Without anyones permission: The open web and online learning

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As teaching and learning activities move into online and blended learning environments we need to think carefully about how we use those spaces, which is often determined by the features of the platforms and services we choose. One topic in the field on online learning that's been getting a lot of attention, is the MOOC (the New York Times declared 2013 the year of the MOOC). However, for all the rhetoric about how MOOCs are disrupting higher education, we have yet to see any strong evidence that they lead to any kind of improved learning, and we are slowly starting to realise that "MOOCs are essentially a dead end with regard to providing learners who do not have adequate access to education with high quality qualifications." In other words, if you don't already have a good foundation upon which to build, the promise of MOOCs seems to be an empty one.

One of the reasons that *disruption* is difficult to apply to the mainstream MOOC phenomenon is that – for all intents and purposes – these MOOCs (specifically, xMOOCs) are not doing anything particularly innovative. They reproduce distance learning models that have existed for decades and moreover, they do so less well. This post will focus on the **Open** aspect of xMOOCs – in particular how they are anything but open – and to discuss some of the ways that educators need to think differently about how we use the web in our teaching practice.

The majority of xMOOC providers design their courses using non-open formats and use restrictive content licenses preventing reuse and sharing of the content and learning experiences. These MOOC providers are fencing in and closing off the educational experience, while at the same time preaching openness and enhanced accessibility. This loss of *openness* in online learning – as it is conceived by the major xMOOC providers – is, according to some, a horrific corruption, as more and more of our learning experiences are controlled by organisations that dictate the direction that online and blended learning is taking. Which brings me back to the idea that started this post; if we are going to move teaching and learning into

online environments it is important for us to understand the environment that we're moving to. We need to remember that when we talk about online learning, we should be talking about learning **on the web**. Not learning on an app, or on Coursera, or on Facebook. And therein lies the problem:

This isn't our web today. We've lost key features that we used to rely on, and worse, we've abandoned core values that used to be fundamental to the web world. To the credit of today's social networks, they've brought in hundreds of millions of new participants to these networks, and they've certainly made a small number of people rich. But they haven't shown the web itself the respect and care it deserves, as a medium which has enabled them to succeed. And they've now narrowed the possibilities of the web for an entire generation of users who don't realize how much more innovative and meaningful their experience could be.

Anil Dash

Maybe we need to reclaim online learning for what it is and what it represents. The open source movement has provided the tools we need to build our own (open) online courses, so what exactly do we need Coursera and Udacity for? As we give up more and more (or, as platform providers *take* more and more?), we must remain cognisant of what it is that we're losing. The restrictive licensing requirements of most xMOOC providers has shown that we – the people doing the teaching – need to take the online learning environment back, eliminating (or at least reducing) our reliance on convenient platforms that do more to impoverish the learning experience than enhance it. We can provide an open online learning experience while at the same time enabling a culture of democratized, permission-less innovation in education.

We need to remember that delivering mass media is the least of the Net's powers.
The Net's super-power is connection without permission. Its almighty power is that we can make of it whatever we want.

We, the People of the Internet, need to remember the glory of its revelation so that we reclaim it now in the name of what it truly is.

No one owns that place. Everybody can use it. Anyone can improve it.

Doc Searles – New Clues

Anil Dash described how we lost the web and then followed up with how to rebuild the web we lost, highlighting the utility of the open web to enable transformative change in the world. The web as an open platform for creative expression and unfettered communication is slowly being eroded and replaced by gilded cages. As the services we champion make it more difficult to move content into and out of, it's becoming increasingly difficult to create connections between people and ideas in open online spaces. Sure, if you want to do everything in Facebook, then Facebook works. But just try taking something out of Facebook to use somewhere else.

We get bullshit turf battles like Tumblr not being able to find your Twitter friends or Facebook not letting Instagram photos show up on Twitter because of giant companies pursuing their agendas instead of collaborating in a way that would serve users. And we get a generation of entrepreneurs encouraged to make more narrow-minded, web-hostile products like these because it continues to make a small number of wealthy people even more wealthy, instead of letting lots of people build innovative new opportunities for themselves on top of the web itself.

