

The Mooc (R)evolution. Where the EMMA project come from¹

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Abstract

Academic institutions all over the world, as well as active stakeholders in the field of education, are exploring Moocs to understand how learning and teaching environments are changing, what are the outcomes of such a novelty for different countries and publics, to what extent the Moocs revolution can represent both a unique opportunity to open up education and a new business model.

Born to help universities and academic institutions to innovate pedagogical models, Moocs are developing along different routes. Using a policy framework analysis approach, this paper presents the results of a European survey that questioned both public and private stakeholders on Mooc policy design, objectives and expected outcomes.

The policy framework analysis was also the opportunity to define the main assets of a new TEL project at a European Level: Emma, the European Multiple Moocs Aggregator, an innovative Moocs platform lead by the University of Naples Federico II and based on its previous experience with the Federica web learning project.

Keywords: Education, TEL, Moocs, Policy framework.

Describing the European context

Variously described as a *disruptive innovation* (Horn and Christensen 2013), a *tsunami* (Brooks 2012, Bull 2012) and a *revolution* (Koller and Ng 2012), Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) have become a focus of public debate in recent years. Although the first MOOCs experiments date back to 2008, it was in 2012 with the development of bespoke MOOCs platforms that the phenomenon gained momentum prompting the New York Times to dub it the year of the MOOC. MOOCs are a new way of delivering open access, online courses that can be scaled up to reach potentially limitless numbers of users, crossing geographical confines to offer quality learning content to the global market (Pappano 2012).

In 2013 the phenomenon reached new heights. Many observers commented that it was like being «*in the midst of a hype cycle*» (Coates 2013, Yang 2013), while others feared that it was the overstatement surrounding the phenomenon that would prove their greatest obstacle to success (Dillenbourg 2013). Expectations are high in Europe too, but accompanied by a certain apprehension regarding the future of public universities and the way competition is increasing between old and new players for a position in this open and global education market.

The aim of this research is to understand what is happening in the European context: how the MOOCs phenomenon is perceived by key players in the field; what comprises the product and what the aims and strategies informing them are. Framework analysis lends itself to this type of research because it enables us to explore a new context through procedural analysis. This approach is designed to explore and describe the initial stages of a new phenomenon i.e. understand *what is happening in a particular setting* (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). The research was structured on three levels. For reasons of synthesis here are reported only some insights from the first *MOOCs European Stakeholders Meeting*, and the main results from a stakeholder survey.

¹ This paper is an excerpt elaborated from a research article by Rosanna De Rosa and Valentina Reda published on the online review LEA, by Florence University Press 2013.

The full version is downloadable here: <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-lea/article/view/13850>

Networking is leading

The *MOOCs European Stakeholders Meeting* offered the opportunity to see a policy community in action. The meeting was designed to find out how Europe is addressing the issue of Moocs, who the key players are and what strategies they are using. The summit highlighted a complex *geopardized* situation with some areas much more active than others but also an incredible range of key players (public, private, nonprofit), some of them with different objectives and business models. A certain amount of *overstatement* undoubtedly surrounds MOOCs, and this is forcing universities to confront the issue without any clear vision or approach. This is reducing the innovative potential of MOOCs to competitive potential.

The key themes that emerged from the debate are here organized into the three sub-areas (fig.1).

The first sub-area is *policy issues*, where the policy community is called on collectively to provide informed and comprehensive answers. Where educational policy is concerned, this response needs to be an official *position statement* that clearly sets out: the role and position of the different players and the type of cultural and financial investment each one is prepared to make in order to attain the desired results. A complex scenario emerges, whereby individual stakeholders decide their own approaches and objectives depending on the policy paradigm adopted. There are three alternative paradigms.

The first is an economic paradigm, where openness means freeing up the education market and removing some of the traditional obstacles, creating new job and business opportunities and experimenting with new sustainability models to respond to government cuts in education spending and increased competition.

In the second, openness is interpreted as a way of democratizing access to higher education, and of wielding cultural soft power in parts of the world where there is less protection for human rights. Innovative teaching methodologies and knowledge transfer could help to achieve these objectives. And making results of publicly-financed research available would be a major demonstration of the impact that OER can have.

The last one sees the Europeanisation issue in terms of providing an adequate response to an education process which seems to be currently dominated by the Americans. This is why branding and marketing are key issues, as these define the power of platforms like Coursera, Edx, Udacity, because leading brands gain the top positions in online learning rankings as well. It would be impossible for Europe to compete with the attractiveness of the American products without an adequate marketing policy but if they do not do so the consequences could be very damaging: in terms of concentration of initiatives and resources, centralisation of the education market and uniformisation of cultural references. The outlook for smaller universities and those with no alternative business model is not good. One of their only chances of survival could lie in quality and specialist output, as Anderson discussed in his *long tail theory* (Anderson 2006). The third scenario seems to hinge on the europe vs platform debate; i.e. for or against the adoption of protectionist policies. The Bologna Process is a policy document for recognition of university credits, but, in this context, it becomes a tool for limiting standardisation to the geographical confines (European High Education Area).

