

REVIEW OF *MOOCS*, BY JONATHAN HABER

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J. Adam Carter & Duncan Pritchard

University of Edinburgh

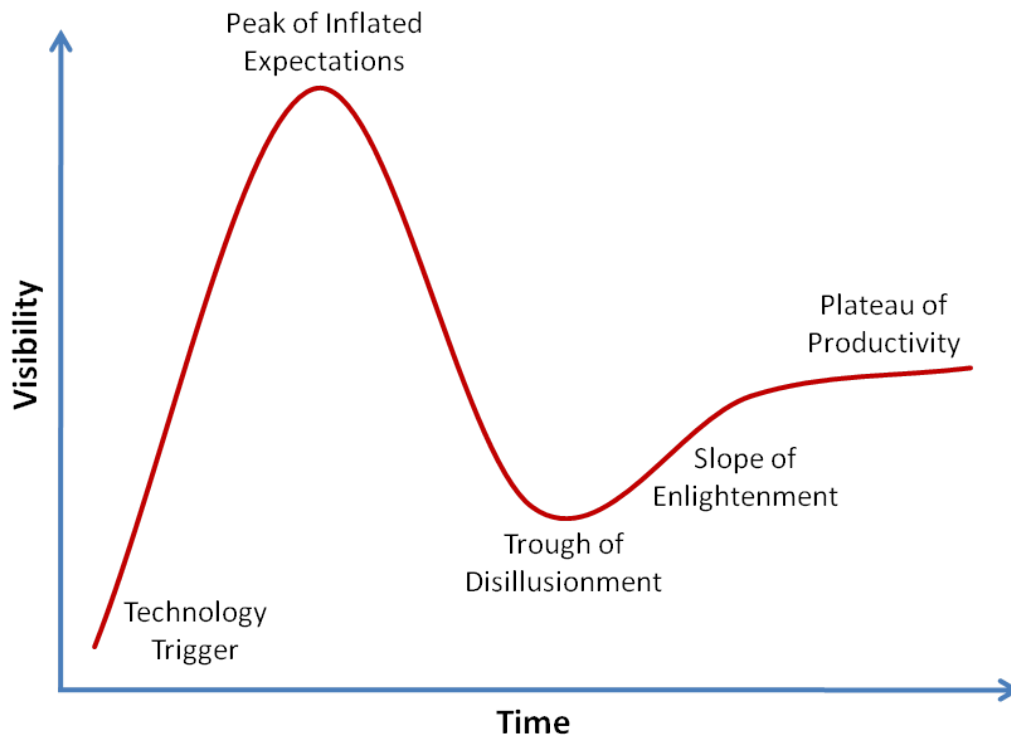
Massive online open courses—or MOOCS, as they are known—are one of the fastest growing trends in higher education. The potential benefits of free open education for anyone with an internet connection are hard to deny. Nonetheless—and especially since 2013—the topic of MOOCs has been an especially divisive one among educators. One source of this divisiveness is uncertainty about what the new possibilities engendered by MOOCS mean for traditional forms of pedagogy. Some predictions have been striking. Take for example, Sebastian Thrun, the founder of Udacity, which is (along with Coursera and edX) one of the ‘big three’ MOOC providers. In 2012, after several MOOCs already had 100,000+ participants, Thrun predicted that in the next fifty years we would see MOOCs come to ‘rule an educational landscape consisting of no more than ten institutions.’¹ It’s not surprising, in the face of such hype, that ‘pro-MOOC’ and ‘anti-MOOC’ arguments began to take on polarising shapes.

Perhaps the most important benefit of Jonathan Haber’s timely book *MOOCS* is that it offers a balanced, well-informed and thoughtful approach to navigating through, as Haber puts it, ‘the thicket of competing claims, aspirations and accusations that clutter discussion of an important new educational technology...’² Following a big-picture introduction (Chapter 1), Haber’s five substantive chapters help to put in perspective: (i) how MOOCs originated (Chapter 2); (ii) what MOOCs *are* (and relatedly what they are *not*) (Chapter 3); (iii) what the salient issues and controversies are (Chapter 4); (iv) what modifications to MOOC design and implementation have been effective (Chapter 5); and (v) where MOOCs are realistically headed (Chapter 6). The upshot of the book is a perspective on MOOCs that is well grounded in detail, history and context, and which provides a clear sense of how MOOCs can realistically be effective in higher education.

¹ Haber (2014, 10).

² Haber (2014 p. xiii).

Haber situates his discussion of MOOCs within the Gartner Group's Hype Cycle for new, disruptive technologies, which 'maps out important peaks and valleys of perception that tend to repeat whenever an important technology-driven trend plays out.'³



Gartner Group's Hype Cycle⁴

With respect to the hype cycle, the analogy Haber draws between MOOCs and e-books is revealing. In the case of e-books, the relevant technology 'trigger' was Amazon's release of the Kindle. This fueled unrealistic expectations, the most extreme being that printed books would be 'replaced' entirely by e-books, thereby putting print publishers out of business. As Haber notes, not long after the technological trigger and associated peak of inflated expectations there was a predictable initial backlash and disillusionment. E-books (for various reasons) were not all that some had (unrealistically) predicted. Following this 'trough of disillusionment', e-books eventually moved through a 'slope of enlightenment', toward a 'plateau of productivity', one where their realistic benefits could be appreciated alongside more traditional mediums. Important to the move up the slope of enlightenment was an

³ Haber (2014, 8).

⁴ Haber (2014, 9).

appreciation of e-books' realistic potential, not as 'replacements' for printed books, but also not as irrelevant or without use.

