

Open online courses and massively untold stories

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This paper seeks to account for a small range of open online courses that helped to inform the early development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). It laments the loss of meaning in the word open and its historic alignment to free and open source principles. It calls for more academic work to better represent the histories and range of critical perspectives on open online courses, and outlines how Wikipedia can be used as a central organising platform for such work.

Keywords: open education, open source, Wikipedia, transparency, collaboration, reusability, networked learning, MOOCs, open online courses

Introduction

Since leaving Otago Polytechnic in 2009, I have witnessed and been subjected to an intensified interest in open online courses. As someone who specialises in developing open educational practices, I've become concerned with directional decisions in the organisations where I work that seem to lack depth of critical perspective or, most urgently - a fundamental misunderstanding of the word 'open'. As far as I can tell, this has largely stemmed from the popularity of interest in the Ivy-League university instantiations of open online courses and an obfuscation of historical developments prior to 2011.

This paper seeks to account for a small range of open online courses that helped to inform the early development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). It laments the loss of meaning in the word open and its historic alignment to free and open source principles. It calls for more academic work to better represent the histories and range of critical perspectives on open online courses, and outlines how Wikipedia can be used as a central organising platform for such work.

A history

In Dunedin, New Zealand, early in 2006, Bronwyn Hegarty and Leigh Blackall set about convening the first [Future of Learning in a Networked World](#) (FLNW) open conference. FLNW2006 came together with assistance from several people in New Zealand who brought funds from a number of New Zealand Ministry of Education initiatives. The ten-day open conference toured across New Zealand in September 2006, with international developers and commentators of education, such as Teemu Leinonen, Barbara Dieu, Konrad Glogowski, Stephen Downes and several others from Australia and New Zealand. Over the course of 15 days, the group travelled to major centres around New Zealand and met with local educators, developers, scholars and commentators, to discuss networked learning in open conference style. The event resulted in [a website](#) containing presentation recordings, an [online forum](#) for discussing networked learning, and [a book](#) and DVD based on the content captured over the ten days. In those outputs are detailed accounts of a unanimous agreement that open educational practices, and more permeable boundaries between formal and informal learning, would become a significant if not primary space for educational development within five years.

Emboldened by these forecasts, the conference conveners started developing open, online courses at their home institution, Otago Polytechnic. They developed [Facilitating Online](#) and [Flexible Learning](#) in 2007 and 2008, [evaluating the impact in 2009](#) to find noteworthy savings and gains in the models (Blackall & Hegarty, 2009). Teemu returned to the Media Lab in Helsinki and started developing [Composing Free and Open Online Educational Resources](#) in 2007, also [evaluating the impact in 2009](#) (Leinonen, Vadén, & Suoranta, 2009). These course websites attribute David Wiley's 2007 course [Introduction to Open Education](#) as the model they based their work on, and all the courses were part of formal - for credit courses at the respective institutions. They were the precursors to what would later be called Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

“Wiley Wikis”

A common feature across these course websites was the use of a MediaWiki to openly prepare the course curriculum, resources and schedule of activities. All used Commons-based projects such as Wikiversity, Wikieducator and Open Content (Dyer-Witthford 2006). [Leigh Blackall recorded a conversation in 2008](#) with Teemu and Bronwyn, talking about what they were calling the “Wiley Wiki” course model. They discussed

open courses and what was being realised in their work. [David Wiley responded](#) with his first notes on the model he had been developing since 2004. Other [commentators such as Stephen Downes](#) would later use the “Wiley Wiki” description, but drop references to works other than Wiley’s.

These courses went on to use blogs as decentralised communication channels out from the course and among participants and a wider public. They maintained the wikis as source and documentation for the courses. In all the courses, participants were asked to create their own blogs, and to use them to note their progress. The participant blogs were brought together and monitored through RSS feeds, and participant communication across their blogs was encouraged either through recognition or direct communications. This method distributed the course communications and interactions more widely, attempting to stimulate online learning networks where participants communicate from and in their own online spaces, ideally beyond the life of the course. This method would later be deemed a ‘Connectivist MOOC’ (Siemens, 2012).

