Editorial: Massive Open Online Courses, a perspective paper by Sir John Daniel

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We are very pleased to focus this issue on a perspective article by Sir John Daniel. Sir John has a long history of involvement with the Open University, the UK home of JIME. Indeed as he points out in his biography (Daniel, 2012), he first visited the Institute of Educational Technology at The Open University back in 1972. The visit was as part of his work for a Master's degree in Educational Technology at Concordia University and he describes this as a life-changing experience. He returned to The Open University in 1990 and stayed this time for eleven years in a rather different role as the OU's Vice Chancellor. Open Higher Education has been a consistent theme in his career that has included the presidencies of the International Council for Open and Distance Education, the Canadian Association for Distance Education and the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education before "retiring" from President of the Commonwealth of Learning in 2012. He was also the Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO where he had the opportunity to promote open education at all levels. His publications have also anticipated the idea of education at very large scale with the inclusion of works such as Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education (Daniel, 1996) and Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All (Daniel, 2010).

The paper in this issue is the result of time spent at the Korea National Open University during a period when initiatives were emerging to provide free access to learning materials at scale. The result is a thoughtful and detailed review of very recent activity, including both the grey literature of blogs and referring back to foundations that it would be dangerous to ignore. The paper was released first to be a record of activity available under the attribution creative commons licence (CC-BY). The use of the creative commons licence means that we are able to make light edits and republish here in JIME as a perspective piece without raising ownership issues. The review process highlighted one place where we thought some additional notes could be useful to cover some of the definitions used in the paper. The key of course is the MOOC acronym itself: Massive Open Online Course. This is a broad term that is used to include almost

any way in which free learning experiences are being designed to be offered via the Internet. Within that broad definition there are two types that are distinguished in the paper: the "cMOOC" and the "xMOOC". The "c" stands for connectivism (Siemens, 2005) and represents the view of those who first coined the term MOOC that an effective way to operate at scale is to use shared interest to connect with others. Tools for such courses then centre on discussions, shared expertise and aggregation of joint work. The more recent MOOCs that come out of existing courses are then distinguished as "x", which follows the practice of marking spin-offs from existing work with an "x", in some cases representing "extension", "experimental", "multiplied" up or even "unknown". These are much more likely to have a direct match to material that has been previously offered to learners, to be linked to existing providers such as universities, and to be structured around fixed content and assessment. In practice there may be less distinction and considerable blending between these categories. The paper discusses the differences but then bases much of its analysis on the steps that are being taken towards xMOOCs, and so some of the criticisms need to be seen in that context rather than open courses overall.

Writing this short editorial at the end of 2012 means that it is difficult to predict whether the concept of MOOC will be a lasting one, however as part of a move towards greater scale and openness there is a longer history and an expanding trajectory. We also do not have to look very far to see the impact on organisations. At The Open University we have used open approaches for some time; OpenLearn was launched in 2006 to offer free access to content and we have many users for our open content. The ideas in MOOCs have acted to provide further models for how we can innovate courses: examples include developing ways to learn how to translate open materials (OT12, 2012), how to understand learning design (OLDS, 2012) (that describes itself as a "pMOOC" where "p" is project to offer yet another model), and a hybrid learning experience as part of the established Masters in Online and Distance Education. In this last case the open course forms a section within a longer taught course that carries traditional credit (OU, 2012). Blending open and free with registered and fee paying will give valuable experience for both groups of learner and continues a path towards a more complex and holistic picture for learners across the world.

The next steps remain uncertain; the new ventures described in the paper (Coursera, udacity, and MITx) are leading to fresh ideas. On the day this is being prepared for publication The Open University has announced Futurelearn (THES, 2012) as a way to bring in some of the background that is highlighted in Sir John Daniel's paper to provide a shared platform and further expand the choice to learners and to educators in how to start the learning experience. There can be no certainty of lasting impact but it is clear that these are experiments from which we have the chance to learn and to examine whether indeed they help meet some of the grand challenges for education that have been a consistent theme of Sir John Daniel's work.

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