institute co-authored by Christensen, Horn, Caldera and Soares (2011) entitled "Disrupting College: How Disruptive Innovation Can Deliver Quality And Affordability To Postsecondary Education," the authors outline the need for the American postsecondary system to embrace the theory of disruptive innovation as a potential agent of change to offset a broken business model and create greater accessibility to traditionally underrepresented populations.

The theory of disruptive innovation originally emerged from a study of the disk drive industry to explain why the leading companies were unable to sustain their industry leadership from one generation to the next. It has been shown to explain the histories of literally hundreds of industries where the dominant companies or institutions have been replaced by entrants. These range from product to service industries, for-profit to not-for-profit ones, and slow-to-fast-moving industries. Disruption is the causal mechanism behind the phenomena that the great economist Joseph Schumpeter termed 'creative destruction.' (p. 12)

Specifically, the authors suggest that postsecondary education in the United States should embrace technology and online learning as a key part of changing their business model, and in turn, of reframing their engagement with learners and stakeholders.

Online learning is a natural medium and platform for many of these changes. And using the old assumptions and policies to measure its disruptive emergence is inappropriate and could hamstring the innovations so that they fail in their promise to deliver a more affordable, higher quality system for many more of the country's population." (p. 4)

The application of new technology and online learning within universities and colleges is often fraught with bureaucratic red tape and budgetary constraints. The institutions that do embrace the theory of innovative disruption, and by extension, are engaged in OERs, are driving the next radical change to formal education.

According to Conrad (2013), “innovative open, distance and online practices are fueling both disruption and excitement as they offer educational opportunities to global audiences” (p. 41).

Open learning is an interesting concept to wrap one’s head around. For starters, it presupposes an antithesis – “closed learning” – which does *not* exist! There is, however, a tightly held “closed until open” credential and degree-bearing system that is found in the academy. Within this system of formal education, the concept of open learning is currently the hot topic of discussion in opinion pieces by academic deans and primary topics of conferences for education administrators and stakeholders. Underlying these discussions and conference proceedings are hints of what is to be understood by the term “open learning” and what this means for their institutions, their colleagues and their learners. An example of an institution that is embracing OERs and the theory of disruptive innovation is SUNY Empire State College. In the book *Game Changers*, Benke, Davis and Travers (2012) defined the open education movement in this way:

The open education movement now goes beyond open admission, distance education, and various forms of “broadcast” teaching. It includes the expansion of shared open resources and virtual peer-mentoring environments that provide learners with the opportunity to create global networks of peers who are engaged in the same areas of learning. It offers faculty the opportunity to connect with other experts in the field and to learn from the learners as they explore, ask questions, and critique emerging knowledge. Open learning provides each learner and faculty mentor with multiple networks and opportunities to grow as an educated person and as a member of a profession. In all these respects, open education, broadly defined, builds upon and extends SUNY Empire State College’s mentored-learning approaches. It also inspires discourse on new theories of learning. (p. 150)

The characteristics of open learning are usually referenced in terminology such as: pioneering, inventive, new, novel, modern, accessible and affordable. The MOOC is a resource of open learning that is currently labeled as a “disruptive innovation,” which may sound subversive, but is in fact the concept that has been crowned the most open of them all. In order to fully appreciate the disruptiveness of this innovation, it is crucial to ask, “How *massive* is massive in a MOOC?” In a TED Talk, Stanford University professor and co-founder of Coursera, Dr. Daphne Koller (2012), outlined that the first course offered (Machine Learning) had 100,000 registrants. To further illustrate the “massive” in the MOOC, she said that in order for Coursera co-founder Dr. Andrew Ng to reach the same number of students through teaching this course at Stanford, he would have to teach the course for 250 years. Another example to demonstrate the scale of “massive” is from another MOOC provider edX, the joint venture between Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). According to Philip DiSalvio (2012):

The first online course from MITx titled 6.002x: Circuits and Electronics, offered earlier this year, had more students than the entire number of living students who have graduated from the university. Indeed, that number is not far from the total of all the students enrolled there since the 19th century. MIT reported that 155,000 people registered for MITx 6.002x and of those, approximately 23,000 tried the first problem set, 9,000 passed the midterm, and 7,157 passed the course as a whole. According to MITx: ‘... if the number is looked at in absolute terms, it had as many students as might take the course in 40 years at MIT’ (paras. 1-2).

