

Creating Democratic Knowledge Online?

John Holmwood

Preamble:

This short background ‘paper’ to my presentation is a contribution to the conversation initiated within this workshop by Danielle Allen and Nannerl Keohane on issues of democratic knowledge and democratic leadership.

It also relates to my wider interests in the relationship between higher education and inequality and in the problem of markets and democracy, some of which I will set out in the presentation. My concern here, however, is with practical solutions.

The context is two-fold – widening inequality and the instrumentalisation of the university. The latter reinforces the former, but also has the paradoxical consequence at the same time of reproducing a more exclusive elite function of higher education. We can think of this in terms of two processes; one, the ‘unbundling’ of universities with the purported aim to provide more efficient and lower cost education (in the context of rising fees and debt) and, second, the reinforcement of elite education as an expensive positional good provided together with the amenities of an upper-class lifestyle. This is a return to a form of ‘sponsored’ mobility appropriate for the re-emergence of patrimonial capitalism that Piketty describes.

The response to these developments within the academy has been worrying. Nussbaum’s recent book, *Not for Profit*, sets out the necessity of organizing the university around an idea of democratic education, against it being at the service of employment and the economy. Yet, she describes the dismantling of public education in the UK as enabling the ‘escape’ from control by unsympathetic bureaucrats through greater emphasis on private, charitable endowments. She misses entirely the dismantling of public education and the encroachment of the market of which it is a part. In a similar way, Ginsberg, in *Fall of the Faculty* laments the dominance of bureaucracy and the displacement of collegial organisation from US universities. Each has in mind the private university serving elite interests and is, in effect, lamenting the philistinism of contemporary elites. Neither seems to recognise that, in the context of the University, democratic knowledge needs a different substance and that the ‘Socratic argument’ necessary to democratic education has to have new modes that can counter instrumentalisation where it is most needed (and where the promise of ‘vocational’ education for a precarious labour market is most pernicious).

Finally, the proposal is linked to two other projects with which I have been involved – the [Campaign for the Public University](#), and a project in ‘public sociology’, [Discover Society](#), a free online magazine of social research, policy analysis and commentary. It can, in some ways, be understood as their continuation by other means.

Education for Social Justice: Re-envisioning the Social Settlement Movement On- and Off-line.

**[A new 'Open Education' institution providing free access to higher education for adult learners
and a wider community resource to facilitate activism for social justice]**

This is a proposal for the use of massive open online courses (MOOCs) to provide free, tutorial-supported, education for adult learners and part-time students who missed out on access to higher education. Such students tend to come from diverse and socially disadvantaged backgrounds and frequently live in communities with multiple inequalities that are separated from higher education institutions even where these institutions are geographically close. The proposal also includes community-based education and research as a means of connecting the community to the curriculum being taught and also to facilitate resources for social activism to address local injustices and make connections to similar injustices elsewhere. At the same time, by 'documenting' inequality and injustice and its continued existence amidst affluence and making this available online, the proposal seeks to make inequalities visible and to give voice to disempowered communities within local and national debates.

The proposal draws on the ideas of the Social Settlement Movement. This was a movement that developed inter-class engagement with issues of poverty and social inequality in the late nineteenth century. It was designed to bring social problems to the attention of the wealthy and bring the voices of the marginalised to the centre of public debate and empower their claims for recognition and social justice. It linked the university and its students to their local communities. Exemplified by Toynbee Hall in London and Hull House in Chicago, it was also a living 'laboratory' for the infant social science disciplines.

Developments of the welfare state and of the university within the UK displaced the social settlement movement. In the former case, welfare provision was institutionalised and professionalised under the idea of 'social rights' (see, T.H. Marshall 'Citizenship and Social Class' and related essays, for both aspects). The consequences for universities has been their withdrawal from local communities and direct issues of social justice (in the US, community engagement by Universities remained much stronger precisely because of a less well-institutionalised welfare state and also because of less central direction of a University *system*).

Finally, the gradual erosion of free higher education and its replacement by fees has meant that 'lower status' education is frequently as costly as 'higher status' education. Thus, fees at the equivalent of a Community College are approximately \$9000 per annum, while those at Oxford and Cambridge are \$13000 per annum. This has given rise to the idea that the cap on fees should be lifted so that the latter may rise, while for-profit providers of more vocationally-oriented are encouraged to enter to keep fees for 'low status' education pegged.

