Chapter 5: Tensions in the Academy around All MOOC Models  
       Narrative: DAVE on Sandy in Edfutures

What does success look like?

It looks funny. And then I’m going to say it looks funny again.

Fault Lines Being Drawn: dualiths.

The discussion of the problem(s) of education is a dominant narrative in western culture. Our own educational experiences, whether through the public school system, one of the many private schooling options or whether we’ve been taught in the home have a huge influence on who we develop into as people. It is not surprising, then, that opinions on education abound.

In his book ‘the outliers’ Malcolm Gladwell popularized the idea that the real phenoms of the world seemed to have practiced a given thing for 10,000 hours before they were able to reach the peak of their fields… before they became experts. That ten thousand hours represents dedicated study in a given field giving that expert the ability to make good decisions about what they are doing, whether they are chess players or educational consultants.

If we are to apply this number to the education system a troubling result begins to emerge. The average length of school year in the US is 180 days. If we assume that any given student spends 5 hours of those days actively engaged in ‘schooling’ type activities and goes on to finish their k-12 years of education we find the answer to the volume of the education debate – everyone is an expert. Barring a major disruption in someone’s schooling they will finish their pre-university education with over 10K hours of experience ‘being a student’.

Among those many lessons learning in the thousands of hours most of us have spent in the classroom is an idea of what success looks like. Success, for most of us, is a reflection of the grade that we end up being given by our teacher. For twelve years of schooling we have been trained to understand that our acquisition of knowledge was easily judged by the B+ that was setout next to the work we had done. As ‘being a student’ experts we know that is measured in completing tasks that fit the measurements we’ve been given. There is a window, we have only to take the pieces of wood we’ve been given, and fit the molding around it. If the corners don’t meet perfectly, or if the paint spills onto the wall behind it, we’ll have points taken away.

Hidden in our woodworking analogy, however, is the choice of the wood for the window, the thickness of it, and the colour choice. Wood often comes warped, or twisted, and the windows in many houses aren’t square to begin with. Hidden a layer deeper is the question of whether the molding should be put on the window at all.

In order for success to be measured, it needs to be structured in such a way as learning can be measured. Items of learning need to be identified, and levels of mastery categorized in order to make the A-F measurements mean something.

Lets take the simplest of the identifiable units of measurement – attendance. For many classrooms attendance serves simple set of purposes, it encourages students to come to class. It might potentially also be intended to encourage them to come on time, and to come prepared, but it is primarily a tool of enforcement.

But what is being measured on this clear path to success? It does measure my presence in a room, but does it does little to measure the depth to which I participated in that room. A clever student can easily give the perception of paying attention during a class if this is required for an attendance mark.

When the classroom is the place where the content is stored, then attendance is required. The traditional classroom is premised on this idea of the scarcity of content and focused on the journey to finding, sorting and most of all keeping the content. In our current era of content abundance, we would argue, the requirements have changed.

### Taking two sides

The lines of discussion in our culture so often get separated into two sides, good vs. evil, conservative vs. liberal black vs. white. Education is no different. The influence of the MOOC on discussions in academy further polarize many debates that have been brewing for years.

Classroom vs. boardroom  
Perhaps the oldest and most impactful of the dualiths that rule conversations around education regard what education is for. Particularly, are we trying to prepare people for ‘jobs’ or are we engaged in some more ephemeral discussion. This conversation becomes even more interesting, and more polarized, when VC people start to move into education. It is difficult enough to measure the success of an educational program without direct investment, but when millions of dollars of investor money, that expects a return, gets funneled into education, it becomes even more important to be able to ‘see what success looks like’.  
  
The social contract between an educational institution and a student has always been hazy at best and self-referencing at worst. If we have designed our schools to prepare our students to be good citizens, we have walked down the dangerous road of testing our various political convictions that govern what that might mean to each of us. If our commitment to our high school students is to prepare students for university, we have said nothing at all other than the fact that we are somehow committed to a system whether it makes sense or not. There is no way to measure the value in these systems in a way that can be bureaucratized for understanding.  
  
If we are measuring the number of months after a student has passed a course or achieved a certificate when they have gotten a job, now we have something we can measure. It also creates new kinds of pressure and opportunity for those institutions to further cater directly to those providers of jobs in order to ensure better success rates. MOOCs have brought those VC people in the door, and they will challenge the job assumptions.  
  
real vs. online  
There is a sense in which the ‘online degree’ has been the degree with an asterix. A feeling that the work done and the certificate acquired by correspondence, electronic or otherwise, lacks the rigour or the full range of experience that gives the degree its true weight. The brand of higher education, essentially, does not extend to the online degree.  
  
