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**Out of the Fishbowl: The Uberization of Teaching**  
**Fuori dall'acquario: "l'uberizzazione" dell'insegnamento**

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**Abstract**

In terms of recent innovations affecting the Higher Education sector, two are generating significant interest: the creation and delivery of MOOCs as Open Education Resources, and the concept of the flipped classroom, a pedagogic approach whereby the roles of teacher and learner are inverted. Although the connection between the two may not be immediately obvious, they represent different sides of the same coin, and they can be brought together in a blended learning

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approach. Using both MOOCs and flipped classroom in a blended setting can help to evaluate the potential impact of MOOCs in a changing society. The following paragraphs are based on a non-systematic observation of disintermediation phenomena in educational experiences during the pilot phase of the Emma Project<sup>1</sup>, accordingly to its objectives and challenges.

**Keywords:** MOOC, Flipped classroom, teacher role, Uberization

## **1 The disintermediation force**

The educational system has been one of the last to be affected by the radical changes that technological innovation brought to processes of knowledge transfer. These changes can all be ascribed to the category of “emancipation”. As we already witnessed in other systems (especially in politics and the economy), the huge disintermediation force of the new communication technologies is enough to break down existing structures and replace them with different frameworks and, in the process, modify the relationship between the actors involved.

Two of the changes affecting the educational sector that have received significant interest are the creation and delivery of MOOCs and Flipped Classrooms.

The literature on MOOCs has identified several factors that have led to the success of this new form (and format) of online learning. Their potential for scalability, for democratising education and for improving on-campus tuition have put MOOCs at the centre of public debate in the last 3 years (Koller D. and Ng 2012; Bull 2013, Siemens 2013; De Rosa e Reda 2014). The media interest around MOOCs testifies to the growing pressure that education systems are under from the market, from politics and from society itself to respond to current challenges and provide an effective response to global education needs (eg in BRIC countries) and to produce better citizens.

The concept of flipped classrooms was introduced much earlier than MOOCs, and developed from theories of peer instruction (Mazur 1997) and the idea that individual learning style should form the basis of a more personalised teaching approach. Various experiments have taken place at both primary and secondary school level (i.e. Bergmann and Sams 2012). The literature confirms the effectiveness of the method, highlighting how much classroom time is freed up to be used for more participatory and active learning.

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<sup>1</sup> The Emma Project ([www.europeanmoocs.eu](http://www.europeanmoocs.eu)) is funded by EU under a CIP program, GA n. 621030

Although these two phenomena may not at first sight appear to be linked, they both have the same origins – in virtualisation of processes – and a common destiny (Brooks 2012). The unbundling of the system represents, in fact, on the one hand, the progressive emancipation of educational methods from educational content – which is ever more open and accessible – and, on the other, the emancipation of the leading players in the educational process – teachers, students, academic institutions - from each other.

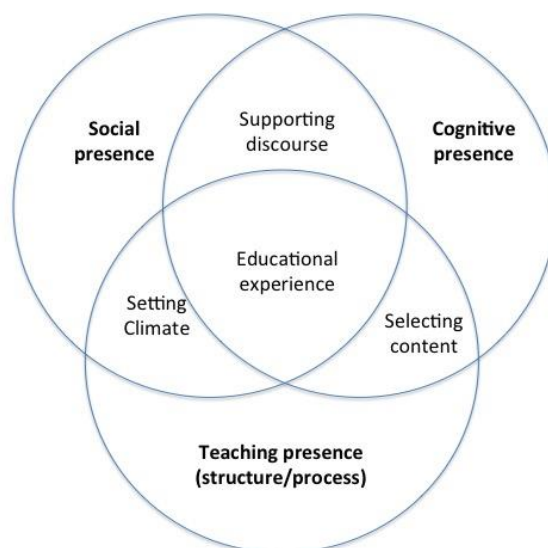
## 2 The community of Inquiry Model

How do these emancipatory forces play out? To explore how the unbundling of the system works, at a micro level first, let's take a case of the introduction of MOOCs in a blended classroom. This is also a case of a hybrid environment where:

- MOOCs are widely available
- Blended learning is the new formal setting in academic education

Although still considered crucial, the role of the teacher in blended learning is different from that in the solely on-campus or online environment. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) using the Dewey's *Community of Inquiry* model, make references to the online environment and different online teaching presences stating that «the concept of teaching presence is constitutively defined as having three categories – design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction» (p.1).

