

CHAPTER 11

Bildung in a Digital World

The Case of MOOCs

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Introduction

Imagine a student enrolling in an Introduction to Philosophy course. She checks the required readings, sources the relevant materials and blocks out the required time in her agenda. The course begins with the question, ‘What is philosophy?’ She is not in a lecture hall or a classroom. No students shuffle uncomfortably in their seats and no professor stands waiting for an answer. Rather than blurting out her thoughts or raising her hand, she begins to type. As she does so, perhaps two, perhaps 2,000, fellow students are considering the very same question from Amsterdam to Hong Kong.

‘Introduction to Philosophy’ is one example of a massive open online course, (MOOC) which is offered by the University of Edinburgh. It ranks in the ‘top fifty most popular MOOCs of all time’, with over 500,000 enrolments since 2013.¹ MOOCs were expected to revolutionize higher education, not only on account of their promises of ‘massiveness’ and ‘openness’, but also because they

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allow students greater flexibility and tailor-made programmes. Since *The New York Times* declared 2012 ‘the year of the MOOC’, MOOCs have frequently been touted as key to the future of universities where students will be ‘declaring missions, not majors.’²

MOOCs offer many advantages, allowing people to study wherever and whenever they want, interacting with leading scholars and other students from around the world. They also promise to broaden access to those who do not have the opportunity or means to participate in traditional forms of location-based higher education, and to allow older people to ‘up-skill’, re-train or simply enjoy the pleasures of learning. Against these democratizing and empowering claims, some humanities scholars have voiced scepticism as to whether MOOCs can deliver the sort of intellectual training and personal cultivation (*Bildung*—discussed more extensively below) that is provided within the walls of the university, where staff and students interact face-to-face, in relatively intimate settings, to discuss issues they deem important rather than being driven by external definitions of relevance. MOOCs are seen as the antithesis to such an ideal. Instead of promoting critical engagement with ideas, they are dismissed as marketing or entertainment, or more seriously, as an attack on academic labour and a means of instrumentalizing humanities education (Bogost et al. 2013; Hall 2015).

In this chapter, we critically examine both the promises and despair surrounding MOOCs (building on the more general discussion in the opening chapter to this volume by Stocchetti). We do so from a perspective that takes the materiality of education seriously. In other words, we recognize that all educational forms are technologically mediated, and all have an important material dimension that shapes interactions between staff and students, as well as among students themselves. To do this, the next section provides a brief outline of the development of MOOCs. We then explore the most common humanist objections against them, and show how these objections may be justified, as MOOCs can be seen as incompatible with *Bildung* and the values of the humanities. But we also go on to question the extent to which MOOCs really do threaten these values by focusing on the advantages and disadvantages elicited from people’s experiences with MOOCs so far. We suggest that far from confirming the sceptics’ perceived incompatibility between a technology-intensive environment and the *Bildung* ideal, experiences with MOOCs to date may actually serve to promote several of the values of the humanities.

A Decade of MOOCs

The objective of the first MOOC, launched in 2008, was to explore the potential of an online platform, focusing on knowledge transmission through networked practices and decentred learning experiences (Downes & Siemens 2009). Today, there are two distinct categories: the cMOOC (‘connectivism’) and the

xMOOC ('exponential' or 'extended'). The cMOOC is the progeny of the first MOOC created in 2008 and is typically dialogical, emphasizing interaction between learners. The xMOOC, on the other hand, is modelled on the typical content delivery method of traditional university teaching (Stewart 2013) and is thus seen as a scalable extension of the university (e.g. HarvardX and MITx) (Hollands & Tirthali 2014). The first xMOOC was in 2011, when Stanford professors attracted over 160,000 students for a course on artificial intelligence (Markoff 2011; Waldrop 2013). While some continue to experiment with cMOOCs, xMOOCs are now dominant among the main providers of MOOCs: Coursera, EdX and Udacity.³ Disagreements abound about the exact differences between the two models; however, a crude characterization is as follows: in an xMOOC you sit and watch a video, in a cMOOC you collaboratively produce the video (Bruff 2013). As Hollands and Tirthali state, according to the creators of the two platforms, there are 'radical differences in goals and structure of these learning experiences, with the only commonalities being that they are scalable and technology-based' (2014: 18). Recent studies point to further diversifications within MOOCs, for example, pMOOCs ('problem' or 'participant' based) and qMOOCs ('quality' based) (Jansen & Schuwer 2015), as well as further derivatives of the MOOC model, such as POOCs (Personalized Open Online Courses) and SMOCs (Synchronous Massive Online Courses) (Hollands & Tirthali 2014). However, it is the predominance of xMOOCs that fuels fears that MOOCs are primarily being embraced for their profit-making ability rather than their pedagogic possibilities (Bulfin, Pangrazio & Selwyn 2014; Kovanović et al. 2015).

Following the first course offered by Stanford in 2011, two annual reviews of the MOOC-space, 'The MOOC juggernaut: one year later' (Shah 2012) and 'The MOOC juggernaut: year 2' (Shah 2013), both discuss the huge surge in enrolments and document the hype and excitement that surrounded MOOCs in the early years. In a survey conducted in 2013, the most cited reasons for institutions engaging with MOOCs were to 'increase the visibility of the institution' (27 per cent) and to 'drive student recruitment' (20 per cent). The third most cited reason was 'innovating pedagogy' (18 per cent) (Allen & Seamen 2013). A further qualitative study similarly asked, 'How and why are institutions engaging with MOOCs?' (Hollands & Tirthali 2014). Of the six goals they identified, 'building and maintaining brand' was identified as important by 41 per cent of respondents and 'improving economics by lowering costs or increasing revenues' by 38 per cent. 'Extending the reach of the institution and access to education' was ranked most highly, by 65 per cent of respondents. The other three goals included 'improving educational outcomes for both MOOC participants and on-campus students' (38 per cent), 'innovation in teaching and learning' (38 per cent) and 'conducting research on teaching and learning' (28 per cent) (ibid.).