This feeling carries further into our culture where the relationships that are formed/maintained online are seen by many as superficial and second rate. The recent work of Sherry turkle on relating online, the work by dude about google making us stupid, they all represent a back seating of online connected as representing something not-human. As if the interactions mediated through the technology tainted the connection with the technology itself, thereby making it no different that an interaction with a machine.

\*\*obvious google making us stupid connections here and connections back to other comments about what the internet is\*\*  
  
With the new swatch of onlineness being adopted by many of the bigger brands in higher education we may not only see a change in people’s views of online courses, but a broader change in people’s view of online interaction themselves. Someone in the NYT said that a person online could simply choose to do the best of the courses from the best of schools and piece together their own degree, as if the taint of online education simply no longer applied.  
  
closed vs. open  
Another of the long held discussions in higher ed under review is the debate between closed and open access. Should my research be available to everyone? Who will steal my content if i put it online? Why would anyone come to the university for my course if they can simply access the content?  
  
This question of content ownership is linked directly to how an institution sees it’s value to the students. If a university is responsible for curating content on a specific subject and doling it out to students, and then confirming through the assessment and accreditation models that the students have acquired this content, then the open access issue is very important indeed.   
  
Certainly we have seen in the case of the larger branded university that this is not the case. If we look to the example of the MIT open courseware project, we see an institution convinced that the content they possess is not something they can sell. In 2002 they decided to give a portion of their content away (essentially the syllabus) and allow anyone in the world to use, modify or translate their content.  
  
This kind of decision certain has implications on the faculty at MIT. They need to be very careful about the choice of content that they are preparing for their courses. There could be IP implications for the use or miss use of different content. Their content being public puts them up to criticism and critique from their peers. It creates, in a sense, a social peer review possibility for the faculty where they are open to the world.  
  
The decision also impacts other institutions as well. If industry leaders in a given field are giving away their content, it makes the position of other institutions protecting their ‘value’ by keeping their content closed less easy to maintain.

The threat to journals  
I see this creating a two point threat to the journal infrastructure as we know it. Current journals are either of the open access variety, where mostly unpaid academic type people take care of the work and allow every to access the material. These, i presume, will get more and more traffic due to MOOCs. The paid journals, where libraries are charged fees based on the number of times people have accessed a particular piece or based on an institutional price governed by the number of students or… well… there are a few models. Anyway these journals are not usable by MOOCs. The licensing as it is would be too weird.

Broad viewing of open access  
I’ve always thought that one of the reasons that OER and open access has struggle to catch on in some circles is that many academics had particular articles and people that they were accustomed to using in their courses, and choosing to go open access would require rethinking their courses and long search times. The curation process that is a MOOC alleviates this to a great degree. Here we have a network textbook that, in our present case the fine folks at Edinburgh, have taken the effort to collect. How easy to just take it and repurpose the pieces that you need.

The brand element  
The need to publish is wrapped into a pile of tangles inside the academic system, tenure promotion, institutions proving that they have impact, satisfying funders etc… If we are having giant courses with 100K people in them, however, and anyone who publishes in a closed journal is left out, that’s going to have an impact on the uh… impact. The chance to have your work viewed, your institution to be known as having influential people in it, could increasingly be a matter of whether your material is used in a MOOC.

And, as mentioned earlier, your ability to market online courses could increasingly be a question of whether you have the kind of faculty that people want to take a course with. If i’m looking to learn something about connectivism, and I see George’s name on half the things that are written about them, I’m going to be tempted to take the connectivism course with george at Athabasca. If he’d published all those things in closed journals, it seems less likely that they would get found

So whither the closed journal? They are either going to get left out of the MOOC drive, or they are going to have to change the licensing. If they are going to charge anything for the material, however, that will be taking the price of the course from ‘free’ to ‘not-free’… which is a pretty big leap no matter how much you charge. The open net, on the other hand, is licensed in a way that is perfectly setup for MOOCs. Now that we have so much public curation going on, we are not only going to be able to find more of the existing awesomeness, I’m guessing that we’ll see people releasing more and more of their stuff for free… if only so they don’t miss out.  
  