The MOOC phenomenon is currently tracked by bloggers and open learning commentators in terms of the number of universities and colleges that have signed agreements with providers such as Coursera, edX and Udacity. According to Koller (2012), the focus for Coursera is the experience of the learner. Koller passionately espouses that these MOOCs are different than traditional online learning since they offer “a real course experience ... real homework assignments for a real grade with a real deadline” (see minutes 06:04-06:17). From these MOOCs, there is a treasure trove of data to analyze with information captured about the learners, such as number of registrants, where they live, how often they view videos, when they complete assignments and if they finish the course. The analysis of this data will surely inform both the evolution of MOOCs and the arguments of MOOC detractors who temper the euphoria of massive open learning, for free, with assertions such as those made by Royal Roads University Vice President and Provost Steve Grundy (2013) that “the business model is still rather mystifying ... the quality varies ... the quality of students’ work is difficult to verify on such a large scale and ... MOOCs are simply more content in an already crowded content world (paras. 7-11).

MOOCs and PLA: Disruptive Innovations

What cannot be denied is that MOOCs offer a tantalizing opportunity for learners around the world to put Stanford or MIT on their resume as an educational institution at which they have taken a course. Or is it? Here-in lie the tolerable contradictions of MOOCs. Distance education, for example, was established in order to facilitate a mechanism for learners to have greater access to learning and knowledge or to formal education and still achieve their degree, certification or validation of learning regardless of their location to the institution proper. The MOOC was not established with the same end goal. MOOCs started as an experiment in access to knowledge as established by formal institutions of postsecondary learning, not as a mechanism to further or complete formal education. However, Friesen and Wihak (2013) suggested that a synergy exists between MOOCs or OCW (OpenCourseWare) and PLAR as a means for learners to fill in the gaps of competencies rather than take an entire course when not all the learning outcomes are met.

MOOCs and OCW both offer a learning experience readily comparable to a course for which a student would be eligible for credit. For similar reasons, very specifically defined competencies or sets of competencies, acquired through OER or similar resources, could also be translated into institutional accreditation through the successful completion of an exam designed to test these competencies. (p. 56)

In her TED Talk, Koller (2012) made a vague reference to accreditation by stating “some students took their certificate (of completion) and presented this to an education institution at which they were enrolled for actual college credit so these students were really getting something meaningful for their investment of time and effort” (see minutes 06:38-06:49). However, receiving institutions have total discretion whether or not the MOOC course with the Stanford University professor would be recognized for credit. The issue of formally recognizing a MOOC for academic credit is in its infancy while the proliferation of open learning resources continues to grow exponentially. Proponents of the match between MOOCs and OER and PLAR can be found in reports such as The Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute/TEKRI’s (as cited in Friesen & Wihak, 2013) “OER for Assessment and Credit for Student Project,” which states:

The knowledge, research and experience derived from the large-scale open distance learning institutions in proving assessment services at a distance, combined with refinements to existing protocols for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) could open pathways for assessment and credit services for students where traditional delivery models are unable to respond to the growing need for post-secondary education worldwide. (p. 53)

According to Conrad (2013), “Much of the lack of clarity surrounding the integration of open technologies and open learning into traditional systems stems from the thorny issue of assessment and the closely related concept of accreditation” (p. 43). A very recent development in this evolution is the news in February 2013 that the American Council on Education (ACE) College Credit Recommendation Service “has evaluated and recommended college credit for five courses on Coursera” (Coursera, 2013, para. 1). Further, ACE Credit “will evaluate for potential credit four courses offered by Udacity” (American Council on Education, 2013, para. 2). This could mean that learners have further resources to aid in their degree completion, but to complete a degree or certificate by taking MOOCs is not yet viable for a learner. How to pull all of these bits and pieces of MOOCs, training courses, past certificates, classroom transcripts and other forms of experiential learning together still remains an issue.