Two discourses have dominated the literature in recent years (BIS 2013). The first is that of the 'enthusiasts' who have 'welcome[d] the shake-up and energy MOOCs bring to learning, teaching and assessment' (ibid.: 4). The emphasis

is on positive experiences with ‘innovative formats of pedagogy, and spotlight themes such as access, empowerment, relationship building and community’ (ibid.). The discourse of the ‘sceptics ... serve[d] to temper the general enthusiasm’ (ibid.). They point to challenges which have been left unresolved by previous generations of online learning, suggesting they ‘suffer from weaknesses around access, content, quality of learning, accreditation, pedagogy, poor engagement of weaker learners, exclusion of learners without specific networking skills’ (ibid.).

However, neither the enthusiasts nor the sceptics are saying anything new (see Stocchetti, Chapter 1, in this volume). Every change in the means of delivering education has prompted debate. Socrates feared that writing, a very early information technology, would lead to a decline in the quality of learning. Ironically, we know this because Plato took the liberty of writing down Socrates’ concerns in the *Phaedrus*. These included the fear that writing would become a substitute for memory and thought so that students would later simply repeat what they had heard rather than thinking for themselves, and that interaction between teacher and student would decline (Everard 2000).

Leaping ahead to the 20th century, radio and television were taken up by both broadcasting and educational organizations. Since its establishment in the 1920s, the BBC’s mission has been ‘to enrich people’s lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain.’⁴ The Open University in the United Kingdom, established in the 1960s, offered higher education to non-traditional students in non-traditional ways (largely distance learning to older people who for whatever reason had not gone to university when they were 18). It worked closely with the BBC, and later commercial broadcasters, to produce high-quality learning materials to accompany their books and face-to-face meetings. Television programmes are not always erudite nor educational, but there is no a priori reason why radio and television programmes cannot be produced to support *Bildung*.

After the World Wide Web became available in 1993, similar debates again took place. This technology with global reach was heralded as offering the potential to provide information to the entire world at very low cost. For example, the UK Fryer Report (1997) was very optimistic about the possibilities:

New digital technologies will create learning opportunities which are not dependent on being available at a particular time and place. Learning at home and outside conventional educational establishments will become more widespread—with implications for institutions, teachers and content creators (like broadcasters) as well as individual learners. Tailoring resources to individual needs will eventually become possible. (Fryer 1997: 15)

This certainly pre-figures contemporary debates about the possibility of MOOCs to offer personalized education beyond the university, and to support

the widening of access to higher education. At the same time, digital technologies are often seen by policymakers and university managers as part of the solution to declining resources and greater competition between universities (Brown 2000).

The point of this very condensed pre-MOOC history about the use of technology in the delivery of education is threefold. First, debates about how best to engage students with knowledge and ideas are not new. Second, new developments in the means of recording and sharing information are always accompanied by debates about their suitability for educational contexts. Third, when technologies are new, they have potentials, and how those potentials are ultimately realized depends not only on the technological affordances, but also on the social and political contexts in which they are introduced.

Voices of Dissent

Scholars in the humanities have harboured a number of concerns about MOOCs. These relate to their overall desirability and purpose within the broader landscape of higher education, as well as to how they are taught. The city and the factory (Feenberg 2002) are useful metaphors for thinking about why humanities scholars make their objections to MOOCs. The city exemplifies the ideals of liberal education, as articulated via the notion of *Bildung*. The humanities engage with artistic, literary and cultural expressions of what it means to be human. According to the city model of education, dialogical exchange with a diverse community of individuals is key to one's self-development and intellectual growth as a critical intellectual well versed in reading, interpretation and writing. This city model of education is then presented as being under attack by a factory model. The factory is oriented towards efficiently producing employable citizens for a society in which science and technology are the dominant currency, thus contributing to the commodification of knowledge which is being delivered in neat packages in a cost-effective and time-efficient way, with the objective of increasing profits (see Hall, Chapter 7, in this volume). MOOCs are therefore considered to be incompatible with broader human values and the formation of intellectual character.

What is salient in such debates is how technology automatically, and certainly unreflectively, gets linked to the factory rather than the city. This can also be seen in the discussion about digital humanities. Although hailed by some as saviour of the humanities (Straumsheim 2014), others resist this 'evangelical discourse' on digitalization (Hamilton 2016). Fish has notoriously attacked digital humanists for fetishizing technology at the expense of genuine intellectual enquiry, suggesting that 'the more the focus has been on disciplines where computational skills are central, the greater the erosion of the skills we refer to as "critical thinking"' (2013). He has also asked whether 'the technologies wielded by digital humanities practitioners either facilitate the work of the humanities, as

it has been traditionally understood, or bring about an entirely new conception of what work in the humanities can and should be?’ (2015: 349) Fish’s charges received support from Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia (2016):

What digital humanities is not about, despite its explicit claims, is the use of digital or quantitative methodologies to answer research questions in the humanities. It is, instead, about the promotion of project-based learning and lab-based research over reading and writing, the rebranding of insecure campus employment as an empowering ‘alt-ac’ career choice, and the redefinition of technical expertise as a form (indeed, the superior form) of humanist knowledge.