As an example of activity in these courses, the early version of the Facilitating Online course at Otago Polytechnic ran a series of ‘mini lectures’, where guest speakers were invited to present an idea through a web conferencing facility and then participate in discussion for the remaining time. George Siemens was one of the presenters, presenting and discussing his ideas about [Curatorial Teaching](#). These events were recorded and made publicly available through [The Internet Archive](#), and the course participants were encouraged to research the ideas further and note their findings to their blogs.

The meaning of open

Using Commons-based wikis to develop and document open online courses demonstrates openness in the ‘free and open source’ sense of the word (Stallman, 2008), as an act of [radical transparency](#). *They invite collaboration, they make the processes of development transparent, and they ensure reusability*. As collaborative authoring platforms, the Commons-based wikis implicitly invite anyone to edit the course websites or discussion pages. To ensure transparency, all edited versions and contributions are preserved and made available. To ensure reusability only open standard formats and copyright licenses that permit free reuse of the works are used.

We are [joining in the argument](#) that these features of invitational collaboration, transparency and reusability are critical elements to what is classed as an open online course (Wiley, 2012). We are emboldened in this claim by the recent formulation of the [Learners’ Bill of Rights](#), while also aligning with critical perspectives around privatisation, commodification, freedom and the [emancipatory intent of open education](#) (Hall, 2013; Neary & Winn, 2012).

If an alignment to free and open source development is deemed an appropriate association when using the word open, then we feel that invitational collaboration, transparency and reusability are appropriate conditions for an online course to be considered open.

Back to the history

George Seimens went on to work with Stephen Downes in mid 2008, to develop the open course [Connectivism and Connected Knowledge](#). This course attracted thousands of participants and much interest across the educational web-logging commentariat. While prior mentioned courses by Wiley, Leinonen, Blackall and Hegarty had attracted barely hundreds, Connectivism and Connected Knowledge took open online courses to a whole other level - a phenomenon that led [David Cormier to coin the term MOOC](#) (Massive Open Online Course), and a name that would stick. Later, the name would be appropriated by software developers, global universities and commentators to describe even larger scale implementations. Here is [David Cormier and others reflecting on that appropriation](#).

In 2011, Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig developed the open online course [Introduction to Artificial Intelligence](#) - a derivative of a course they would normally teach at Stanford University. It attracted hundreds of thousands of participants, leading to the establishment of Udacity - a software and platform development that hosts and runs other such courses. Also out of Stanford came Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller who ran open online courses in 2012, and who then established Coursera - another software platform development project to host yet more ‘open’ online courses.

In the free and open-source sense of the word ‘open’ positioned in the previous section of this paper, both Coursera and Udacity do not offer open courses. The courses hosted there do not invite developmental

collaboration nor are they transparent in the development. Their choice of legal terms and copyrights make clear the level of restriction placed on reusability - rendering them legally non-reusable in most likely contexts. The appropriation of the descriptive words 'open online course' is inappropriate in our view (Wiley 2012).

So what?

Open is more than access

We are concerned that open online courses have come to mean closed development and restricted reuse, resting on a measure of access only. If access (and only after creating a user account and accepting terms and conditions) is now the predominant meaning of open, then the understanding of open online courses that are collaborative, transparent and reusable are fast diminishing, if not lost already.

The Conversation

Back in Australia and many other places around the world, the later MOOC developments in 2011 and 2012 began having an impact in mainstream news and educational commentary. [The Conversation](#) - a widely read online newspaper from the higher education sector, has generated [a significant quantity of content and citations](#) across the web regarding MOOCs. Unfortunately only [two articles](#) from The Conversation attribute David Cormier, and none refer to earlier work mentioned here. If the influence that The Conversation has on the Australian university sector is something to go by, this reveals a potential blind spot in the Australian university sector's understanding of the histories, principles and formative practices of open online courses. Also, these blind spots translate into [problems for educational developers](#) who seek dialog and support around the development of open online courses.