Context: Disconnected Communities and Institutions

- Widening inequality and an increasing polarisation of the population between good jobs and bad jobs (as well as no jobs) is leading to serious issues of equal opportunity, especially in terms of the absence of intermediate jobs that formed the stepping stones toward mobility. Young people from less advantaged backgrounds must now seek to traverse a gulf, where education seems increasingly abstracted from the reality of their lives.
- Increased student fees are having particular impact upon adult learners and those seeking to improve their qualifications part-time. A 42% fall in applications from such students has given rise to a crisis in '2nd chances', with serious consequences for those who have already been let

down by the education system. These are the students that are most likely to be targeted by for-profit providers offering cheaper access to more vocationally-oriented courses, but frequently – as set out by the [Harkin Report](#) in the US – offering sub-prime education and with no access to financial support.¹

- Higher education is currently being transformed through marketization and competition between universities for high fee-paying students; and among students encouraged to see education as a private investment in their human capital and as an ‘exclusionary’ positional good. Where the public good was served by the nature of the system of higher education as a whole the social mission is now left to individual universities, where recruitment trumps social purpose, creating a ‘moral hazard’ in the realisation of that purpose.
- There is also a turning inward by disadvantaged communities as a ‘defensive’ response to public obloquy toward benefit recipients and the claims that social problems are behavioural rather structural in form. This is public discourse of the ‘deserving affluent versus undeserving poor’, which is damaging for social cohesion. It has its correlate within new generational divisions and rising apathy toward politics on the part of the young – as set out by [Russell Brand in a New Statesman article](#), in his paeon to not-voting (‘it only encourages them’).

Idea: A connected, community-based on-line curriculum

The benefits of open access have been set out in detail in an OECD Report, *Giving Knowledge for Free: the emergence of open educational resources* (2007). However, it is clear that open access also occurs in a context of enclosure. It is the private interests associated with the latter that are beginning to predominate over the public interests expressed in the OECD report and in other accounts of its positive democratic possibilities. This is evident in the idea of MOOCS and their promotion as part of the marketization of higher education through the unbundling of its functions. This is [set out elsewhere](#).

MOOCS are predominantly associated with US-based platforms, such as Coursera and Ed-X, but a consortium of UK universities is developing a presence through a platform provided by a for-profit arm of the Open University, *Future Learn*. Membership of the latter is open only to Universities that have a top 30 position in at least three out of four rank orderings of UK universities.

Recent discussions about the role of MOOCS within *Future Learn* raise a number of issues about their risks and sustainability, including: the absence of a clear business model; the need for significant investment in their technical quality to secure reputation; lack of evidence of significant and sustained uptake by online students; their relationship to existing courses and more traditional modes of teaching and learning; the reinforcement of a conventional, hierarchical curriculum (notwithstanding peer-to-peer online support possibilities).

However, the idea of MOOCS as a means of providing access to free education on a not-for-profit basis to disadvantaged communities remains plausible, albeit at risk of being crowded out within individual universities. In addition, level 3, Access to HE courses are available through the FE sector (which is the main current provider of level 3, Access to HE courses, prior to likely entry by for-profit providers).

¹ One year pre-university qualifying courses can be as costly as University degree courses and do not qualify for student loans, except in special circumstances. In consequence, prospective students are more likely to choose vocational, rather than pre-university courses.

What is proposed is the development of a **cluster of mini-MOOCs** that could be gathered under a single title – in this case, Democracy and Social Justice. They would be provided on a collaborative basis by a number of different universities and partners, each accepting a broadly common format. The idea is that each partner would offer at least two mini-MOOCs to the cluster within the broad format. In principle, this limited commitment makes it easier to generate a significant number of partners and allow the programme to proliferate.

While material would be online, the intention is to engage with other partners to provide direct, face-to-face support in local 'learning centres'. The material would also be available for local schools and colleges to use.

Content: A community-created/ student-created curriculum

Each mini-MOOC would consist of a short block of curriculum material available on line and with links to data, images and other resources. This would be equivalent to two-weeks of instruction in a traditional course (ie equivalent to 2 credits of a 20 credit course). The different mini-MOOCs would have a thematic relation to the broad theme of the cluster, but could be engaged with as separate units and aggregated according to student choices. The idea is that although one partner would take on main responsibility for the initial specification of the mini-MOOC, other participating teams would also provide content relating to their local communities.