All of these claims attest to the notion that when it comes to the relationship between technology and the humanities, there is a perceived trade-off between incompatible values, between the city and the factory.

This same opposition can be observed in the discussion about MOOCs, where two lines of argument can be discerned, one primarily in economic and political terms, the other more in pedagogical or educational ones. In the remainder of this section, we tease out both lines of critique. After mapping the objections against MOOCs, later sections explore which of those could be remedied by re-designing MOOCs, which ones point to insoluble shortcomings of MOOCs and which ones have to be dismissed because humanities-oriented values might actually be better served by MOOCs than by traditional forms of education.

Economic and Political Concerns

Bogost succinctly summarizes the main economic or political objections against MOOCs: ‘MOOCs are a type of marketing’, ‘MOOCs are a financial policy for higher education’, ‘MOOCs are an academic labour policy’, ‘MOOCs are speculative financial instruments’, ‘MOOCs are an expression of Silicon Valley values’ and ‘MOOCs are a kind of entertainment media’ (in Bogost et al. 2013). We examine each of these concerns in turn.

A number of scholars have claimed that MOOCs are no more than a ‘clever marketing ploy’ used by elite universities (Bulfin, Pangrazio & Selwyn 2014). They object that universities have little interest in providing quality education through MOOCs, but rather their main interest is in profiling their names and attracting attention, particularly through showboating their superstar professors. For example, while discussing the launch of the British MOOC platform FutureLearn, a senior advisor voiced concern that the platform was a mere marketing exercise: ‘Increasingly, it feels that universities finding themselves in a competitive market for attracting students have seen MOOCs as a commercial opportunity ... focused on business goals rather than pedagogical [aims]’

(Parr 2012). As we saw above, a number of studies have indicated that universities pursue MOOCs to indeed ‘increase the visibility of the institution’, to ‘drive student recruitment’ and to ‘build and maintain brand’ (Allen & Seamen 2013; Hollands & Tirthali 2014).

The second critique is that MOOCs are a financial policy for higher education. Here, the digitalization and marketization of higher education are seen as complicit in its instrumentalization. Critics characterize the changing contexts of knowledge production in terms of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie 1997), post-academic science (Ziman 2000) or triple-helix relations (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 2000). All of these notions point to the increasing role of market-driven incentives and goals, as well as to the importance of digitalization with respect to ‘audit culture’ and accountability (Strathern 2000).

All of which, through their bias towards deliverable outputs and quantifiable measures, are perceived to present a considerable threat to the humanities. Buzzwords like ‘accountability’ and ‘employability’ dominate higher education and while many disciplines may be well prepared to withstand such terrain, the humanities increasingly feel the imperative to justify themselves, thus rekindling repetitive debates over the ‘useful’ versus the ‘useless’ in instrumental terms (Collini 2012).⁵

Bogost’s third critique is that MOOCs are an academic labour policy. Online education more broadly, and specifically MOOCs, are seen as the final nail in the coffin for the liberal arts model, the historical custodian of humanistic values. In its place, online education is seen as heralding the era of the ‘corporate campus’ (Aronowitz & Giroux 2000) or the ‘digital diploma mill’ (Noble 1998). Academic freedom is perceived as being substituted for the facilitation of profit making, while increased managerial control results in the prioritization of efficiency and accountability (Levidow 2002). In the mid-1990s, David Noble argued that online education would result in a narrowing and deskilling of faculty staff. Critics of MOOCs today share similar fears. Canavan claims:

MOOCs hyper-accelerate a long-term trend toward adjunctification and labor devaluation in the university. I find it’s a labor model in search of a pedagogy. The real interest is in how can we de-skill and de-professionalize academia even further, transforming tenure lines into low-wage work, and ‘managing content’ in MOOCs for tens of thousands of students at a time. I am amazed that so many professors are so eager to experiment with a pedagogical model that is not only ineffective, but which actively seeks to obsolesce them and the work they do. (Canavan 2013: 3)

He is not alone in his dismay. Writing for the UK newspaper *The Guardian*, Wilby (2014) similarly states, ‘Only the elite institutions flourish because everybody prefers output from, say, Oxford or Harvard; and higher education, turned into a mass market industry, settles into uniformity with a few courses and a few

star lecturers.’ He points out that journalists already had to face the same situation: ‘Some critics warn of a future in which thousands of academics lose their jobs (echoing journalists who work for newspapers that lack an online paywall, many ask “why give away our content for nothing?”)’ (ibid.). In ‘Outsourced lectures raise concerns over academic freedom,’ Kolowich (2013a) discusses fears concerning autonomy with regards to MOOCs. He states that ‘where state legislators and college administrators see an opportunity, some professors see a threat—if not to their jobs, then to their freedom to teach a course as they believe it should be taught.’ In ‘Faculty backlash grows against online partnerships,’ Kolowich (2013b) discusses an open letter to Michael Sandel from philosophy professors at San José State University (SJSU) in relation to a course he was offering via the edX platform. The letter was sent after they had refused to use material from Sandel’s Harvard course, ‘for fear that California State University administrators were angling for a way to eventually gut their department.’ They went on to declare concerns for a ‘future in which local faculty become mere caretakers of courses designed by professors at elite universities’ as MOOCs ‘replace professors, dismantle departments, and provide a diminished education for students in public universities’ (SJSU Professors 2013).

