THE WEB IS THE LIMIT: LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND MOOCS

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Abstract:
MOOCs remain the buzzwords of the current landscape of higher education (HE) provision. In the context of the ever growing use of technology through e-Learning and OpenCourseWare and of the new generation of tablet-toting, hyper-connected youth, the university will continue to extend its reach to students around the world, unbounded by geography and time zones, at a fast pace and at a fraction of the cost of a traditional college education. In this context, "To Mooc or not to Mooc" remains a question that several universities are beginning to consider against more pressing critical reflections on issues pertaining to their language and culture. Our paper aims to examine the role of language and culture in online learning, particularly the hegemony of English and Western cultures against the rising "politics of marginality" that other languages are forced to adopt in a dominant, non-negotiable, disruptive online competition space.

Keywords:
MOOCs, culture, languages, hegemonies, peripheries.

Present day education has recently been subject to several drivers, all of whom have been impacting severely on traditional university's demand, diversity, offer, teaching and learning practices[1]. In their attempt to

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[1] Conole, 2013.

expand their online offerings and make more effective use of technologies, universities have tackled new competitive niches and business models. In this context, with an increasing demand for higher student numbers and greater diversity, the issues pertaining to universities' stated aims of developing students' skills in finding and using information effectively have gradually shifted towards developing learners' 21st century digital literacy skills[2] so as to equip them for an increasingly complex and changing societal context. MOOCs represent, in this respect, an example of how technologies can disrupt the status quo of education, forewarning all stakeholders of further changes to come. They also represent a cry for taking online education (hence MOOCs) more seriously and making more serious, informed and pedagogically effective design decisions[3].

Looking into the relatively short history of MOOCs, one notices their rapid emergence as a disruptive education technology, embracing multiple denominations: educational technology, learning technology, networked learning, technology-enhanced learning[4], and more recently, Open Educational Resources[5]. Siemens et al. created the first MOOC in 2008, called '*Connectivism and Connective Knowledg*e', a course that aimed to foster the availability of social and participatory media, heavily relying on the interaction with a distributed network of peers. There was no 'right way' throughout the course, the emphasis being on personalised learning via a personal learning environment. These represented the first generation of MOOCs and were known as cMOOCs. Soon, variants of this course quickly started to proliferate, beginning 2011, and a second generation of MOOCs emerged, known as xMOOCs. These were primarily based on interactive media, such as lectures, videos and text, with the

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[2] Jenkins, 2009.
[3] Conole, 2013.
[4] Conole and Oliver, 2007.
[5] Glennie, Harley et al. 2012.

emphasis on individual learning, rather than learning through peers. They provide access to recorded lectures, online tests and digital documents as alternatives to traditional classroom instructions. Instead of attending a face-to-face course, students may attend one course online, typically free of charge. The intense discussion around their present and future impact on higher education has spurred many definitions. To some, MOOCs represent *fully online learning and teaching spaces involving thousands of learners from around the world*[6], presenting thus an ideal medium for enquiries into how good practice for teaching for cultural inclusion might be applied online. To others, MOOCs respond to the challenges faced by organisations and distributed disciplines, whereby thousands of people from around the world confluence in one unified learning experience[7]. Or, as more pedagogically–oriented practices, MOOCs are based on principles stemming from connectivist pedagogy, including aggregation, re-mixing, re-purposing, and feeding forward with the purpose of creating more connected and hence effective learning[8].

Such unprecedented 'unbundling of education delivery' is also posing many and significant managerial challenges, as 'traditional' higher education institutions have had to rethink their governance models in order to adapt to these changes and domestic reforms. New managerial types have been emerging, including *the 'Amazon university'*, (based on e-learning and sharing content), the *on-demand university*, where students tailor their courses and credits over a period of time, *the learning hotel*, which continually changes flows of collaboration and interchanges between academic scholars and corporate, government or professional practitioners, the *corporate university*, arguably said to represent a paradigm shift in the

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[6] Daniel, 2012.
[7] Cormier, 2010.
[8] Downes, 2011.

development of organisational human capital, as well as *the umbrella university*, which sees the university as a cooperative rather than a self-contained entity with fragmented activities, the university becoming a "*holding structure with a conglomerate of separately managed businesses*"[9].