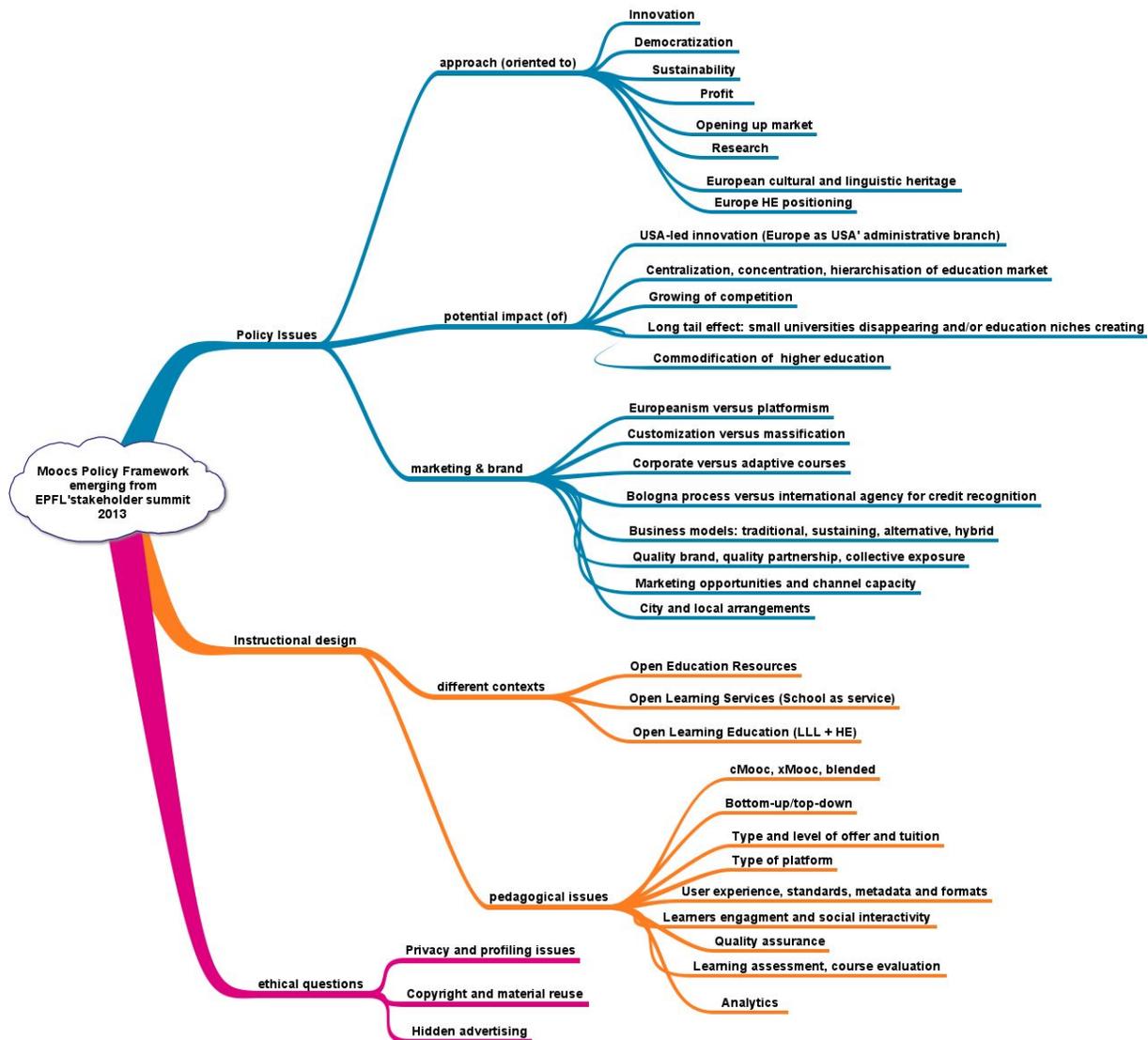


Fig. 1: Moocs Policy Framework

The second sub-area – that of *instructional design* – regards the need to devise new learning process models that reflect the context students live in, the way digital natives use cultural products and the pedagogic models underlying the development of platforms. A significant amount of literature now exists that deals with the structural, organisational and pedagogic differences between cMoocs, xMoocs and the advantages of one particular model over another. Siemens says that cMoocs, compared to the Coursera and EdX model (xMoocs), are unusual in a number of ways but especially because of the generative, connectivist, sharing and social vision of knowledge that underlies them, where the teacher acts as guide – not instructor – and the student has greater autonomy where time-management and learning style is concerned. Sceptics question the validity of this type of learning, and the lack of teacher-student relationship. They criticise the limited control over the learning content, which makes it difficult to define assessment criteria and procedures. The question of quality is often raised and brandished like a weapon in defence of the old teaching system, based on tried and tested methods of assessment, regardless of whether they are effective discriminators. xMoocs on the other hand, have the advantage that they can be scaled up whereas cMOOCs cannot go beyond a certain number of students. They also maintain almost exclusive control over the teaching content and tend to reinforce the authority of the teacher.

Ethical issues are the third and final category. The collection of massive data regarding MOOCs users in a market which is basically unregulated, could prove to be a lucrative sector for profiling agencies and commercial and political marketing, and could threaten individual and privacy rights. Many students who have taken MOOCs refer to this in their post-course feedback, fearing that their failure to do well or complete the course could affect their chances in the job market. The insertion of more, or less, overt publicity is an issue that already needs to be tackled. There are teachers who base MOOCs on their own textbooks, others who seem to encourage the purchase of particular products or brands, like the musical instruments used in their lessons. And guidelines regarding the use and reuse of the materials and copyright seem, for the moment, to be somewhat vague.

Stakeholder survey: who and why

For the final stage of our research we carried out a semi-structured questionnaire on a two-tier sample. Our interviewees are mainly from the academic world: researchers, teachers or consultants involved in MOOCs.

In 70% of cases, the university where the interviewee works has already launched its own MOOC using diverse platforms but with the vast majority on Coursera (38,9%) followed by EdX (11,1%). The 31% of interviewees who belong to universities that have not yet launched their own MOOCs clearly believe that they should proceed in that direction and not stand still while the rest of the world moves on. This makes explicit reference to three major reasons dictating this need for change: changes in pedagogic paradigms, better access to knowledge and issues of inclusion, and marketing of universities.