The fourth and fifth objections, that MOOCs are speculative financial instruments and an expression of Silicon Valley values, are closely interrelated. Discussing recent developments in MOOCs, where the latest trend appears to be a shift towards online degree programs, Shah (2018) speaks of a second wave of MOOCs emerging. He suggests that the huge amounts of investment and resources being thrown into what is essentially an unknown business model closely resembles the first wave of MOOC hype in 2012. He states:

The recent spate of online degree announcements and the resources being spent by MOOC providers and universities alike is giving me a feeling of *déjà vu*. That’s because the major MOOC providers are all jumping on the bandwagon, announcing partnership after partnership and degree after degree.

As was the case when MOOCs first came onto the scene, universities seem to see their potential in terms of generating revenue and have thus been quick to jump on the bandwagon. A number of American universities cite the possibility of ‘improving economics by lowering costs or increasing revenues’ as a key reason for their interest in MOOCs (Hollands & Tirthali 2014), despite this having been speculative right from the start. Critics see MOOCs as an expression of Silicon Valley values, prioritizing profitability at the expense of traditional education values. Harris and Alter (2018) summarize the culture of Silicon Valley in terms of its ‘laid-back California way of life,’ the ‘commitment’ of the people who work there, the ‘competitive’ nature of business and the powerful motivation of the ‘extrinsic reward of financial remuneration.’ They go on to suggest:

What really drives Silicon Valley companies is an emphasis on getting things done quickly rather than agonizing over every potential flaw. A sign painted on a wall at Facebook summarizes that attitude: ‘Done is better than perfect.’ (Harris & Alter 2018: 2)

According to the critics, this mantra exactly captures the way in which MOOCs have been developed.

The final objection is that MOOCs are a kind of entertainment media, and indeed, the language used to describe MOOCs is often borrowed from entertainment media. For example, they are ‘blockbusters’ which give rise ‘to a new era of rock star professors’ (Merritt 2012; Young 2018). One professor involved states, ‘It’s not like a university course where they have to be there in order to get certified ... People are doing this on their own time! They’re actually sitting back and watching this almost as entertainment’ (Young 2018). Some universities have even hired specialist companies to keep production value high, as well as involving celebrities from popular TV shows to ‘get the audience’s attention’ (ibid.).

Pedagogical Concerns

These economic and political objections hint at a lower quality of education being offered via MOOCs, but they only indirectly touch on pedagogical issues. Four such issues can be found in the writings of humanities scholars: MOOCs do not allow for Socratic exchange; MOOCs are impersonal; MOOCs do not train intellectual virtues such as open mindedness and intellectual courage; and MOOCs cannot offer the training of skills considered essential to the humanities. All of these objections are linked to the ideal of *Bildung*. Often interpreted as self-formation or self-cultivation, *Bildung* does not concern pure subjectivism as these terms might imply. Individuals only achieve the ability to be subjective by being initiated culturally within their society. Central to *Bildung* is the process whereby an individual develops this capacity through engaging with others and interacting with cultural objects. There is a constant interplay between the individual and the community in terms of their language, customs and traditions.

As *Bildung* is thought to entail specific educational forms, this brings us to the first pedagogical issue raised by defenders of the humanities. A key defining feature of humanistic scholarship is that it is dialogic, ‘i.e. it is closely dependent on permanent negotiations of meaning, on processes of dialogue, confrontation, interpretation, translation, that ... are constituted by the dialogic relationship itself’ (Ribeiro 2012: 91). Similarly, the dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford states, ‘The humanities have to deal with ambiguity [and] with multiple answers’, which means that they ‘benefit hugely from the exchange of different points of view [and] different arguments’ (Reichard

2013). The humanities thus favour the ‘Socratic method’ which centres upon the activities of questioning, exposition and reflection, and has always been contingent upon synchronous, face-to-face settings, wherein listeners can ask for clarification, requiring the speaker to reformulate and reflectively defend their own perspective (Murray 2000). Many criticisms of MOOCs regard their lack of dialogic exchange. Dialogue is deemed incompatible with large scale, virtual and anonymous MOOCs. For example, Harris (2013) states:

If we take ourselves out of that dialogue, out of the give and take of draft and response and revision, then we are no longer teachers but content providers. Well-designed assignments and curricula are important. But they are only the very start of good teaching. A textbook is not a course. And I don’t see how a MOOC can be much more than a digitized textbook.

This leads their critics to conclude that MOOCs are a priori inadequate platforms for humanities courses and, indeed, even the co-founders of the Coursera platform, Koller and Ng, have admitted that humanities MOOCs are extremely difficult to provide, owing to their dependence on Socratic dialogue, interpretive methods and qualitative feedback.⁶

The second objection, that MOOCs are impersonal, is closely related to the first one. The SJSU philosophers state that, in traditional classrooms, ‘the students not only have a teacher who is passionate, engaged and current on the topic, but, in classes, [through] independent studies, and informal interaction, they are provided the opportunity to engage a topic deeply, thoroughly, and analytically in a dynamic and up-to-date fashion’ (SJSU Professors 2013). Without this sort of relationship being present, many question what sort of intellectual training can possibly be provided. In response to their letter, Sandel agreed, stating, ‘I strongly believe that online courses are no substitute for the personal engagement of teachers with students, especially in the humanities.’ In support of this sentiment, and perhaps going one step further, Guthrie (2012) criticizes the fact that ‘the Coursera model doesn’t create a learning community; it creates a crowd. In most cases, the crowd lacks the loyalty, initiative, and interest to advance a learning relationship beyond an informal, intermittent connection.’ He goes on to emphasize that ‘whether face to face or online, learning occurs when there is a thoughtful interaction between the student and the instructor.’