Wikipedia

The digital historian Roy Rosenzweig wrote about some of [the problems of history through Wikipedia in 2006](#), and we are just coming to realise his points and more in 2013. The publication of 'reliable' source material both draws from Wikipedia as well as contributes to it. In the case of Sir John Daniel's publication [Making Sense of MOOCs](#), he draws heavily from the Wikipedia article at that time, to formulate his arguments - repeating the mistaken claim that Downes' and Siemens' work was modelled on the ideas of Ivan Illich (Daniels 2012, p. 3).

This unsupported connection between MOOCs and Illich was first made on Wikipedia by the one-time editor, [MrMichaelFagan](#) in 2011. His only [contribution to Wikipedia](#) was 27 edits to the MOOC article over a twenty four hour period in December that year. His userpage remains content-less. The connection to Illich remained for a little under a year, and was eventually dropped from the article late in 2012. While the connection to Illich's ideas is unsupported in reference to the development of Siemens' and Downes' work, it is more accurate if referring to a broader history of developments in open online courses. Some of this is captured in the Wikipedia article on [Networked Learning](#), for example.

We have watched with interest the development of [the Wikipedia article on MOOCs](#). It was initiated with [questionable notability](#) in July 2012, and it is inevitably reflecting the mainstream commentary - including the blind spots. The editors of the Wikipedia article are compelled to draw their information from [reliable sources](#), and as time goes by it becomes increasingly difficult to ensure a more complete and accurate historical picture is in place through such reliable sources. This is a large part of our motivation to publish this paper. With Wikipedia being such a crucial information channel - but left without comprehensive coverage, the histories and critical perspectives are lost to most readers. Please refer to the later section of this paper, *What is to be done*, for an outline of suggested actions.

All stories leave out parts

But what of our own omissions? All stories leave out parts, sometimes very important parts, so what about our own? We've so far failed to mention [Massachusetts Institution of Technology's Open Courseware initiative](#), a project that inspired many toward the path of open online courses from as early as 2002, and a story that should not need a reminder - yet its mention is strangely absent in the majority of MOOC coverage. We failed to mention others in the [Open Courseware Consortium](#) who like us, have followed MIT's lead and made available their course materials, even offering access to live course events. We failed to mention Michael Nelson, who in 2005 started developing his course on [web design](#) in Wikiversity, using the model that would later be called

Wiley Wikit. We failed to mention [CyberOne: Law in the Court of Public Opinion](#), an open online course run by individual lecturers out of Harvard Law School in 2006. CyberOne took the open course model further by offering real time participation online using the ‘virtual world’ platform [Second Life](#). We failed to mention the work of Wayne Mackintosh who was delivering large scale open online courses through the [Learning4Content](#) project and drawing participants in the hundreds if not thousands.

All these developments deserve to be included in the stories that make up the history of open online courses, and massive ones at that. Their work was documented and shared through the web-logging educational commentariat, and along with many other stories, had the cumulative influence and shared principles that lead to the development of the early MOOCs.

A closure is happening

The editors of the Wikipedia article have, at the time of writing this article, managed to reach [MOOC history back into the 1890s](#), but the emergence of the term ‘MOOC’ and its appropriation by venture capitalists and the hegemony that global universities compete to assert over the notion of online courses generally, stands to obfuscate important critical discussion and debate.

It has been suggested that [MOOCs have become part of a manufacturing of consent](#), a market development exercise by technopolists who seek, among other things, to ensure investment returns and further opportunities for commodification (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; Postman 1993). Mike Neary, Joss Winn and Richard Hall are some of the few critical voices in this space, and Winn has been collecting [links to others](#). They’re writing about a confusion of the [freedom of people or of content](#), and the radical possibilities and threats of open education. [Richard Hall laments the](#) restriction on discourse about open education:

Moreover, their co-option by venture/finance capital operating inside private providers/using educational technology start-ups, restrict any meaningful discussion of open education as emancipatory. It is simply reduced to normative or deterministic ends, like employability or learning for work (Hall 2013).