However, irrespective of the definition, pedagogical approach or change in the university management that these new teaching and learning technologies are apt to either point to or determine, an ever more pressing issue with MOOCs is closely related to the complex role of language and culture in such type of online learning. If we accept that language, like culture and learning, are culturally embedded phenomena and not mere tools of communication, and since MOOCs do not take place in a glocalized space of acculturation, then technologies themselves are not a culturally neutral phenomenon, rather "*cultural-specific ventures that are grounded and provided in a specific cultural context*" [10].

The role of language and culture in online learning has been well-researched[11]. Owing to deeply rooted cultural values, attitudes and modes of thinking that are difficult to separate from all learning processes[12], cultural diversity remains a valuable asset for addressing many of the global challenges that learning communities are nowadays facing. In response to the threat of loss of cultural identity in the face of globalization, there is a strong desire and need to preserve cultural diversity and enhance community cohesiveness through unique cultural expression[13]. Since education and instructional design are social processes, and since education occurs within culture, culture plays a significant role in instructional

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[9] Squires and Husmann, 2012.
[10] Masoumi & Lindström, 2012: 394.
[11] Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006; Henderson, 1996; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010.
[12] Nisbett, 2003.
[13] Mason, 2007.

planning and design. Hence, instructional providers must be aware both of their learners' cultures and the ways in which these cultures manifest themselves in learning environments and preferences[14]. The complication arises when separation from the educators' own cultures and the culture of the training that they develop can no longer be made. In other words, a great challenge, in our view, is represented by the educators' cultural perspectives represented in the design decisions they make in the MOOCs and the very ways in which they streamline their students to the specific professional, academic and mainstream cultures which they represent.

Now let us look more closely into the relationship between different communities of learners and massive open online courses, harnessing knowledge transfer and information technology for higher education. In all enthusiasm created by their potential to be a cheap way of delivering education to vast audiences, it is somewhat tacitly assumed by individuals and institutions that those who participate willingly in a MOOC accept, per se, that they will participate and work in English and, in all probability, encounter (as well as be assessed against) the hegemony of North Atlantic epistemologies, attitudes and ways of interpreting and seeing the world. Indeed, if MOOCs are seen as some form of neocolonialism[15] and if neo-colonialism of today represents imperialism in its final and (perhaps its) most dangerous stage, then we may as well ask ourselves: *who controls knowledge?[16] And for what purposes?* We don't claim to be able to provide answers to either question in what follows, however, the issue is worth looking into more closely. First, a disclaimer for the use of the 'neo-colonialism' term may point to our understanding (and acceptance) of the term based on the following definition:

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[14] Nisbett, 2003.
[15] Altbach, 2014.
[16] Ibid.

The term 'postcolonialism', it could be argued, has arisen to account for neocolonialism, for continuing modes of imperialist thought and action across much of the contemporary world. It certainly does not imply that the colonial era is over: that a stake has been driven through the heart of Empire that it might never again return. The 'post' in postcolonial remains, nonetheless, irritatingly cryptic. If it doesn't mean 'after' colonialism, then what exactly does it mean? Does it, like the 'post' in postmodernism, risk becoming an empty signifier, a perennial open question or merely a sign of intellectual fatigue?[17]

The term 'neocolonialism' together with its ensuing relationship with MOOCs has also been recently used by Philip G. Altbach, Director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, who holds that since MOOCs are largely an American-led effort, with most courses coming from universities in the United States or other Western countries,

"the online courses threaten to exacerbate the worldwide influence of Western academe, bolstering its higher-education hegemony" [18]

Indeed, since the instruction language is English (even when the course content is translated in other languages, it still reflects the original course and the culture embedded therein), since MOOCs' content and culture are American oriented and based on already existing pedagogical ideas and practices, since the vast majority of instructors are American, it follows that no knowledge can be neutral, quite the reverse, it reflects, at least insofar as MOOCs are concerned, the academic traditions, methodological approaches, and teaching strategies of the American academic system.