The third pedagogical objection concerns the inability of MOOCs to train intellectual virtues. Intellectual virtues are part of an individual’s epistemic processes and are developed as a result of habituation (Baehr 2011). Virtues like intellectual humility, open-mindedness and conscientiousness are then mobilized in intellectual actions like reasoning, interpreting, analysing and defining,⁷ all of which are considered key aspects in the self-development of an epistemic agent—key aspects of *Bildung*. In ‘What’s the matter with MOOCs?’, cultural historian and media scholar Vaidhyanathan (2012) states, ‘Education is

the creation of habits of thought and methods of inquiry that yield unpredictable results.’ The Senior Associate Dean for the Humanities and Arts at Stanford similarly claims, ‘One of the most important things is to not just deliver information [to students] but to teach them how to reason’ (Reichard 2013). Consider this reflection written by an American Studies professor in an article entitled ‘MOOCs of hazard’:

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a long time ago. ‘Truly speaking,’ he said, ‘it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.’ I first understood this distinction during my own student days, while struggling with the theologian Jonathan Edwards’s predestinarian view of life. Toward the end of the course, my teacher, the scholar of American religion Alan Heimert, looked me in the eye and asked: ‘What is it that bothers you about Edwards? Is it that he’s so hard on self-deception?’ This was more than instruction; it was a true provocation. It came from a teacher who listened closely to his students and tried to grasp who they were and who they were trying to become. (Delblanco 2013)

Here, Delblanco clearly considers that provocation was central to his development as an epistemic agent. Regarding the sort of intellectual training provided by the humanities, Vaidhyanathan states, ‘We offer diplomas to people upon completion of a rigorous and diverse set of intellectual experiences—not the mere accumulation of a series of facts and techniques. Education is certainly not an injection of information into a passive receptacle’ (2012). Similarly, the Senior Associate Dean for the Humanities and Arts at Stanford claims that, ‘If we don’t teach our students how to make knowledge, not just how to consume knowledge, then we’re not doing what higher education is supposed to do’ (Reichard 2013).

While teachers can transfer information about how to perform these practices to their students, it is in the repetition of their performance that these virtues become habituated. As MOOCs miss the dialogical and personal relation between teacher and student, they cannot create habits of thought, cannot transmit and train intellectual virtues, and cannot provide *Bildung*.

The final pedagogical objection raised by humanities scholars against MOOCs is that they hinder the practising of skills considered essential to the discipline. Reading and writing are central to the self-identification of the humanities. For example, Harpham argues that ‘the scholarly study of documents and artifacts produced by human beings in the past enables us to see the world from different points of view so that we may better understand ourselves’ (2005: 23). Training analytical skills is key to studying the humanities, but many humanities scholars deeply worry that it is getting increasingly difficult to teach these skills to students. Arndt (2006) suggests that ‘humanists are failing to teach students to listen, speak, read, and write’ (2006: 2). Digital technologies, including MOOCs, are identified as the root of the problem. The introduction

of new technologies, like smartphones and tablets, correlates with a decline in skills such as ‘deep reading.’ The argument goes that students no longer become absorbed by texts, but instead read two or three lines of an online text before switching to Facebook, or any of the other numerous tabs that are always open in their browsers, constantly competing for their attention (Carr 2008). With respect to MOOCs, Canavan (2013: 2) suggests that they ‘will be extremely ineffective in teaching students, much less help[ing] them to become smarter readers and better writers.’ The Senior Associate Dean for the Humanities and Arts at Stanford adds:

Writing is one of the most important skills that people learn in the humanities, and, in my experience, it tends to happen by people going line by line over essays and giving detailed feedback ... And that’s unlikely to happen in a course that has 150,000 students. (Reichard 2013)

The SJSU professors stated:

We do, of course, respect your [Sandel’s] work in political philosophy; nevertheless, having our students read a variety of texts, perhaps including your own, is far superior to having them listen to your lectures. This is especially important for a digital generation that reads far too little. If we can do something as educators we would like to increase literacy, not decrease it. (SJSU Professors 2013).

They suggest that the new technologies may damage students’ literacy. As Freedman (2013) puts it, learning is not always ‘practical, manageable [and] bite-size (hence byte-size) ... Real scholarship, criticism, or commentary is slow, detailed, and difficult, even in the hands of the clearest teacher or smoothest writer, and very few of us are those.’ It is about ‘getting to know a text, working through a problem, mastering a difficult philosophic chain of reasoning.’ MOOCs are thus considered fundamentally incapable of providing a space in which students truly practise these kinds of skills that mark ‘real scholarship’.

Having mapped the various objections made against MOOCs, we now turn to some experiences with a humanities MOOC, in order to see how far these objections are justified.

Digital *Bildung*?

In 2013, the *Los Angeles Review of Books* organized a two-part roundtable discussion in which four distinguished professors were brought together to speak about the risks and opportunities offered by MOOCs (Konstantinou 2013). The participants included Alan Filreis of the University of Pennsylvania and Ray Schroeder from the University of Springfield, Illinois, both of whom reflected

on several years of experience with online education, including recent experiments with MOOCs. In the second part of the roundtable, Cathy Davidson of Duke University, known for experimenting with online pedagogy, running what she referred to as a ‘meta-MOOC’ in 2014 on the ‘History and future of (mostly) higher education’, stated:

