

National and Regional Contexts: Priorities, Capabilities, and Strategies

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Canada gave the world Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, arguably two of the most important modern thinkers about communications and media theory. Innis (1952) well described how the development of new technologies led to the creation of “vast monopolies of communications” and in turn to the “continuous, systematic, ruthless destruction of elements of permanence essential to cultural activity” (p. 15). One could say the university is such an element of permanence. McLuhan said many things, many of which he admitted even he did not agree with. Some aphorisms have been incorrectly attributed to him, as well, such as this one by close friend, Father John Culkin, who noted that “we become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us.”(pp. 51-53, 71-72).

Despite the prophetic nature of Innis and McLuhan's writings, it is fair to say that Canada has been almost deliberately slow to jump on the MOOCs or equivalent bandwagon. Our institutions have been typically cautious and observant, monitoring the hype and noise attendant to the MOOCs and related phenomena in 2012, not rushing either to dismiss or embrace new learning platforms. Such tentativeness might be considered ironic in view of the fact that it was a Canadian (Dave Cormier) at the University of Prince Edward Island who coined the acronym MOOC in the first place, way back in 2008. He was writing about two other Canadians, George Siemens and Stephen Downes, who had launched an online course at the University of Manitoba for which 25 students paid and about in which 2,300 online participants registered for free.

There are 98 universities in Canada and, to date, (only) three have signed up with one of the larger providers, such as Coursera and Udacity, to offer massive online open courses. One might say the rest of us have been watching carefully. As PSE commentator Leo Charbonneau (2013, June 12) recently wrote, “The MOOC is dead, Long Live the MOOC.” Put another way, we could say death of the MOOC might be greatly exaggerated, but we are not quite sure what form, if any *one* form or model, it will end up being born into. The original motivation for delivering a MOOC, at least according to the two Canadian university innovators, was a focus on building open networks of knowledge and collaboration. These were experimental learning experiences, not business ventures. Canada's university system is a public one and so debate about the value of MOOCs has run in circles around questions of how they are meant to be funded. The appeal of the wide access MOOCs provide is indisputable, but there are still large areas of Canada without adequate bandwidth service, particularly in rural regions and in the far north. This fact alone makes the claims about MOOCs disrupting hierarchies and helping the unprivileged somewhat hollow. We are all, or certainly we need to be, asking questions about who is being left out of the ostensibly wide circle of outreach. The blogosphere has been persistent in raising these ethical questions.

At the beginning, and at its weakest, this debate had shaped itself into two opposing camps, with a MOOC-friendly, business model of disruption on one side and an idealized university/college steady-state view on the other. But such a binary framework for discussion has inevitably given way to a more nuanced appreciation of both sides of the spectrum. And so while large, traditional universities in the US were buying into the promise of MOOCs in 2012, by and

large Canadian universities were holding back, more comfortable with assessing the merits and weaknesses of the earlier models. After all, most Canadian institutions have long been offering online distant learning courses for credit.

At the very least, almost all but the most conservative educators acknowledge that the “sage on the stage” model of classroom delivery, especially for freshmen classes, is no longer the only model, if even a model at all anymore. Any self-respecting instructor today is compelled to face the challenge of how best to integrate information and communications technology into the classroom. These generally include email and word processing and presentation software; less frequently deployed but emerging as elements in the ICT classroom are blogs, wikis, computer games, Skype, simulations, Twitter feeds and specialized software.

The University of Regina in Saskatchewan is a useful case in point. There, a new MOOC on educational technology and media has effectively tweaked the original model to encourage much more interaction among course participants, adding an optional in-person element at the end of the ten-week regime. The designers of the course see it as a “community as curriculum” experiment, with focus on knowledge networking itself. By most popular MOOC standards, a course with only 1900 registered students isn’t massive at all, but by Canadian university standards it’s pretty awesome.

At the moment, the appeal of universities giving their wares or services away for free is, according to one of our national newspapers, “part branding exercise, part international outreach and part hard business sense” (Bradshaw, 2012). Cormier, who first coined the term MOOC, recently noted that we are on the verge of shifting to a pay-for-credit version of these online courses, a shift that will radically challenge the foundational public system of which Canadians are so proud. The real revolution, he has said, is not pedagogical; it’s economic.

But it *is* pedagogical, too—at least, in part, because if any version of a MOOC is to succeed it better be interesting. A recent study in Quebec found that students there at least prefer the “old school” approach of an engaging lecture over the use of the latest technological bells and whistles in the classroom or online. ICTs “don’t mean a thing if they ain’t got that swing” of a lecturer’s engaging performance and delivery. Marshall McLuhan also once said that “anyone who tries to make a distinction between education and entertainment doesn’t know the first thing about either” (McLuhan, 1967, pp. 66-73). It’s not the tools but what you do with them that makes or breaks a course’s effectiveness.

Not surprisingly, the earlier model of the MOOC is yielding to more hybrid models that mix online and in-classroom learning, and that marry bells and whistles to dynamic discussion groups or social media connectedness. In Canada, these are the pathways we are fruitfully exploring in the changing postsecondary landscape of new technologies. The emergence of new forms of course delivery is a natural consequence of the times and the sheer persistent fact of the MOOC. This is a welcome trend, one that is taking us away from the dead-end discussions of corporate or venture capital business models. Especially notable is a new addition to the online landscape, founded just four months ago, the Canadian-based Wide World Ed, a progressive project that will begin to offer courses at Canadian universities this fall. World Wide Ed promises to provide courses from non-traditional educators and will be offering both university-style classes and continuing education courses in English, French and First Nations Languages. Its website announces its mission: “Striving for Global Peace and Prosperity through Education.” This is a social justice mission, perhaps the first of its kind anywhere. This is also the kind of unintended consequence of new technologies McLuhan also speculated about, the possibility of a

global village of learners unbound by elite or corporate interest. One might say that its Canadian proponents are intent on changing, maybe saving, the world, one open online course at a time.

Finally, it is well to remember McLuhan's oft-quoted comment about the modern condition—that "our Age of Anxiety is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools and yesterday's concepts" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, pp. 8-9). If he were alive today he might be saying our anxiety is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with *tomorrow's* tools and *tomorrow's* concepts.

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