Changing Roles of Educators  
The role of the educator might be the central point around which all this change happens. Much like the days where our K-12 classrooms are run by single teachers who deliver what the think is best to their students, we are increasingly seeing teaching models in higher education become diversified. Whether it be the increasing reliance of sessional/non-tenured faculty, the increasing division between research and teaching universities or the turn towards hybrid class models, the lecturer is no longer the only model we have to choose from.

Indeed, much like the content of the syllabus is being given away by institutions like MIT, we are increasingly seeing lectures given away as well. We need not see many institutions release video lectures on each given foundational topic before there is enough content on the internet to ‘teach’ the vast majority of first and second level courses in higher education.

If the content of the lecture is public and open access, both in the form of the syllabus and the lecture, what then is the role of the educator? Are they simply the adjudicators of assessment? Cheerleaders?

### Superstar Profs

One of those roles, it seems, might be the role of superstar attraction. Some institutions can, certainly, attract students to their online courses by the weight of their brand, but this will not work for most. In order for MOOCs to attract the number of students that will be required for a course to be considered massive, and for the scale advantages to have an impact, the professors will be a critical draw.

MIT professor Walter Lewin believes

“that free online university courses will force the US' less prestigious higher education institutions - which he calls "trash" - out of business within 20 years.” http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=422586#.URZhSfcNqwI.twitter

He claims that the value provided free and online by professors such as himself will outweigh the lesser ranked schools and that they will lose business.

In the loss leader scenario described earlier, the role of the superstar professor gets slightly more character. The notoriety of any professor, whether they have access to a megaphone or not, could be passed around in student circles due to their ability to clearly deal with a topic, their willingness to engage students or the creativity of their lessons.

New distinctions between faculty and researchers

As we move these courses online, and the immediate feedback of a face to face classroom becomes less and less a prime need for a professor, the distinction between teacher and researcher continues to widen. Higher education has been a history of increasing specialization, and with research funding and new educational models being two options for growth in higher ed, it seems likely to continue.

The instructional designer has always had a distant relationship to the faculty member. A move to online learning might see those two roles move together. A faculty member with design skills could go a long way towards actually producing a better experience for students. A move towards ‘professionalizing’ the teaching process.

With the separation also come a loss of status to the teaching profession in higher education. As the disconnect between the expert who is researching knowledge and the person responsible for handing it over to students widens, the ‘professionalization’ of the teaching profession would see more control over the content move to administration.

Conflicts between social media & traditional academic legitimation processes  
The structures of legitimation that govern our academic process are long since established. A prospective academic moves through their Phd process as an apprentice. They then transition through post-doctoral work through the early assistant professor positions. Publishing papers in increasingly important peer reviewed journals, getting involved as junior partners in research projects. At some point, hopefully they get a chance to get to a prestigious university.

This process, embedded in systems of external verification, is now being challenged by other systems of notoriety. An academic can now get their work recognized by assiduous use of social media. A blog, youtube account and twitter feed can allow a prospective academic to make the required connections, to create their own community that allows them to do the research of an academic.

What does this mean, however, without the traditional systems of legitimatization? It forces us to answer a question as to what that legitimization was for, and, in the context of our discussion here, what it should be for looking forward.

If the content of what most courses will contain is available freely on the internet, then we only need so much proof as to what a given instructor knows. The idea that legitimization is far more connected to the researcher side of the dual responsibility of current faculty. But with the brand requirements that are embedded in the ideas of MOOCs it could very well be that the ‘popularity’ of a faculty member could be just as or more important for their success.

### Drive Towards Financial Sustainable models

There are several financial models for MOOC sustainability that are beginning to emerge. These new models not only stretch our current conceptions of higher education they stretch the meaning of the massive open online course itself.

The loss leader seems like the most obvious road for financial sustainability. The example of Edinburgh university at the beginning of this chapter is an excellent example of this. It allows for students to get a ‘taste’ of the offerings by a given institution as well as creates the potential for given students to find given university faculty that they wish to work with again.

The opportunity to work with particularly engaging faculty could be an important driver moving forward. For the loss leader to work the students have to have some connection to the university that they would wish to continue. When the loss leader is used in the retail sector, for instance, the idea is that by being in a given store you might buy something else, or, perhaps, you are creating a habit of using that store that might lead you to return.

With the digital you exchange the advantage of space for the advantage of data. When you have the data of each student who comes into class, institutions might develop data models that predict the students ‘most likely to registered for paid courses’ that could help in marketing efforts.