I got it wrong in my original essay. When I said that we have some good methods for teaching problem-based learning online but haven’t yet designed a MOOC format that serves dialogic thinking in the humanities and social sciences, I hadn’t read about Professor Schroeder, in Springfield, Illinois, interacting with ‘eduMOOC’ students meeting around the wi-fi at the McDonald’s in New Zealand. Nor had I read Professor Filreis’s account of parents and grandparents taking his modern poetry class online alongside his Penn students—way back in the mid-1990s. I was so charmed after spending time noodling around the materials for his Coursera MOOC that I signed up to be a ModPo student myself this Fall. (Bogost et al. 2013)

ModPo, short for Modern and Contemporary American Poetry, is acknowledged as one of the first MOOCs in the humanities (Knox 2016) and started in 2012 with around 42,000 students (Bicher 2015). Coursera, the platform that currently hosts the course, describes it as:

... a fast-paced introduction to modern and contemporary U.S. poetry, with an emphasis on experimental verse, from Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman to the present. Participants (who need no prior experience with poetry) will learn how to read poems that are supposedly ‘difficult’. (Coursera 2018)

ModPo runs for 10 weeks; however, the ModPo team tweets, blogs and supports forum discussions year-round. This period, referred to as ‘SloPo’, is considered just one of the reasons for the course’s success (Perry 2017). In contrast to the critics’ objections, the constant availability of course supervisors and moderators, as well as the community that is established and sustained through this year-round support, suggests that MOOCs are able to develop some form of community.

Live recordings of collaborative close readings, some led by Alan Filries, replace pre-recorded videos of lectures; however, everyone is encouraged to record and upload their own sessions in order to share and learn from others’ experiences. Students are also invited to visit the centre should they ever be passing, with many both from the United States and further afield having made the pilgrimage. A number of teaching assistants (TAs) working with Professor Filreis on the course, as well as an additional international TA community (people who have taken the course several times before), support these sessions

(Brown 2015). Filreis has always stressed the community aspect of the course, whether that be online or offline. ModPo offers study and meet-up groups, active social forums and Google hangouts:

We emphasize all the interactive spaces one can imagine: the discussion forums, in which I and the student TAs actively participate; weekly live webcasts; four ungraded, peer-reviewed essays; several Facebook groups, created by participants; a robust Twitter feed; various face-to-face meet-ups; ‘office’ hours in the forums; and a standing invitation for any ModPoer who finds himself or herself in or near Philadelphia to visit me and the student TAs at the Writers House (many, indeed, have visited). (Bogost et al. 2013).

According to Filreis, the success of the course revolves around its focus on collaboration and interaction. He describes close reading as ‘a social act’ (Bicher 2015) and suggests that ‘collaborative close readings involving thousands of people can produce fresh interpretations of open-ended poems’ (Poetryfoundation 2014).

ModPo remains a free course with no prerequisites for admission. However, this does have repercussions in terms of enabling any measurable outcomes for the students. While the course does offer a certificate, it is one that ‘is unique to ModPo’, being that it is of their own design. The Coursera website states that:

In order to receive the special ModPo certificate of completion, you must: 1) post a comment in at least one poem-specific discussion forum for each of ModPo’s ten weekly sections; 2) write and submit all four writing assignments; 3) write and submit at least four peer reviews for each of the 4 assignments (at least 16 total); and 4) take and pass all quizzes (you can retake them until you pass).

Thus, while this course does appear to foster Socratic exchange, in that students are encouraged to question, provoke and discuss, both among themselves and with the moderators and supervisors who are constantly on hand, it is not really able to provide a fully graded or credentialed outcome for students. Some critics may consider this a shortcoming; however, Filreis maintains ‘that the courses’ objectives are more important than their measurable outcomes’ (Bicher 2015). In addition to fostering exchange, ModPo also appears to enable the practice and development of both interpretive and communication-based skills, as participants need to learn to listen, engage and respond to one another in virtual forums, which offer different environments and opportunities from their usual day-to-day interactions. Filreis has thus stressed time and again that ‘a humanities MOOC need not be impersonal’ and that ‘the reason ModPo has caught on is that people are discovering the mode of the course is exactly the point we are supposed to learn about the poetry’ (Alenier 2012).

Convincing Coursera to facilitate his innovative pedagogical approach was not easy. In 2017, he explained to his university newspaper, *The Penn Gazette*, that he had to insist ‘on the centrality of the discussion forums, which the founders of Coursera originally assumed would be places where you could ask questions like, “I don’t understand Problem Two,” not “What do you think the meaning of life is? Please reply”’. When it comes to the humanities and arts, Filreis adamantly believes in the importance of ‘co-creation’ or ‘teacher–learner relationships that are iterative and circular’. What starts to become clear here is that, based on experiences like these, we can begin to cast doubt over any a priori incompatibility with the sort of intellectual virtues so valued by the humanities, or the sort of self-development inferred by the notion of *Bildung*. Filreis claims that:

ModPo is not a textbook; it’s a course, having about it the sense of a course: a collective movement through material, in which one learns the material with teachers and learners working at roughly the same time. The discussion forums are so lively that they are roughly synchronous experiences of community-based interpretations of the material. (Bogost et al. 2013).

Returning to our earlier definition of *Bildung* as dependent on a ‘constant interplay between the individual and the community’ or a ‘dialogic relationship, in multiple forms, that is central to the self-formation of the individual’, it certainly seems that ModPo is able to provide this. In the case of ModPo, the MOOC format actually appears to strengthen and bolster some of the values that the sceptics presume they threaten. If the glowing reviews and 95 per cent five-star rating the course continuously receives is anything to go by, it certainly seems that people are getting something out of it (Shah 2018; Coursera 2018). As one reviewer states, ‘Once you sign up for ModPo, you are a ModPo’er for life ... ModPo is more than just a class’ (Pope 2015).