In the case of MOOCs, Haber invites us to view the lay of the land as very similar. The striking predictions (around 2012) were followed, likewise, by initial backlash, including worries expressed that MOOCs would be used to simply replace paid faculty, along with various other criticisms of their effectiveness relative to the initial hype.⁵ Haber identifies the overarching objective of his book as 'finding the proper way' up the slope of enlightenment to more rapidly reach a plateau of productivity.

The two chapters that are probably most effective toward Haber's described objective are Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2, which historically situates MOOCs, is well researched, and it is helpful to the reader to locate MOOCs alongside other technological innovations in education, including distance learning, electronic media and computer-based teaching. Chapter 3 is perhaps the book's most fundamental chapter, in that it engages with the question of what a MOOC is, over and above recorded lectures. Another interesting element of this chapter is that it engages with the more general question of whether a course is something over and above its constituent parts. This chapter will be especially important for readers who have not yet had an experience taking or teaching a MOOC.

That said, probably the most important chapter of the book—and the chapter to which we will dedicate the remainder of our discussion—is Chapter 4, which is concerned with issues and controversies surrounding MOOCs. This chapter raises some of the most common objections to MOOCs that have been proposed, and canvasses some replies. We'll discuss these in turn.

One of the most notorious objections to MOOCs is the *drop out rates* objection. The objection, in short, is that the MOOC drop out rate is typically around 90%, and that this indicates something deeply problematic about MOOCs in comparison with brick-and-mortar university classes (which have much lower dropout rates). Granted, the number looks bad. As Haber notes, however, it is also misleading. The 90% calculation 'treats every sign-up as the equivalent of a course enrollment decision by students attending a traditional

⁵ Many will recall a heavily circulated 'anti-MOOC' open letter from San Jose State University's philosophy department in May 2013. The letter voiced the philosophy department's opposition to the university's proposed use of Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel's edX 'Justice' MOOC. This letter, published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* raised an alarming worry that resonated with many in the blogosphere: that MOOCs were a ploy to replace paid faculty.

college or university...⁶ Haber questions—rightly, in our view—whether online sign-ups should be treated as indicating the same level of commitment as enrolling in a traditional college course, particularly considering that the latter often feature ‘shop around’ periods.⁷ As Haber (2014, 92) puts it:

if a potential MOOC student curious about a course clicks on the Enroll button to get a closer look at the syllabus and course requirements or to size up the teacher they will be spending several weeks learning from, should this be considered the equivalent of formal enrollment in the class or would it be more comparable to “shopping” classes or even just browsing through the college catalog?

This is an important and difficult question. At the very least, it recommends a more careful way of arriving at a drop-out rate. A further problem with the drop-out rate objection, which Haber doesn’t raise, is that it’s not clear that drop-out rates have the same kind of relevance in the case of MOOCs as with traditional courses, and this point about relevance points to an interesting advantage MOOCs can lay claim to. Consider that in the case of traditional courses, dropping out signals a significant cost on behalf of the student—e.g., substantial tuition fees, accommodation, etc., as well as additional opportunity costs. It is at least in part in virtue of these costs that high drop-out rates would be problematic with respect to traditional courses. Dropping out of a MOOC, however, does not generate the same kinds of costs. But since such costs are obviously part of what makes high drop-out rates problematic, it’s therefore not clear that a high drop-out rate for MOOCs, in contrast to traditional courses, should be thought to have same kind of negative significance.

Another concern expressed about MOOCs is that they will ‘remake’ education, by enticing students who would have originally applied to traditional universities to instead not do so, opting for MOOCs instead. This concern, however, is not borne out by the studies that track the demographic of MOOC participants. Haber notes, for example, a University of Edinburgh study in which over 200,000 students who had enrolled in its six Coursera courses were sent a personal information survey. Of the 40,000+ who responded, it turned out that 76% were over the age of 25 (a significantly older demographic than what’s normally associated with college and university-age courses).⁸ More generally, as Haber notes, it turns out that the 18-22-year old demographic, which makes up the brunt of

⁶ Haber (2014, 92).

⁷ Haber (2014, 92).

⁸ Haber (2014, 98).

university-age students, ‘represents just a small fraction of MOOC enrollees.’⁹ Accordingly, the demographic data does not corroborate fears that MOOCs will result in dramatic drops in attendance at traditional universities.

Another point of controversy about MOOCs which Haber engages with concerns awarding credit for MOOC classes. The question framing this debate is whether ‘free massive online courses from world-famous universities should be considered on a par with the residential and online programs offered by other (i.e., less prestigious) institutions of higher learning.’¹⁰ Haber helpfully explores some of the complexities of this issue, situating it helpfully in the context of other initiatives to attain university credit through unconventional ways (e.g., the AP and CREDIT programs). Haber suggests that some of the backlash against awarding MOOCs college credit ‘may have also derived from attempts to award them too much credibility too quickly.’¹¹

Other issues and controversies Haber engages with concern worries about cheating in MOOCs, intellectual property, openness, level of demand and the value of MOOCs. As with the more general approach taken in the book, Haber’s diagnosis in each case is admirably even-handed.

As an overall assessment, we think *MOOCS* is a well-written, informed and timely contribution to what is currently a very important issue in higher education. It should be essential reading for educators and/or administrators considering launching a MOOC, and it is also strongly recommended reading for those who desire to better understand what MOOCs are and what they can realistically offer.

⁹ Haber (2014, 99).

¹⁰ Haber (2014, 102).

¹¹ Haber (2014, 103).