One of the major stumbling blocks to tackle as regards MOOCs is the critical issue of Openness, a term which is part of the acronym and one which would seem to be a defining characteristic of this type of learning. Our sample was divided on the issue in pretty equal measure, with those agreeing that MOOCs are open standing at 53.8% and those expressing some reservations at 42.3%. Those who expressed reservations about the definition of MOOCs as open, pointed out that there are obvious contradictions between theory and practice, and that openness is not one of the dominant features of many of the MOOC courses available today. Interviewees also pointed out the tendency to over-use and over-simplify the term, openness is, in fact, a much more complex issue as it refers to different level of openness and degree of user liberty. Finally, they also refer to the legal aspects of openness, including issues of copyright and reuse of learning content.

Most people would like to see increased research and experimentation with Moocs as part of an overall university strategy to reaffirm the strategic importance of online learning and its role in lifelong learning. Moocs are often included as part of a University's commitment to Open Education, but many people strongly feel that universities should go beyond experimental projects and use MOOCs as an integral part of traditional degree courses and as an orientation tool for graduate job seekers. The major areas in which interviewees would like to see concrete policies implemented by educational institutions refer mostly to user mobility and innovation in teaching and learning.

While, in general, the picture that emerges is one of solipsistic and extemporaneous individual projects, the future of MOOCs in Europe as far as stakeholders are concerned is fairly clear. They see MOOCs as a new business model and a parallel alternative to traditional teaching, though not a substitute. Half the people interviewed were not in favour of offering university credits for MOOCs. The most common reason given was the difficulty in setting common assessment standards to ensure proper evaluation, and the dangers of plagiarism. Awareness of this problem does not prevent interviewees from considering a different option; that of using MOOCs as a support or parallel pathway to traditional teaching.

The potential to professionalise MOOCs and to make them available to as wide an audience as possible meant that half of our interviewees think MOOCs should be at least bi-lingual (in the national language and English), enabling institutions to increase their potential audiences abroad while reinforcing their national audience by offering the opportunity to study in two languages. Participants were also asked to

state what objectives the European Commission should set for the uptake and use of MOOCs. They were asked to express their agreement on a scale of 1-5 for each proposal. Almost three quarters of respondents (73,1%) agreed that a common European MOOCs strategy was necessary and that central to this was increased funding for projects and research and coordination of national strategies. The general view is that MOOCs are competing globally, and that single European nations are too small to be of relevance. In this respect, a holistic approach to the knowledge economy is more useful.