Similarly to Filreis, Schroeder also speaks of MOOCs sharing ‘[t]he social constructivist principles of what scholars of education call the “community of inquiry”’ (Bogost et al. 2013). He claims that in his own experience this community is able to ‘thrive online through teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence’ convincingly contradicting the critics, he suggests, ‘those are the very same principles that led to the success of the liberal arts college experience decades ago’ (Bogost et al. 2013). Another example is Colgate University, a small, liberal arts college, which offers a MOOC via edX on ‘the History of the Atom Bomb’. Despite some of the students involved acknowledging that the liberal arts and MOOCs are often considered ‘unlikely bed-fellows’ (Wadhera & Zengilowski 2015), their course enrolls both current undergraduates and alumni of the College and thus serves to build a community, as well as to enhance on-campus courses (Brown 2015). These experiences suggest that experimentation with the humanities and MOOCs have offered a number

of new possibilities and opportunities neglected by their critics. What these experiments point to is that instead of instantly dismissing MOOCs, or constantly comparing them with traditional learning environments and dwelling on their shortcomings, looking for the new opportunities which they afford could be far more rewarding. The promises that accompanied the rise of MOOCs may have been exaggerated, but their continued popularity 10 years on indicates that they do fulfil a need. Courses like ModPo demonstrate that knee-jerk defences of the humanities in the face of new technologies might not be so warranted. Rather than looking to MOOCs as a revolutionary force that will transform higher education, perhaps MOOCs could be embraced as a way of fostering a quieter, slower form of disruption:

By introducing professors to new tools and techniques that they could use to improve their on-campus teaching; by providing researchers access to a tremendous amount of data to improve teaching and learning; and by offering a level of international connectedness and shared meaning-making that, in its most utopic form, could lead to a new form of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship. (Brown 2015).

Despite criticism regarding how far they are truly ‘massive’ or ‘open’, formats like ModPo illustrate that there is something unique about MOOCs that make them a useful tool for experimenting with a ‘new form of cosmopolitanism’ (Brown 2015). Despite the concerns of many, if Filreis’ experiences are anything to go by, it would seem that MOOCs are not a priori incompatible with courses in the humanities. Instead, they could, and perhaps should, provide a fertile playground for exploration and experimentation.

Conclusion: Would You Rather Be a Cyborg Mentor or a Socratic Master?⁸

Humanities scholars regularly mobilize objections to the deployment of technology in universities. Sometimes these are motivated by the ways in which economic imperatives are dominating choices made by universities, and sometimes by concerns for the quality of learning. In summary, the fear is that with MOOCs the ‘factory’ delivering packages of commodified knowledge to produce standardized degrees takes over from the vibrant and cosmopolitan interactions offered by the ‘city’. In this chapter, we have demonstrated that the issues underscoring some of these criticisms are not particularly new, and thus not exclusively related to MOOCs. The current ‘crisis’ in the humanities is closely affiliated with a number of crises in higher education more broadly, which converged towards the end of the 1980s, giving rise to a ‘great academic depression’ (Kerr 2001). These crises concerned funding, access, enrolment and legitimacy (Hamilton 2016), and what Halfman and Radder (2015) describe

as the ‘occupation’ of the university by senior managers not committed to scientific and scholarly ideals. In the early 1990s, online education emerged as a potential panacea, which promised to resolve many of these issues, as well as to expand access to higher education. However, for its numerous critics, online education simply facilitated the introduction of numerous neoliberal reforms wherein the values of efficiency, productivity, cost-effectiveness and accountability were prioritized at the expense of traditional humanistic values, like meaning making, through interpretation and evaluation.

We have presented a more nuanced argument, going beyond the instinctive rejection of technology felt by many humanists. Haraway insisted ‘the machine is us’, and reminded us of our responsibilities for the creation, design and use of machines and technologies (1985: 99). Instead of seeing MOOCs as essentially anti-humanist, we recognize their potential for supporting *Bildung*. MOOCs are designed and used by people at particular historical moments, in specific university and disciplinary contexts, and they can take different forms and be used to support different pedagogical models.

As explained above, the first wave of MOOCs reflected a broad range of possibilities. Two distinctive models, cMOOCs, xMOOCs and various alternatives, offered numerous pathways for experimentation and development. In those early days, humanities courses enjoyed great success in both using and delivering humanities content via MOOCs. Some early examples, and some still ongoing, demonstrate that the humanities are not a priori incompatible with technology-intensive forms of mediated education. As MOOCs expanded, scepticism over what they were delivering increased and the popularity of humanities courses waned. As scepticism grew, MOOCs moved further away from the sorts of city-type models that enabled new pedagogical possibilities, and closer towards factory-style production lines. In a rather disturbing move, it could be that the voices of dissent we discussed above actually contributed to shaping the development of MOOCs in ways that are not conducive to *Bildung*. It is important to keep the specific educational concerns about MOOCs separate from broader debates about the long-standing crises in higher education. As Davidson suggests in Bogost et al. (2013), ‘The deplorable condition of higher education today is a social problem that preceded, and is far greater than, the rise of MOOCs. Instead of MOOC panic, now is a time to be thinking collectively and responsibly about ... the future of the university.’ Issues surrounding funding, access, societal relevance and academic freedom cannot be attributed to MOOCs alone, but they are issues that urgently require discussion.⁹

Students remain interested in MOOCs, especially those who are unable for whatever reason to take part in the traditional place-based model of higher education. There may be variation from one year to the next, but the numbers from 2017 and 2018 indicate that enrolments in MOOCs are increasing at similar rates to 2012 and 2013. Even if completion rates are very low, many participants may take part for particular modules or out of curiosity rather than credit (Murray 2019). While they may not be the radically disruptive innovation

heralded in their early years, they are becoming a more constant feature of the higher education landscape. MOOCs have been pulled in a certain direction by market demand, while at the same time also being pushed away by outspoken criticism. It is likely that MOOCs will continue to play an important role in the future of higher education: it is therefore crucial that rather than shunning them entirely, humanities scholars need to deploy their critical energies and talents to engage and reflect upon what this might mean for their careers, disciplines and institutions.