Anil Dash

In his post about rebuilding the web we lost, Anil made the following suggestions for taking back the open web, which I've repurposed here in an online learning context. I'm sure that my take on it isn't perfect, and I'd be happy to hear any other interpretations.

1. **Take responsibility and accept blame**. This is our fault. Educators have allowed companies like Coursea / Udacity / Future Learn to take over and drive the online learning agenda. We did this because we didn't understand what the web was and how we could build enriching educational experiences with it. Instead of embracing the web, we've spent the past few decades demonising it. We blame it for increases in cheating, lower levels of critical thinking, and encouraging lazy approaches to student work. Just think of all the rants about why students shouldn't use Wikipedia, instead of taking on the challenge of making Wikipedia as good as it could possibly be. Educators and students could have used the platform in ways that would have improved the content of the site, while also helping students to develop important 21st century skills that are not covered in the formal curriculum. We dropped the ball, and now we need to ask what we're going to do about it.

2. **Don't just meet the UX standards, raise the bar**. Coursera, Future Learn, Udacity, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest are all beautifully designed. They have great websites and come with user-friendly mobile apps, and we marvel at how easy they are to use. They must be wonderful places for learning. All we have to do is provide the content. But is that all there is to learning? Pre-packaged collections of readings, with no opportunities to empower students as part of that process? High quality, well-produced video lectures that students can't download? Forum discussion boards that were also boring in the 90s? Why do we put up with it? Because it's pretty? We can do better.

3. **Rethink funding fundamentals**. If we want to move the learning experience into online spaces – and with it, open up access to education that xMOOCs so proudly take credit for – we must rethink how we are going to fund the development of those experiences. Is it realistic for individual lecturers to try and manage courses with thousands of students? Does everyone understand that Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and every other social network that exists does so in order to make a profit for their shareholders or their founders. These are companies designed to make money, not enhance learning. We will need to come up with different ways of funding large-scale online education if we are going to take it seriously.

4. **Explore architectural changes**. The ability to manage enormous numbers of users used to require banks of servers and the installation of costly database software. Now you can get the same functionality as a service, either from Amazon (AWS) or a range of other providers. Cloud-based storage providers (Dropbox, Google Drive, OneDrive, etc.) provide hosting and collaborative editing of files – largely for free – that just a few years ago would have been prohibitively expensive. By making use of free or cheap services, we can reproduce platforms that previously would have been impossible or very expensive. Changes in how software and services are offered provide new opportunities for growth and innovation. We need to not only be aware of these services but to think carefully about how we can use them in ways that are truly disruptive.

5. **Exploit their weakness: Insularity**. Be sceptical of those who tell us that This New Thing is *open* in any sense of the word, other than open = free. But even the use of "free" in this context means simply "without cost", and is dissociated from the freedoms we have come to expect with the web. Instead of looking to the big institutions for guidance – and therefore falling prey to their limited perspectives – we must establish collaborations outside of the walled gardens of closed online learning environments.

6. **Don't trust the trade press**. Stop believing everything that the mainstream media tells you is true. "MOOCs are disrupting higher education"; only…they're not. Not yet, and certainly not by the Coursera's of the world. It is essential that teachers, principals, students, parents and every other stakeholder involved in learning educates themselves on what the web is, and how it evolved to become what it is. It's only by knowing what we're losing that we can take steps to reclaim it. Even as the mainstream media and uncritical academics proclaim the disruption and end of traditional models of higher education due to the emergence of whatever is trending on Twitter, we must maintain a critical perspective in how we design our online learning experiences.

7. **Create public spaces**. Think about this; almost every online space where you can currently assemble large groups of people is privately owned. Facebook, Google+, Instagram…there are no truly open and public spaces where we can engage in public performances, at least not in any real numbers. This holds true for educational online spaces too; Coursera, Udacity, EdX, Canvas. All are privately held and all exist to make a profit. Where are the open spaces that position learning as a public good? Other than a few marginalised experiments like Wikiversity it's difficult to point out a truly open learning environment. It seems that if this is something that we want – that we value – we are going to have to build it ourselves.