If the transmission of knowledge in education is determined by factors such as present experience, historical reproduction, negotiated

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[17] Huggan, 1997:22.
[18] Altbach, 2014.

curricula and pedagogy, then meaning-making and knowledge construction are dominant in the transmission of knowledge[19]. Focusing on education service, Bernstein argues that it is

'a public institution central to the production and reproduction of distributive injustices'.[20]

He maintains that schools are failing in a certain measure to provide the egalitarian opportunities that underpin social democratic values and principles (stipulated in the Education Reform Act of 1956) and holds that schools reproduce a culture in which the society of dominant holders of power is reproduced in its turn. In other words,

"(h)ow a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control"[21].

His theoretical model for the analysis of university education based on a classification of knowledge and focusing on three 'message systems'[22] curricula, pedagogy, and evaluation may be well applied to MOOCs that are single-handedly conveying the Western canon. Altbach's justification on MOOCs' organic, undeliberate influence, offers little solace:

Those responsible for creating, designing, and delivering MOOC courses do not seek to impose their values or methodologies on others; influence happens organically and without conspiracies. A combination of powerful academic cultures, the location of the main creators and disseminators of MOOCs, and the orientation of most of those creating and teaching MOOCs ensures the domination of the largely English-speaking academic systems[23].

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[19] see Bernstein, 1971a; 1971b; 1996.
[20] Bernstein, 1996:5.
[21] Bernstein, 1971:202.
[22] Bernstein, 1971:203.
[23] Altbach, 2014.

Western academic systems, modes of inquiry, the literature and articles in peer-reviewed influential journals dominate all delivery material of MOOCs. Particularly within the social sciences and humanities paradigm, most courses reflect Western traditions of knowledge, methodologies, the Western literature canon, and Western philosophical assumptions. According to Altbach,

"it is, under these circumstances, natural that the dominant ideas from these centers will dominate academic discourse, and will be reflected in the thinking and orientations of most of those planning and teaching MOOCs. MOOC gatekeepers, such as Coursera, Udacity, and others, will seek to maintain standards as they interpret them, and this will no doubt strengthen the hegemony of Western methodologies".

Moreover, English is the dominant language of scholarly communication, hence of internationally circulated academic journals, the language of websites. Neither terminology nor any course instructions can be fully effective in reaching non-elite audiences except if in English. If we consider that internet-based virtual communication typically occurs through written rather than spoken interactions, then learners may be missing several benefits, such as the socio-cultural cues[24] and orderliness[25] typically encountered and provided by face-to-face interactions. It would be interesting to have statistics, for example, on how much of closest interpretation of printed text can be effectively made when participants coming from various cultural backgrounds are engaged in learning situations and for that matter, how much of it is based on mutual, reciprocal understanding and how much on own cultural background. It would be equally valuable to assess effective communication and knowledge transfer and management with learners coming from Asian and English speaking

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[24] Roald, 1999.
[25] Allwood & Schroeder, 2000.

communities, to take only these two cases for the case in point, knowing that communication processes are different in their cultures. It is known for example, that Asian speakers use sentences in which the main point is postponed until enough background information is known for making correct connections and inferences, whereas English speakers typically open discourse with the main topic followed by supportive information. This culturally embedded discourse disparity often results in English speakers' familiarity with the usage of a topic sentence to open discourse or anticipate critical information being presented at the start of a conversation whereas Asian speakers wait until later in discourse for important information to be made available[26]. How is then course content assimilated? How can learning behaviour be the same? Furthermore, at yet another level, developments in linguistics (semantics in particular) have isolated intractable phenomena, such as: presuppositions, and other context-dependent implications that require pragmatic solutions[27].