Example: 'De-industrialisation'. This would involve curriculum material on decline of manufacturing and its impact on local communities.

Local examples: Steel in Sheffield; Car industry in Birmingham; Bicycles in Nottingham, etc

Among the mini-MOOCs to be developed would also be courses on research methodologies for community-based research. These would facilitate the development of curriculum content. The intention would be that students at each of the partner-universities would be involved in developing curriculum content as part of their later university studies. But this content would also be developed in association with local community groups, who could also develop content for their own purposes. This content could be posted online for comment and moderation (eg on a wiki-education site) for incorporation into the curriculum.

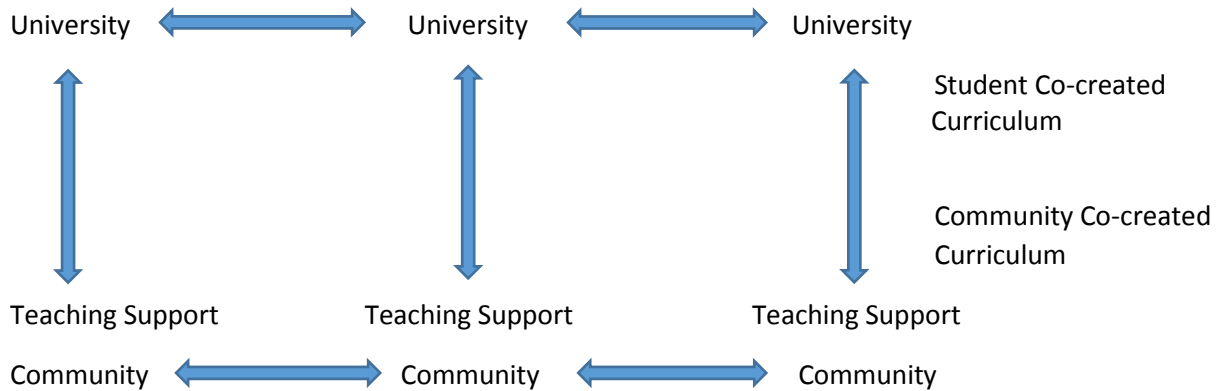
The intention, here, is that students and communities would develop the curriculum at the same time as developing their own skills. In this way, one of the 'gaps' between higher education and disadvantaged communities would be overcome by making the content relevant to students and their communities, but also by enlisting their expertise in the development of the curriculum, thereby engaging with the central promise of open access as facilitating democratic practices of learning and knowledge production.

Education for Activism

There would also be courses in different aspects of campaigning and community activism. The purpose here is to overcome the division of knowledge and practice and to empower those who wish their studies to advance their communities at the same time as advancing themselves. In

addition, the intention is also to provide, by means of the programme, connections across communities that are not dependent on passing through the 'University nodes' in the network.

Replacing Disconnected Vicious Cycles with Connected, Virtuous Circles



Implementation

- There would be a need for a platform. FutureLearn would be the ideal format, with the proviso that it would be necessary to ensure a commitment to a non-commercial form of certification as a *pro bono* activity of an, otherwise commercial activity. While the idea of a cluster of mini-MOOCs avoids the use of the course as a brand/marketing tool – an objection otherwise directed at FutureLearn and existing MOOCs – there would be a 'global' benefit to FutureLearn as a means of showing that it can promote a social mission.
- There would be a need to have the qualification approved by QAA as a level 3 Access to HE Diploma and also approved by FutureLearn universities for admission purposes.
- Use of Young Foundation as 'badge' in order to allow participation of universities outside FutureLearn in the development of the curriculum. Community-based learning and research is better developed in 'post-92' institutions, which are outside FutureLearn.
- Use of professional associations – eg British Sociological Association, Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth – to identify participating universities. Also partnership with the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (<http://nccpe.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/>)
- Partnership with national bodies like British Library, ESRC, AHRC, etc to provide access to national data sets, etc.
- Links with community partners, including those working with young people to develop 'documents' of everyday life – eg FullyFocused (<http://www.fullyfocusedproductions.com/>) and their million youth media project.
- Links with local charities providing face-to-face tutorial support.

A different kind of 'settler' (internal 'decoloniality'):

From the Entrance to the Passmore-Edwards Settlement, Bloomsbury, London