Whether or not MOOCs will transform the meaning and practice of higher education in the future, there is little doubt that new technologies will continue to emerge, and they will be accompanied by promises and expectations, similar to those that accompanied other forms of distance learning. We know not only from MOOCs but also from countless studies of other technologies (digital and other) that values are deeply embedded in how technologies are designed and utilized. Deep analysis and reflection is needed regarding the epistemic and educational values prioritized by the producers and experienced by the users of MOOCs. Exploring the relationship between MOOCs and *Bildung* represents an opportunity for reflecting on what is lost and what is gained as humanities courses go digital.

The question is urgent. Online education has a role to play in expanding educational opportunities to a wide range of people, and the success or failure of particular innovations depends heavily upon the way in which professionals interpret and respond to them. The history of educational technology is one of divisive discourses. Humanistic values of *Bildung* are seen as incompatible with rationalist and instrumental values associated with technology (Hamilton 2016). To overcome such essentialist interpretations, it is crucial to approach online education not as something beyond or outside the human and the social, but as a sociotechnical practice. From this perspective, everyone, including those who promote, and those who protest, technological innovations within higher education have something to offer. Future research could investigate a reimagining of these critiques of educational technologies as a basis for their innovation. This reimagining could feed into institutional decision making as well as concrete technological developments in order to ‘support a critical practice of online education in place of a critical reaction to technology’ (Hamilton 2016: 161).

To conclude, we want to urge everyone (student, designer, policymaker, teacher) to adopt more nuanced understandings of digital or virtual spaces for teaching and learning which recognize that such spaces are not fixed, and that there is always potential for fruitful engagement and intervention. We introduce the word ‘virtual’ at this late stage to draw attention to what we already know from the philosophy and history of science, namely that the production of knowledge in whatever form is always embedded in and mediated by complex webs of social and material interaction (Wyatt et al. 2013). MOOCs have the potential to destabilize traditional power relations in the production and distribution of knowledge. This is in line with Berry (2011), who suggests that

the humanities have a responsibility to interrogate the affordances and implications of a technologically mediated ‘digital intellect’. Humanities scholars need to look to the processes that technologies mediate. Instead of simply rejecting educational technologies like MOOCs, and dismissing them as tools incompatible with humanistic values, we need to recognize that they can be part of our pedagogical practices, and they may allow virtual knowledge spaces to open up and carry the potential for change (Wyatt et al. 2013). Of course, MOOCs may be taken up to strengthen an anti-humanist, profit-oriented model of education, and that will certainly be the case if the sceptics step back from engagement. Those committed to *Bildung* and those familiar with the technological possibilities need to work together in order to expand education in ways that are democratizing and empowering for both teachers and students.

Notes

- ¹ See the University of Edinburgh website for descriptions and reviews of the MOOCs they offer: <http://eidyn.ppls.ed.ac.uk/article/introduction-philosophy-mooc-among-top-most-popular-mooc-all-time>. Since this chapter was written, the University has also offered a MOOC in ‘Intellectual Humility’, which would be an even better example with respect to the argument made above.
- ² See Stanford’s ‘Purpose Learning’ project where they look back from the year 2100, encouraging us to ‘take a peek into archival footage brought from the future to discover how the learning paths were transformed by Purpose Learning’: <http://www.stanford2025.com/purpose-learning/>
- ³ Edsurge publishes independent news and reports. The growth and development of MOOCs within the landscape of higher education has been a regular feature on their site in recent years: <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2014-12-26-moocs-in-2014-breaking-down-the-numbers>
- ⁴ See here for an overview of the BBC’s Royal charter: <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission>
- ⁵ A number of well-argued and reflexive accounts stress the humanities’ value in multiple ways, from facilitating democracy to increasing happiness (Bate 2010; Nussbaum 2012; Small 2013).
- ⁶ *The Stanford Daily* published on the difficulties encountered in teaching the humanities via MOOCs here: <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2013/06/04/moocs-face-challenges-in-teaching-humanities/>
- ⁷ According to virtue epistemologists, we cannot only be told to be open-minded, we must undergo a shift whereby open-mindedness becomes ‘deeply inculcated’. We cannot only believe that being open-minded is a positive thing, we must have virtuous desires and motivations which mean that we become fundamentally attached to the practice of being open-minded (Montmarquet in Battaly 2006: 204). According to Zagzebski, this will ‘begin with the imitation of virtuous persons, require practise

which develops certain bits of feeling and acting, and usually include an in-between stage of intellectual self-control' (Zazebki in Battaly 2006: 204).

⁸ With apologies to Donna Haraway, who, in *The cyborg manifesto*, stated that she 'would rather be a cyborg than a goddess' (1985: 101).

⁹ In recent years, there have been protests about the state of higher education in various countries, sometimes prompted by budget cuts, departmental (usually humanities) closures, work pressure, privatizing pensions or something else. An overview can be found in Halffman and Radder (2015; 2017).

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