While this list isn't perfect – it was written for a different context – I think it gives us some ideas about how we can think differently about moving education into online and blended learning spaces. It's not enough to simply add *online* to our teaching and learning activities, and think that we're changing anything. We need to stop doing "business as usual". The mainstream xMOOC providers offer little more than structured collections of content, well-produced video lectures and extremely limited forms of engagement. There is nothing fundamentally innovative about this approach, nor does it have any pedagogical foundations to support learning. The promise of technology – and the web – in teaching and learning is not simply to reproduce a poorer version of the classroom experience. We need to ask who is setting the online learning agenda and whether or not we are comfortable with that (hint, the correct answer is "No").

Open source software has given us the tools to create sophisticated online spaces for learning – all we have to do is learn how to use them. We would be asking no more of ourselves than we ask of our students every day i.e. to push ourselves to learn something new; to make a difference in the world. As long as we're performing in closed spaces, we are disempowering our students and colleagues, preventing them from participating in educational experiences that are liberating and that develop a sense of agency.

Stephen Downes offers us four principles of open and networked learning via the theory of Connectivism – principles that could be useful in our designs for online learning experiences. We could do worse than these concepts when it comes to interrogating what kinds of online platforms we use, and how we use them. It would be an enlightening experiment to take an honest look at our learning spaces – online and physical – and ask if they encourage and facilitate the development of these concepts:

- Autonomy: Learners should have the ability to choose where, when, how, what and with whom to learn
- Diversity: Learners represent sufficiently diverse populations to avoid group-think and "echo-chambers"
- Openness: The learning environment accommodates all levels of engagement, with no barriers between 'in' and 'out', helping to ensure the free flow of information through the network, and encouraging a culture of sharing
- Connectedness: "Connectedness" and interactivity is what makes all this possible, as knowledge emerges through the connections that learners make

At the risk of sounding like an uncritical fanboy, I'm well aware that the web is not the panacea we sometimes make it out to be. The presentation below – given at the 2014 meeting of *The Network – Towards Unity for Health*, in Fortaleza – was largely inspired by the ideas presented here, and highlights the challenges with online and blended learning, especially when we are uncritical about what we use and why.

Using the web to empower agents of change from **Michael Rowe**

This uncritical perspective is most evident than when we talk about *the web*. We speak about it as a discrete entity, something defined, bounded and imbued with a set of characteristics that is

inherently Good. *The web* positioned as the solution to our many educational problems is somewhat the essence of the xMOOC contingent, and most solutions to the "education problem" that emerge from Silicon Valley. Evgeny Morozov has suggested that our tendency to look to the internet as the solution to everything is problematic, calling it the "quasi-religion" of "Internet-centrism" where Internet-centrism views the internet as being inherently special. As educators responsible for using the web and it's features to *our* advantage, we must ensure that we are cognisant of both it's utility and potential for harm (or, at the very least, it's potential for ineffectiveness). Taking a critical position – one of the roles of academics in society – allows us to see mainstream xMOOCs for what they really are: impoverished walled gardens that diminish the learning experience. Learners are treated as users, content is viewed as knowledge, and the learning interaction is regarded as linear and subject to control. But it doesn't have to be this way.

The internet is essentially a set of agreements (protocols) that tell us how to write a page that can link to any other page without needing anyone's permission. *Without needing anyone's permission*. Without having to ask if it is OK. Without needing to login. Without needing to share our personal information. Without giving up our content through resrictive licensing requirements. "Every link by a person with something to say is an act of generosity and selflessness, bidding our readers to leave the page to see how the world looks to someone else." When we construct our learning experiences behind closed doors, hiding our interactions inside platforms and apps that we can't make real choices about, we give up something. As we continue to move teaching and learning into spaces like Facebook – because it's "where the students are" – we cede our autonomy and ability to make real choices about how we teach and how students learn. We change our teaching practices, not because it is in the students' best interest, but because it is *all that we are allowed to do*.

We all love our shiny apps, even when they're sealed as tight as a Moon base. But put all the closed apps in the world together and you have a pile of apps.
Put all the Web pages together and you have a new world.
Web pages are about connecting. Apps are about control.
As we move from the Web to an app-based world, we lose the commons we were building together.
In the Kingdom of Apps, we are users, not makers.
Every new page makes the Web bigger. Every new link makes the Web richer.
Every new app gives us something else to do on the bus.

New Clues