A few years later, Anderson (2004) organized these roles in a graphic model showing that deep and meaningful learning results when there are sufficient levels of three components but overlapping “presences” which she termed social, cognitive and teaching, as illustrated in the diagram below. (p.273).



## 2.1 Teacher role in fast changing society

In a blended learning situation where the MOOC is embedded in the regular curriculum as a new component of the learning process, and which comes with its own media format and instructional design, we should take into consideration the possibility that the teacher no longer has a monolithic role, but is forced to act and react to an external teacher presence in the form of the MOOC teacher, who often has a diverse academic position and level of authorship. In other words, the level of teacher “presence” in a blended class would seem to depend – among other variables – also on the degree of MOOC authorship and academic status, thus determining at least four different scenarios:

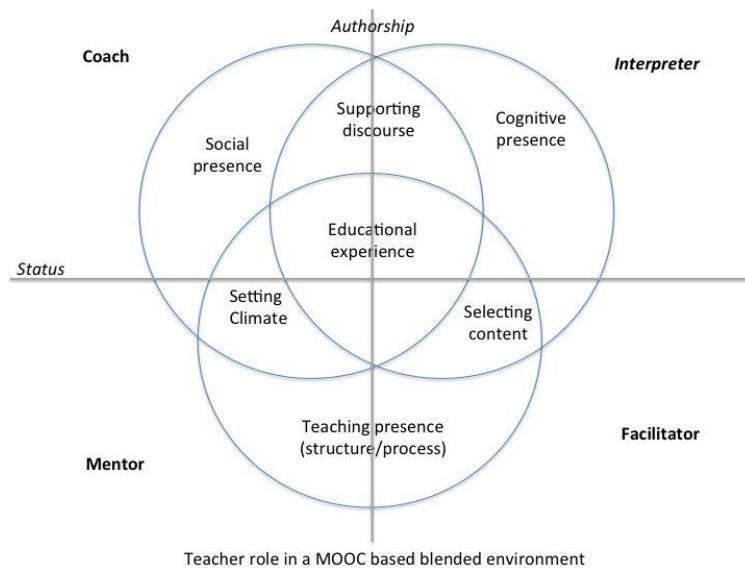
- a) The on-campus teacher is also the MOOC author
- b) The on-campus teacher is not the MOOC author
  
- c) The on-campus teacher has the same academic status as the MOOC author
- d) The on-campus teacher does not have the same academic status as the MOOC author

In a blended classroom, in fact, the expert who has developed the MOOC may also be responsible for teaching the on-campus class. In this case, his or her role is about interpreting their own teachings, and encouraging reflection with the class on their own theories and ideas, setting a receptive climate. The result is largely knowledge transfer and the teacher makes little use of the teaching skills listed above, confining himself to a more cognitive presence. We called this kind of teacher role *interpreter*.

In other situations, the MOOC developed by an expert in the field is actually used by another teacher who is an authority in the field in their own right. The teacher in this case feels confident about their own position and able to convey their own teaching and ideas using the original MOOC as a springboard, or prompt reflection through comparison between their own ideas and the original content. Here the teacher does not confine him or her self to a cognitive role, but is able to support plural discourses and stimulate learning in a complex way. The term we gave to this kind of teacher role is *coach*.

In other classrooms, the MOOC that is used is that of an expert in the field, but the teacher of the on-campus course does not have the same academic position or level of prestige. Here the teacher uses his or her own skills to simplify and explain content, guiding the class through concepts, paradigms and resultant reflection in a more collaborative environment. The teacher sets a learning climate with a stronger social presence. We can call this kind of teacher a *facilitator*.