Can prior learning assessment and portfolios be the answer? Benke, Davis and Travers (2012) suggested that this is a possibility by “applying the retrospective analysis and reflection typically associated with prior learning assessment on this more emergent learning [it] provides a valid and authentic assessment” (p. 152). If this is the case, is the PLA community ready to meet the demand? Paul Fain (2012) has already considered this question and has written a step by step plan for how a student can take a MOOC and get college credit using a prior learning portfolio. In his article, Fain (2012) quoted Coursera’s Andrew Ng as saying the synergy between MOOCs and PLA would be welcome and that the prior learning pathway to credits for MOOCs is “fantastic” and a “big value add for students. Furthermore, it doesn’t overlap with Coursera’s goals … ” as the company will not pursue accreditation as a means of issuing formal academic credits” (para. 8). For the moment, it would seem Coursera has designated the task of seeking accreditation through existing services such

as ACE Credit or that this task will be left to the learner to navigate. In an essay by Pamela Tate (2013), president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, she suggested that course-by-course approval of MOOCs may not be wise.

Now that ACE has evaluated a few courses, MOOC providers will see how their process goes as students start actually finding proctors and taking tests – or finding other methods of assessment – to prove they learned the material. But a few courses will not be enough to really help students earn degrees, and with MOOC courses and providers continuing to proliferate, this does not seem like a viable way to keep up with demand. Regardless, it is more than likely that the universities that agreed to the ACE CREDIT review are never going to accept an ACE CREDIT transcript themselves. The students with ACE CREDIT transcripts will need to present those transcripts to ‘lesser known’ schools that are not among the elite players – colleges with much lower tuition and a willingness to serve post-traditional students” (paras. 4-5).

Tate’s comments are reminiscent of discussions in the PLA community concerning whether or not PLA policies and procedures are embedded within the core function of a university or college and whether or not PLA credit would be recognized from one department to another or from one institution to another. Once PLA is fully acknowledged and accepted within a college or university, it becomes part of the culture to both the learners and the academy, and there develops a transparency about the process and the expected outcomes. Within the PLA community, there is no doubt that prior learning assessment is an academically rigorous process. The advent of the MOOC may offer the opportunity for the PLA community to establish itself as an academically rigorous and trusted conduit for learners, where policies and procedures are fully transparent and integrated within academic handbooks and calendars.

Conclusion

The potential of PLA to play a significant role in the public’s fascination with MOOCs should not be overlooked. And the MOOC public is truly worldwide in scope. In regard to MOOCs, we are still on the precipice of the potential impact on formal education. The courses that have gained credit recognition or are under consideration by ACE CREDIT (College Credit Recommendation Service) are nominal in terms of the number of courses currently offered by MOOC providers. Questions abound in this equation such as: will MOOCs be more readily recognized by the public and employers as knowledge and learning gained rather than experiential learning that is not necessarily tied to a formal institution or well-known professor? Will the evolution of MOOCs and desire for further accreditation bring the concept of PLA to the consciousness of the general public?

Thomas (1998) concluded his chapter by stating:

What PLAR represents above all is the implications of the iron law that nothing is guaranteed to change an educational system more surely than a change in the composition of the student body ... Fundamentally, PLAR is a means of providing for the individual's power over his or her own learning, which is the ultimate power of all. (p. 342)

PLA has a significant role to play in the arena of open learning, and specifically with MOOCs, in relation to applying the knowledge we have as a PLA community to facilitate the recognition and validation of learning -- regardless of its source--to the benefit of the learner.

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