The Cornell model is another form of the loss leader model. In it the first part of a given certification is given away for free, and then second or future parts of the program are offered at an increased price and will, ostensibly, allow for the kinds of assessment and verification that are part and parcel to the giving out of credentials.

For the MOOCs recommended for credit by the American Council for Education, the model clearly indicates that the cost to be paid by students will be for ‘verification’ of student identity. In this model specific schools are being assigned the teaching of specific courses that will lead to greater financial efficiency in their construction and delivery.

### Goals and Roles of Students

The subject of the role of students has been in transition for many years. Higher education has increasingly been moving towards more and more supports for students that involve more guidance and less autonomy with specializations that are really just a different assemblage of courses offered by the institution.

The value of the university undergraduate degree, once an end in itself, has decreased as it has become more common. With a larger proportion of the population going to university than ever, (West? Dunno… interesting conversation here) the undergraduate degree is increasingly a stepping stone or simply a checkbox that must be ticked while other skills are acquired.

There has always been a section of higher education, whether under the auspices of the extension department or life long learning, where students are interested in acquiring knowledge or know how and aren’t particularly driven by degrees or certificates.

With the proliferation of identity and experience information on the internet, prospective employees or partners now have a plethora of other ways to demonstrate their suitability for employment. How will employers weigh, for instance, one candidate with more credentials and a negative social media profile against another with a perfectly suitable digital identity and fewer credentials?

This increased complexity in the establishment of suitability of an applicant makes the establishment of student goals less of an obvious direct line and more of an organic development.

### Finishing vs Participating: Should we call MOOC dropouts?

One of the more popular discussions pertaining to MOOCs revolves around declining rates of student participation (Kop) and low completion rates. The attrition rate of students in some MOOCs is well over 90%. For many observers this level of disinterest in programs is a signal that the whole project of these courses is flawed.

In the music industry, the numbers for the amount of downloads that are done by high level p2p users is skewed in the sense that acquisition of content has been separated from the consumption of content. IN a sense, the same is true for the MOOC. The students of the MOOC acquires a seat in the free courses, by registering to many courses they never in reality expect to finish.

Example Stories

### Edinburgh example

The university of Edinburgh serves as a nice example of the different ways in which the open access conversation comes into play in the MOOC environment. It is an institution ranked 32nd in the world in the 2012-2013 university ranking by the times higher education, with 24000+ students and offers a wide range of programming. It is, in effect, a good school.  
  
In July of 2012 they began offering courses using the coursera platform. These courses were over a wide range of disciplines and included things like philosophy, veterinary medicine and education. They were joining an ever enlarging group of elite educational institutions that joined the Coursera MOOCs that summer.   
  
In that time the university has enrolled 300,000 students in their online courses. It represents more than ten times the existing number of students they have enrolled for their payed courses, and yet nets the institution no payed revenue.   
  
According to the times higher, the institution is looking to increase their online learning complement from 2000 students to 10000 students over the next five years.

Sandy’s story

In the summer of 2010 I ran into a colleague of mine at my institution and asked him how his experience with his first MOOC went. This colleague was going to be participating with us on our first formal MOOC grant and I was interested in his take on the experience. He’s agreed to participate in our Edfutures course on the exploration of possible futures for education and, frankly, I hadn’t seen him as very active near the end of the project.  
  
Well... he hated it.  
  
He said that he didn’t like the course in the sense that many people who look at this kind of education reject it, it didn’t support his understanding of what the educator was for. It seemed he hadn’t completed the last couple of weeks of the course, and he’d felt that the lonely position of the learner, unscaffolded by the instructor, without the kinds of supports that would allow him to succeed, had left him uninspired.  
  
How, he wondered, would students new to the discipline ever be able to survive inside such an unsupported environment? How could you expect students to make intelligent decisions about what to do when the communications from the facilitators was intermittent and frequently unclear?  
  
I admit I was taken aback by the strength of his reaction, and, concerned, I asked him to give me a blow by blow account of the kind of experience that he had. I wondered if in this experience, really my first face 2 face conversation with someone who was from outside our networks of practice about a MOOC, there might be some valuable lessons to learn about this new approach we were toying with.  
  