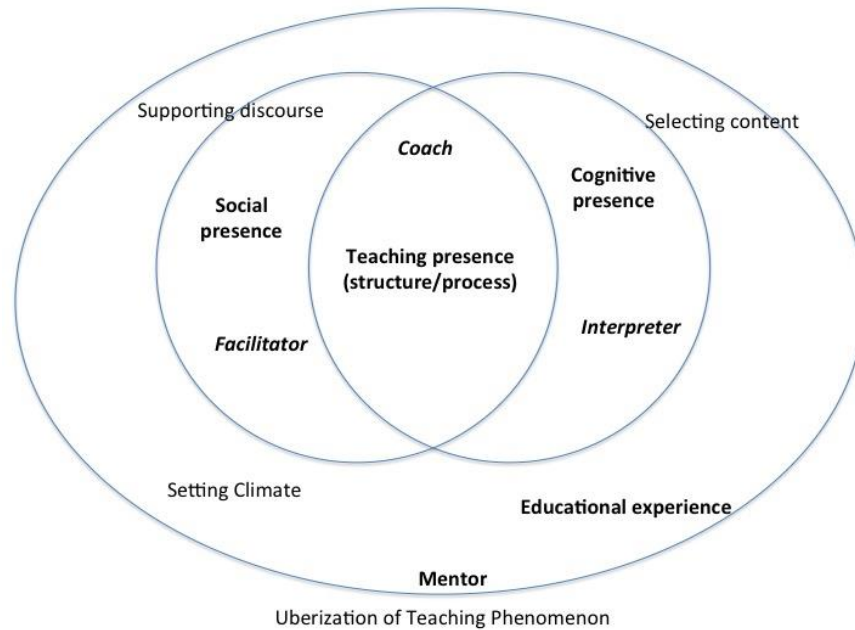
Finally, we have the last scenario, where the MOOC is simply learning content to be used by a teacher with high levels of the kind of teaching skills - stimulating thought, guiding learning processes, providing support and trust – that help to achieve good learning outcomes and better citizens. This kind of teacher does not experience any sense of loss of institutional legitimacy as they have emancipated themselves from the “traditional” academic role of content producer and are confident about the content produced by others.



This scenario is one of the most interesting because it highlights the emergence of a new and - at the same time - very old teacher role: *the mentor*.

## 2.2 The emerging of “brand old” role

The mentor considers the learner as an individual able to find his own way to learn if self-motivated and wisely guided. The mentor/teacher works in an educational context that is not reduced to the academic institution but tends to be wider, like the social community itself. The educational sphere includes both the teaching, social and cognitive presence but is not specifically related to any of them, since its mission is educating in a broader sense. This is also the situation where the flipped classroom can have a mainstream role where the teacher is transformed in a *coach* (Bergmann & Sams 2012).



## Conclusion

Experiencing MOOCs in a blended learning classroom can give us, therefore, a preliminary taste of the disintermediation force at work in the field of education. This is leading towards what can be defined as the «uberization of teaching» phenomenon<sup>2</sup>. In a context where MOOCs is going to play a pivotal role in the academic education thanks to alternative pedagogies such as blended learning and flipped classroom, teaching not only will be characterized as a form of disseminated and ubiquitous activity, but it will also be de-contextualised from a specifically-designated institution and academic role. It will then be re-contextualised more organically into the community itself, where its activity will be more fluid and embedded in the life-style. In other words, educating is going to become a highly personalised and flexible activity, regardless of how informal, or not, the learning is. Accordingly, academic institutions will probably change

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<sup>2</sup> This concept has been used by [Gil Rogers](#) in a interview on the uberization of education (3 June 2014). The same concept has been also defined by James L. Salmon in a post titled *Uberization of Education in the Built Environment* (10 sept. 2015) where he explain that: «The Uberization of Education occurs when a specific student seeks out a specific teacher or group of teachers to learn a specialized skill or skill set. The internet facilitates the connection of the student and the teacher while simultaneously enabling distance learning. The process harkens back to the apprenticeship model mastered by specialty trades and professions in centuries past».

their social role, focusing more on defining those criteria and validation paths that allow learners to become part of the emerging epistemic societies.

To conclude, in accordance with what Clay Shirky (2015) has recently written about the dramatic adoption of online education, which is less about change in the content of classes and more about change to the institutional form of colleges, the result will be an organizational revolution where the teacher will see his/her role expanded and extended.

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