

Participants in 2013 Worldviews Conference debate MOOCs and higher education ‘disruption’

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The second international Worldviews conference on “Global trends in media and higher education” was held in Toronto from June 19 to 21. The event was jointly organized by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) and The Ontario Institute for Studies in Higher Education (OISE) in conjunction with two well known publications, *Inside Higher Ed* and *University World News*. Invited participants included scholars, higher education administrators, journalists, ‘ed-tech’ entrepreneurs, student activists and others.

Panels addressed topics such as university rankings, the role of media in covering higher education, and the public function and profile of universities. But one theme that seemed to dominate much of the discussion was that of Massive Open Online Courses , or MOOCs which provoked debate about the possible connection between the growing use of educational technology and academic outsourcing, “crowdsourcing” and privatization in universities. Given the recent promotion and hype surrounding MOOCs and online education, and their potential role in higher education reform, I will confine my summary and comments to themes related to this topic.

The first keynote address was given by Chad Gaffield, the president of SSHRC. Dr. Gaffield argued that the continued growth of post-secondary education would likely be accompanied by pressures for higher education institutions (HEI’s) to become more diverse, collaborative, socially engaged, networked, complex and creative. One strand in this development would be the increased deployment of digital technology in teaching and knowledge dissemination. Gaffield predicted continuing expansion of public/private partnerships, and he mentioned that one manifestation of this would be the outsourcing of teaching using online transmission and delivery of content. He connected this to broader transformations in the role of authors, editors , students and publishers in a peer-to-peer world of scholarship and research information. Gaffield – and other speakers - referred several times to “crowdsourcing,” suggesting that, to an increasing degree, academic content and practices are being created, vetted, and used in ways that no longer come under the control of the ivory tower. According to his portrait – and those of other speakers such as Glen Jones and Philip Altbach, we are seeing a disruption in the role, status and autonomy of traditional HEIs which may challenge and broaden our models of teaching and research.

The theme of technology-induced disruption and decentering was picked up by many participants. Author and Internet entrepreneur Andrew Keen spoke in dystopian terms about how the Internet-era trend of ‘disrupting’ gatekeepers was really a way of providing legitimacy to technologies that increase inequality and widen the gap between elite universities and the rest of the higher education sector. This ‘disappearing middle’ has been a major concern in connection with MOOCs, which make available free teaching content and lectures originating from freelancing ‘star’ professors at elite schools. The courses are intended, in turn, to be taken by freelancing students – or non-traditional learners - many of whom are not formally enrolled but

may hope to purchase third party assessment services that can help them eventually obtain recognized credentials at a cheap price.

Many participants recognized that the MOOC phenomenon is paradoxical. On the one hand, MOOCs are part of an open content movement in academia (along with open access scholarship) which evokes a kind of democratization of knowledge. On the other hand, in order to generate revenue from free content the ed-tech companies that provide MOOCs, need to be able to sell secondary services or monetize the student data that the on-line platform generates. In some cases this data is made available to employers for recruiting purposes and other private providers seeking to create partnerships in the higher education sphere. Many participants at the conference voiced the commonly-heard worry that the provision of free content is really a precursor to outsourcing, where cheap, portable content will replace (or deprofessionalize) at least some of the work of faculty and other academic staff. If MOOCs were to become mainstream many predict that there would be a further increase in the proportion of teaching-only faculty and HEIs.

While some participants saw the advantages of networked and flexible access to knowledge others saw MOOCs as part of a strategy of academic disaggregation that favours market forces over academic autonomy in determining curriculum and defining academic quality and priorities. Keynote speaker Sir John Daniels from the Open University in the UK expressed concern about the fact that the current MOOCs (in their Silicon Valley incarnations) are not truly ‘open’ and reusable. Instead MOOCs from companies such as Udacity and Coursera use restrictive licenses which place limits of price and permission on those users and institutions that want to blend them into credit bearing courses or programs. But he was nevertheless a strong advocate of online education. In fact, he strongly supported policies and programs that would promote “DIY” degrees that could be designed by students assembling portable courses from a wide variety of sources. Daniels came close to portraying the university of the future as a clearinghouse for outsourced academic services.

Indeed, Daniels and others indicated their support for the new trend of on-line ‘badges’ which would use crowdsourcing and online networks to validate competencies and ‘prior learning’ and thereby provide cheaper and more flexible alternatives to traditional university degree credits. In the U.S. influential advocates of higher education reform such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Bill Clinton are aggressively promoting MOOCs and competency based education as ways of addressing the cost inflation and the productivity ‘crisis’ in higher education.

By the end of the conference MOOC critics such as York graduate student and higher education blogger Melonie Fullick seemed to outnumber MOOC boosters. Many saw on-line courses as a threat to important academic values and as a means for the ed tech industry to profit from the financial challenges plaguing higher education. Notably, one of the final panels included Andrew Ng, co-founder of Coursera, the leading MOOC provider. He tried to ease concerns about MOOCs as a disruptive force by pointing to the fact that the demographic served by his company has so far included mostly non traditional students such as working people who already have degrees and people looking for intellectual stimulation for its own sake. Ng admitted, however, that in recent months Coursera has begun to directly target the traditional higher education

demographic, signing partnership deals with ten public university systems in the U.S. to provide a platform for sharing on-line curriculum.

Along the same lines, the Council of Ontario Universities has developed a consortium called Ontario Universities Online (OUO) which may be working on arrangements for universities to pool online courses. York has agreed to take part, but no discussion with faculty or Senate has yet taken place. As we have seen in the U.S. there has been significant pushback against these kinds of arrangements largely due to concerns about quality and academic autonomy.

OCUFA and its partners are to be commended for promoting an international dialogue about these trends of academic outsourcing and privatization. One lesson that members of YUFA can take away is importance of ensuring that faculty have a seat at the table when these issues are raised at York.