He suggested that he had started the course by following the suggested activities, had joined the discussion forum and had attended the first few live interactive sessions. He had found that the chaos of the experience, and the weaknesses of the online platform, were major factors in his dislike of the course. He said that by week 4 or 5 he had met someone in one of the discussions and had continued a discussion that they were having offline. The connection proved fruitful and they co-presented a paper on the topic at a conference.  
  
This distraction, and his frustrations with the technical experience, had led him to forfeit any attempt at completing the course itself... leading him to pronounce the experience a failure. And this is the point at which we diverged. I saw his experience as a success. What better evidence of the creation of connections can you have than having joined an experience designed to encourage connection and to have made one.   
  
For him ‘completion’ was the sign of success. This focus on completion has been one of the key points of argument for many in their critique of MOOCs and seemingly one of self-consciousness for those who are defending MOOCs. I think this is one of those places where the availability of multiple options creates new tensions within the academy.

# New Credentialing Models There are many assumptions about the ‘purpose’ of education rolled up in the discussion that the MOOC lens helps us address. Chapter 3

## MOOCs as textbook: Dave

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121565135185141235.html> custom textbooks

<http://chronicle.com/article/As-Textbooks-Go-Digital-Will/124881/>

The modern classroom textbook comes out of a broken market. The purchasers of the textbook have not real impact on the market price of the textbook, in part because they are not the people who make choices about which textbook they wish to purchase.

I was looking over the work the folks at the university of Edinburgh on Coursera, specifically the [E-learning and Digital Cultures](https://class.coursera.org/edc-001/class) and the tidiness of the work that they had done really struck me. Each week, here’s five neatly organized videos, here’s some nice things to read, here are some more complex things you might want to engage with… all nicely arranged by topic. Or, you could say, by chapter.

Having mostly piggy backed on the encyclopedic knowledge of Downes and Siemens for the teaching of MOOCs, it’d never really struck me how much the process is really about carving out a piece of the Internet. A dabble of this perspective, some papers by that person, lets get some differing opinions in here – I remember this really great video by…

If you’re lucky (and I would argue, if you’re doing it right) that curation does predate the course, but it only ramps up when the course starts. [Grsshopper](http://grsshopper.downes.ca/), Stephen’s software for newsletters, is a curation engine. It pulls together All the Things created by the participants in a course so they can be seen by anyone who wants to. Again, chopping the internet into manageable pieces.

A [comment by Jason Green on twitter](https://twitter.com/jasongreen/status/260450426112065537) got me thinking again about a different lens through which to see the MOOC. The book, and particularly the textbook, are at the core of many of our classrooms. There’s no denying that having the content for a course all tied up in a handy, portable, near unbreakable format is convenient. Proof of this can be found in the fact that the yearly slaying of trees, organizing of content, printing and ordering of books and queuing in the bookstore to purchase them are almost as strong today as it was 30 years ago. Surely some people (I’m looking at you [Cable Green](http://creativecommons.org/tag/cable-green)) have encouraged a move towards taking those books online, but many of those models replicate much of the ‘prepare, organize and buy’ models of the paper book industry while saving trees and avoiding fleecing the student. Those books are still, however, finite and finished.

The book  
The physical book and the logistical and practical constraints that it imposes on knowledge and learning are key to understanding the shift that the internet imposes on education. Among other things the book

1. Imposes a need to ‘finalize’ a version of knowledge
2. Requires that the content of a course be decided before the students arrive
3. Is not easily added to – it does not allow contribution by the learner
4. cannot argue back

If I was to accuse the book of one crime, it would be that it tends to encourage passivity. As it cannot change, it does not encourage change in others.

The textbook has a set of implicit literacies that go along with it. It encourages linearity. It is a single source. Many of them speak as a single point of authority.

The Feedbook  
The Feedbook is an idea that I’ve been toying about for years, and, in some ways is the idea that got ‘Dave’s Educational Blog’ started. In 2005 I started talking about [the idea of a feedbook](http://davecormier.com/edblog/2006/02/28/the-great-hack-of-2006/), that is, looking at a textbook as a collection of feeds from various people in the field that you are in, and creating a ‘living textbook’. It would replace the static textbook and allow students to not only access content and ideas that are incredibly current, they would also have that content contextualized by the identity of the person who had written…

There were any number of challenges to doing it this way. It ignored, first of all, many forms of knowing and representing knowing (like formally written articles) which are of great value. Logistically it also forces any number of problems in terms of pulling together [OPML files](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OPML), choosing people who were blogging ‘well’, and keeping things from getting distracted. It’s also pretty much impossible for someone who does not already have a number of connections in the network to be able to get ‘in’.