Participants wanted financial and political support from Europe but rejected the idea of direct European involvement. Half the respondents, in fact, were against the idea of a European Moocs platform, and more than half (61%) do not even want to develop a European MOOCs model. The idea of a common assessment framework for Europe was greeted more favourably, which was predictable in view of responses to previous questions. It reflects a desire to protect the autonomy of the individual institution and to keep the higher education market free from any attempt at supranational regulation. The aim would be to guarantee coordination not uniformisation. People are also concerned that the specific value and diverse nature of European MOOCs is successfully promoted, so much so that more than half of respondents (57%) were in favour of creating multilingual platforms.

While for other issues emerged from the survey you can refer to the already cited article, here we take the opportunity to present quickly Emma, as a project resulting from these research findings.

Emma. From research to implementation

According to stakeholder survey findings, Emma (European Multiple MOOC Aggregator) is a TEL initiative – coordinated by the University of Naples Federico II - aiming at creating and establishing an online platform that supports institutions across the EU in offering MOOCs, paving the way for a pan-European approach to online learning by bringing together a multi-linguistic, cross-cultural, and customized approach. Thus also providing a practical way for opening up university-level education to a much more diverse student audience.

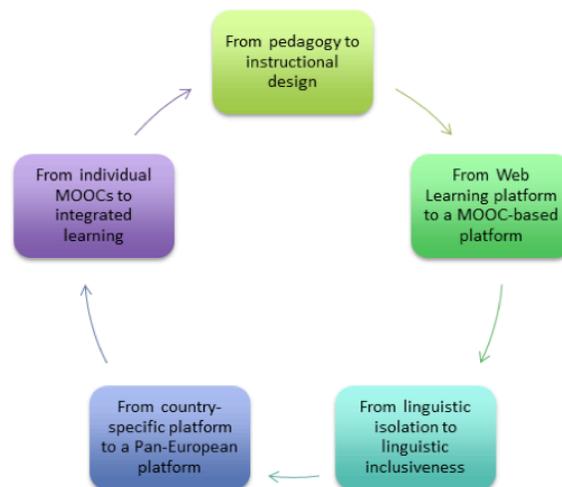


Fig 2: the Emma' five challenges

Seeking to expand the concept of the MOOC, five challenges have been identified as being critical to achieving the Emma' goals (fig. 2). These challenges will be explored – and transformed in assets - throughout the project:

- 1) *From pedagogy to instructional design*: the pedagogy behind each model and the instructional design that derives from this. To what extent can diversity be accommodated in a unique platform without losing effectiveness and consistency?
- 2) *From the web-learning paradigms to MOOCs. Changing paradigms*: Any education platform is a cultural artifact. Creating a platform that aims at supporting diverse approaches concerns integration/aggregation processes at a technical level, but also at a cultural level. To what extent can these processes be translated into sustainability, inclusiveness, and deployment within different social contexts?
- 3) *Accessibility through language. From linguistic isolation to linguistic inclusiveness*: Reaching students outside national boundaries is the main goal of any pan-European platform. But languages are not only about translation. How to approach linguistic to cultural translation?
- 4) *Accessibility through culture: from a country-specific platform to a Pan-European platform*: Current courses leave no room for diversity. Aggregation of MOOCs without language barriers, will enable learners to access MOOCs from differing cultural perspectives. But how to transform this multicultural perspective in added value?
- 5) *From individual MOOCs to massive and back again*: MOOCs are usually characterised by their massive nature. Even in such a context, learning remains an individual task. How to ensure a mindful and individual learning experience in a massive learning environment?

To respond to these challenges, EMMA provide:

- 1) a flexible pan-European platform with range of features (agile approach)
- 2) adaptive access to related learning resources (External Resources, Europeana)
- 3) 16 MOOCs with different elearning approaches and instructional design
- 4) multilingual transcription/translation system
- 5) extensive monitoring system and inbuilt cycles of improvement
- 6) massive and individual learning path combination
- 7) choice of PLE with some adaptive features and building block approach

During the project period, the partners collaborate together to provides MOOCs as well as experience and expertise in the field of e-learning, learning analytics and innovative translation technology, supporting the improving of the platform, its deployment and exploitation. So, finally, the research results offered a unique opportunity for organising and implementing a Project, creating a European brand on the international stage, using the European linguistic richness (24 official languages) as an enormous opportunity for reaching target audiences in other parts of the world, and – last - considering the legacy of academic cooperation already available as an opportunity to create an institutional network for credits recognition as a valuable issue to reinforce the European High Education Area.

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