"*The most often quoted example "Some ten cent pieces are rejected by this vending machine", shows that "some" may mean either "some and not all" or "some and perhaps all", and it further indicates that a semantic theory can give us only a certain proportion of a general account of language understanding. The gap that remains to be bridged between a semantic theory and a complete theory of linguistic communication must account for the hints, implicit purposes, assumptions, social attitudes, etc. that are effectively communicated by the use of language,*"[28]

including "*the world experience brought to the situation of discourse by the interlocutors*"[29].

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[26] Scollon & Scollon, 1995.
[27] Florea, 2013:129.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Jaszczolt 2006:3.

Across a larger cultural spectrum, even teacher-student interaction may be reflective of different norms and values; in the US, it generally occurs on a position of equality, in the German culture, a confrontational, argumentative style in a teacher–student interaction is often considered to be necessary so as to lend more interest and spark to informal conversations, whereas to Asian students, interactions of this type are hardly ever acceptable. The literature indicates that Eastern language cultures use "high-context communication", and receivers of message (and hence course content) are solely responsible for deducing the entire, appropriate meaning[30], whereas American culture is considered a mid-context culture, characterized by a clearly provided context of conversation and more task-focused responses. According to Chen, Hsu and Caropreso even

"The use of emoticons by Taiwanese students, compared to American students' absence of such symbolic indicators, may reflect the goal of Taiwanese to compensate for high-context communication typical of eastern cultures."[31]

However, the culture-specific determinants of online learning environment and the performance of learning communities are far more complex than this and often times intractable, showing a potential for inhibiting the emergence of a local academic culture and content, and/or of courses tailored particularly for national audiences. Likewise, cross-cultural learning takes more processing time for effective communication, especially given communication context-specific differences. English-as-a-foreign-language challenges may often contribute to different learning behaviours. For example,

"Efficiency is a critical criterion for judging job performance in American society but not in Asian society. This may explain why Taiwanese

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[30] Porter & Samovar, 2003.
[31] Chen, S. J., Hsu, C.L., & Caropreso, E. J., 2006:27.

students considered American students to be aggressive, whereas Americans thought the delay of participation to be a weakness of this cross-cultural activity."[32]

Paradoxically, in the process, while having a rich potential to reach non-elite audiences, MOOCs seems to strengthen in fact the currently dominant academic culture, making it more difficult for alternative voices to be heard. It will be interesting to see in the near future, for example, how will MOOCs and their "foreign ideas" impact the Chinese ideology and socialism, given the breakthrough that these online courses have made in China in 2013, when Cousera and edX (two major MOOC platforms) partnered up with Chinese universities to offer their courses online. The future development of virtual ethnography would perhaps allow for better collection and analysis of data reflecting more on richness of communication between and across cultures, if not between and across dominant nations. Bonding educational discourse may help explain matters pertaining to sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, new ethnicities and urban youth culture at several macro levels of education practices and social organization. Cultural hybridity forms have already been identified as forms of cognitive dissonance and social marginalization, however new and different forms of collective representation through different languages in different learning communities may be the solution for a better functionality and wider adoption of MOOCs within the paradigm of language, culture, identity. Our argument here is centered on the need to think beyond the (marginalizing) politics of marginality and to focus on education produced solely in the articulation and legitimation of cultural differences. The rationale is that such unifying-under-one-language spaces will allow for elaborating communal strategies of selfhood apt to hinder new signs of

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[32] Ibid.

identity, and blur whatever becomes a complex social construct in the production of self and other perceptions.

As the degree of diversity will proportionally increase, MOOCs may turn out to represent a unifying voice, making all education more accessible and less expensive, however it remains to be seen whether in the online competition space the rising hegemony stakes of English and Western cultures will come to be globally accepted at all costs. "Rivers and people become crooked by following the lines of least resistance" may be just another way of putting it. Or MOOCing it.

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