Distributed participation  
Many of the criticisms that I’ve heard about the cMOOCs that we’ve done and I think much of the potential that people have missed in the xMOOCs is through a misunderstanding of the distributed possibilities presented by the model. If you think of a course as given by an expert for the sole intent of someday having that expert tell you that you have reached a number of pre-agreed objectives, then we are not using the word course in the same way.

I see a course as a way of organizing a discussion, whether that be simply through the organization of topics or questions or with the suggestions of other people’s recorded (in text, video or otherwise) thoughts to provide common ground for discussion. I see a course as hosting a themed party. With the MOOC it’s more like earth day. On this day you all go about doing things that, for you, represent your hopes and dreams for how we can better take care of the planet. There are suggested activities (like going dark in your house for an hour) and there are suggested ways to change your activities to make things healthier for the planet, but, at the end of the day, your participation is up to you. Earth day is a reminder that this issue is important to you. It brings focus.

# Chapter 6

## How Scale Plus Networks Can Decentre The Teacher

I got an interesting question on twitter today from someone asking about the decentralized role of the teacher in a ‘What is a MOOC video’ that we recorded as part of a [research project on MOOCs](http://davecormier.com/edblog/2010/12/20/moocs-knowledge-and-the-digital-economy-a-research-project/) Sandy Macauley, Bonnie, George and I did in 2010. (video embedded at the end of the post) and i think Dan’s question gets to the heart of one of the important possibilities presented by the internet which have been taken up in MOOCs in one way or another.

**Instructor as trunk**  
It should be obvious, i guess, that the trunk is essential to the tree. You can get away with cutting a few branches, or maybe a root or two, but once you do away with the big part at the middle of the tree you are now talking about something that is ‘wood’ not ‘a tree’. The image of instructor as trunk, then, is not only a question of them being ‘in the middle’ of the class, but they are also the critical and only point of connection between each of the branches. The trunk is the only reason the branches have for being. The conversation between the different branches (students) is structured and routed directly through the instructor.

For many years our education inevitably had to work this way. Students journeyed for miles to get to the location where the knowledge was, whether that was a few scant books or the instructors who are read or even written them. Each of those students needed to interact with that instructor in order to gain access to whatever it was they were going to say. Each of those students often had to share access to the same books… The instructor, ostensibly, would have acquired other knowledge, somewhere else, that it wasn’t feasible to transport to the location of the students. The instructor was the trunk around whom the students worked.

This provided a ton of advantages, many of which we now simply see as ‘what education is’. The technologies (and i mean the word very broadly) that were available had a profound impact not only on what was possible but also on choices that were made based on the particular advantages of that system. This certainly isn’t an exhaustive list, but lets take a look at what the advantages of a trunk based education system are

1. everyone is, more or less, accessing the same content  
2. People are, more or less, accessing content at the same time

This may seem to be fairly straightforward, but they have far reaching consequences. If everyone is accessing the same content (because its all coming from the same instructor), we can measure the degrees to which people have accessed that content. If they are accessing it at the same time (because that instructor is one person, and can only be in one place at one time, and it’s more efficient to have all the people in, say, a room to listen to him/her) then we might as well have everyone get together and do the learning at the same time.

If we’re all going to learn together at the same time, and we’re all going to learn the same things, then we might as well package that in such a way that we can call it something. Say english 101. The trunk pulls things together, it allows for things to be standardized, measured and kept on time. These are often useful things. One primary problem, and this is the response that i made to Dan’s tweet earlier today…

@[danlemaypi](https://twitter.com/danlemaypi) If you do, to follow your analogy, when the trunk is removed after the course, the connections die

— dave cormier (@davecormier) [January 6, 2013](https://twitter.com/davecormier/status/287924838583123968)

**Bring on the network**  
If the internet were to happen to education, now, things could be a bit different. Two of the things that are swept off the board, potentially, are the need to access the same content and to access it at the same time. If we can all access content out there on the internet and we can do it whenever we want, then we can go ahead and just learn the things that we want whenever we want to. Many of us have stories of learning how to do things, about new things or new ways of seeing things on our own time in our own way using resources (and people) on the web. There are now very few things you can’t learn on the web… in one way or another… if you accept that all those people out there on the web are people you can learn from.