We share these concerns and are experiencing the same closure on critical voice and historic connection in our local contexts.

What is to be done?

Short of the various early developers claiming an infringement on their moral and legal rights (attribution, prior art and so on), we need to ensure that a fuller historical account is academically developed, and that a diverse critical discussion is heard. We need to do this in such a way that helps ensure the next development isn’t so easily misappropriated.

Notwithstanding the numerous [problems with Wikipedia as a medium for historical work](#), it seems reasonable to suggest that the articles relating to MOOC and open online courses can be the place to focus our attention and coordinate an effort. This includes the publication of new reliable academic content that will help Wikipedia editors improve the articles.

So we propose that a concerted effort be made to ensure that Wikipedia coverage be linked up, and that it lists all publications referring to open online course development and criticism. If the breadth and depth of publications can be captured and monitored, we need to continuously work at incorporating key points into the Wikipedia articles. To do this, we need Wikipedia work to become a normal course of action in the publication of academic work. To do this, we’re proposing the following practices be adopted.

To suggest actions

1. The Wikipedia articles that relate to the MOOC article need to be brought together through either a common Wikipedia category that is added to the bottom of the articles, and/or through a Wikipedia project space.
2. All unsupported claims within the text on the articles need to be challenged, either through use of the [Citation Needed template](#) or the discussion pages. If these claims cannot be verified, they should be removed from the article’s current version.
3. A wider range of reliable literature needs to be published and collected, that will help address many of the problems in the Wikipedia coverage. The growing number of other language Wikipedia articles on MOOCs may well be referring to literature not commonly referred to by the English editors, and may be useful for

- highlighting any blind spots or a particular ethnocentricity in the coverage.
4. The range of literature referring to MOOCs may need to be tabulated similarly to the tabulation of [academic work on Wikipedia](#). This might be done either on a Wikipedia project space, a user page, or a sub article that is collected into the common category. Some of it may well be added into the bibliography sections of the articles themselves, but would need to be quickly referred to in the article's text.

An open future needs action

We hope that we have shown a need for coordinating a deeper appreciation of the history and critical ideas that have contributed to the development of open online courses over the recent years. We've attempted to highlight at least one blind spot in the mainstream commentary on MOOCs - that being a dilution of at least one meaning of the word open, and a loss of appreciation for the relevance of that meaning and how it has been enacted in the past. As the global universities, businesses and commentators continue to appropriate the concept, we may increasingly see it as a form of 'open washing', and recognise that we risk losing ground in the effort for free and open learning as an emancipatory activity (Hall 2013). As the buzz for MOOCs dies down, there is a considerable risk that the principles of openness in education will die away with it. But there may be an opportunity to return to some of the original intentions of open online courses, if we can draw enough commentary to those ideas.

We've pointed to an interesting project that seeks to define [rights for learners](#), and suggested that openness in the form of *invitation to collaborate, transparency and reusability* are a good way to ensure those rights are met and expanded on. We've suggested that Wikipedia be a central and opportune organising space to address the history of open online course development, and to connect up the range of principles and practices that have informed it. We hope that this will help maintain a trajectory toward emancipatory purpose in open online courses, and help steer us away from the vacuous meaning of 'access'.

If we succeed in promoting this range of actions, then we look forward to a future where more people will better understand these concepts and where critical thinking and discourse may thrive and inform our developments. For us, we haven't found a better way to practise openness other than to continue developing from a Commons-base such as through Wikiversity, neighbouring Wikipedia and the Wikimedia Commons. The scale and success of these projects seem like the best defence to misappropriation, enclosure, privatisation and commodification.

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