But the wealth of possibilities brings on its own challenges. Along with the new connectivity, we were not given more time. We were also not given simpler lives that would allow for the inclusion of many new areas of research, both in our private and our professional lives. There is also the problem of sifting through the content available… how am I supposed to evaluate the worth of something I don’t understand.

**Join a community**  
This has been a solution for many of the [early adopters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_WELL) to the new connective technologies. Communities allow for collaborative evaluation of content and the ‘hive mind’ approach to knowing. You yourself may not have access to the things that you need, but someone nearby might. If you can bring together enough people from a field, you have a chance of being able to tackle most any problem.

But those communities have challenges of their own. They are difficult to join… and difficult to lurk in. They tend to develop their own habits, their own jokes, and while many communities mean to allow newcomers to join it can be difficult and off putting to find ways of fitting in with groups that are already cohesive.

**Where’s my teacher?**  
And so we go and find ourselves a teacher again. But the teacher, this time, need not come along with all the content for their course crammed up in their head, or trapped in a sheaf of papers. That teacher has access to all kinds of content on the internet, has some sense of where much of it is stored, and has the ability (one hopes) to help evaluate the worth of that content.

**The second C in cMOOC**  
I am a firm believer in the inclusion of the idea of a course into Massive open and online learning. I have spent many years working with communities online, with many failures some victories. It’s hard work bringing people together online, and harder work keeping them together. Having people study at the same time offers the ‘eventedness’ that spurs people to focus on a particular subject, idea of concept in ways that they often don’t when left to their own devices. It’s like going to the gym with other people… the proximity, the sharing, the shame are all part of the thing that keeps you going.

**Keeping the Open in MOOC**  
So I’m willing to keep the we do this at the same time part that we learned from pre-web learning, but I don’t feel the same way about content. There are few fields where anything but the first few basic concepts aren’t subject to negotiation. There are many sides to be taken, contexts in which to take them and different applications that requires different kinds of input. If we allow people to choose their own content (within reason) we allow for those things to form on their own.

It’ll make grading harder (assuming you think that’s necessary)  
It’ll make organizing it harder

But when you take the trunk out of education, when you remove the instructor as the person who makes decisions about the content, you might allow for the connections that are made during the course to remain when the course is finished. Authentic connections (assuming there’s such a thing) to content and people that don’t require the teacher to keep them growing.

MOOC as textbook  
More and more I see any MOOC as an event. It’s an event in which you can participate in whatever way you like. The social (and financial) contract explicitly at the core of most courses doesn’t exist. While this may lead to some of the low rates of completion that are part of what a MOOC is, they allow for flexibility of participation. The MOOC as ‘textbook’ is one of those methods of participation.

We have heard many stories of people taking a credit course ‘through the MOOC’([John Schinker’s story of trying it on his own](http://schinker.wordpress.com/2011/12/29/whats-not-to-mooc/) is interesting for this). There are a number of courses that have run alongside of the MOOCs with support staff and small tight knit communities taking what they were interested in from the MOOCs and leaving the rest. The MOOC event structure often includes suggested content and activities and also has the advantage of shaping a broad discussion along certain lines that you can use to structure your own course. It can be any course’s main content… even if the instructor spends much of their time disagreeing with the content.

The big advantage, i think, to conceptualizing the MOOC as a textbook is that it is embedded in networked literacies. In a paper textbook the creation and negotiation of the content is almost entirely hidden. There is no way to contribute to the discussion on the content that is being covered. Multiple voices are at the core of a distributed view of content. You could easily have three posts in a given day all taking exactly opposite opinions from each other leaving your students to have to choose what works for them.

What problem does it solve?  
For one, it provides a means of access to a community. Through a MOOC anyone with internet access can work towards being part of a discussion. I see that as a good thing.

It also offers choice. Indeed it forces choice. Choosing and choosing well has always been a valuable literacy, but in the context of a world of knowledge abundance, choice is slowly become the most important literacy.

In the end, and this is my bias showing, the community becomes the curriculum.

NOTE: <http://stevendkrause.com/2012/10/11/whats-good-about-moocs-or-they-arent-about-selling-textbooks-they-are-textbooks/> here are some similar ideas blogged by Steven Krause a few weeks before this post.

<http://gforsythe.ca/edcmooc/> Giulia’s post

Writing bits

While those first and second year courses have long been the bane of many a college faculty member, they are also one of the primary sources from which institutions can make money.