Resistance to MOOCs in the US Higher Education system

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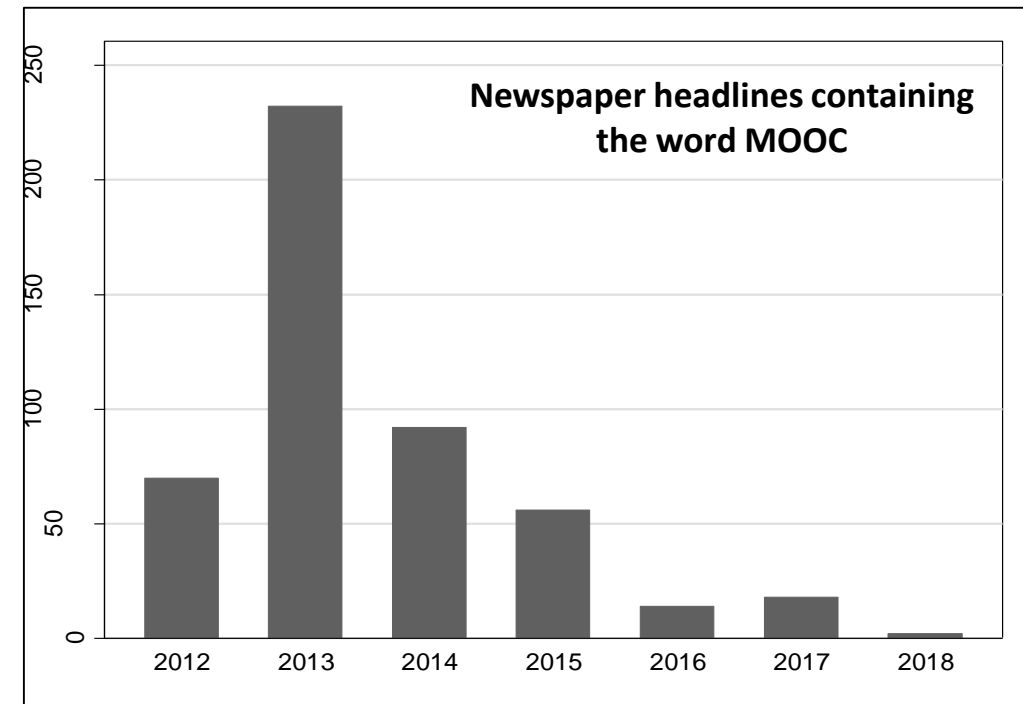
Stanford University (USA), Airbnb (USA)

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What are MOOCs?

- Acronym of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs):
  - university-level courses on a specific subject
  - no (explicit) barriers other than an internet connection (in terms of cost, time, qualification)
  - delivered online on digital platforms (e.g. edX, Coursera, FutureLearn)
  - potentially accessible to a massive number of users

- Media hype: pervasive and enthusiastic about the potential of MOOCs in democratizing education

The New York Times

EDUCATION LIFE

The Year of the MOOC

By LAURA PAPPANO   NOV. 2, 2012

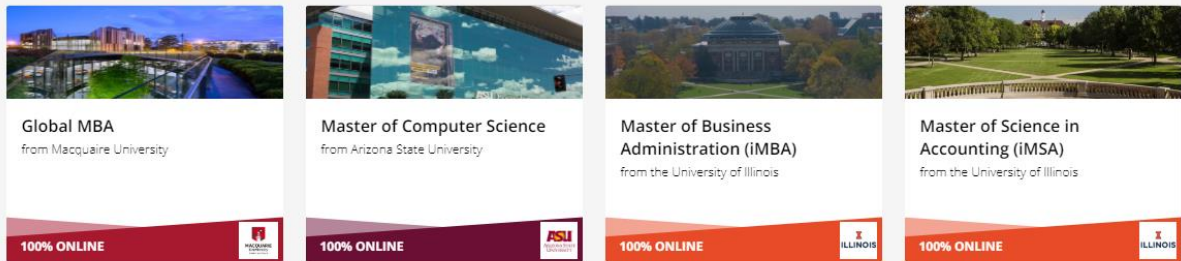**Newspaper headlines containing the word MOOC**

Source: own elaboration based on Factiva database on 5 major USA newspapers and 3 regional newspapers (The Wall Street Journal; The New York Times; Chicago Tribune; New York Post; Los Angeles Times; The Boston Globe; The Mercury News; San Francisco Chronicle)
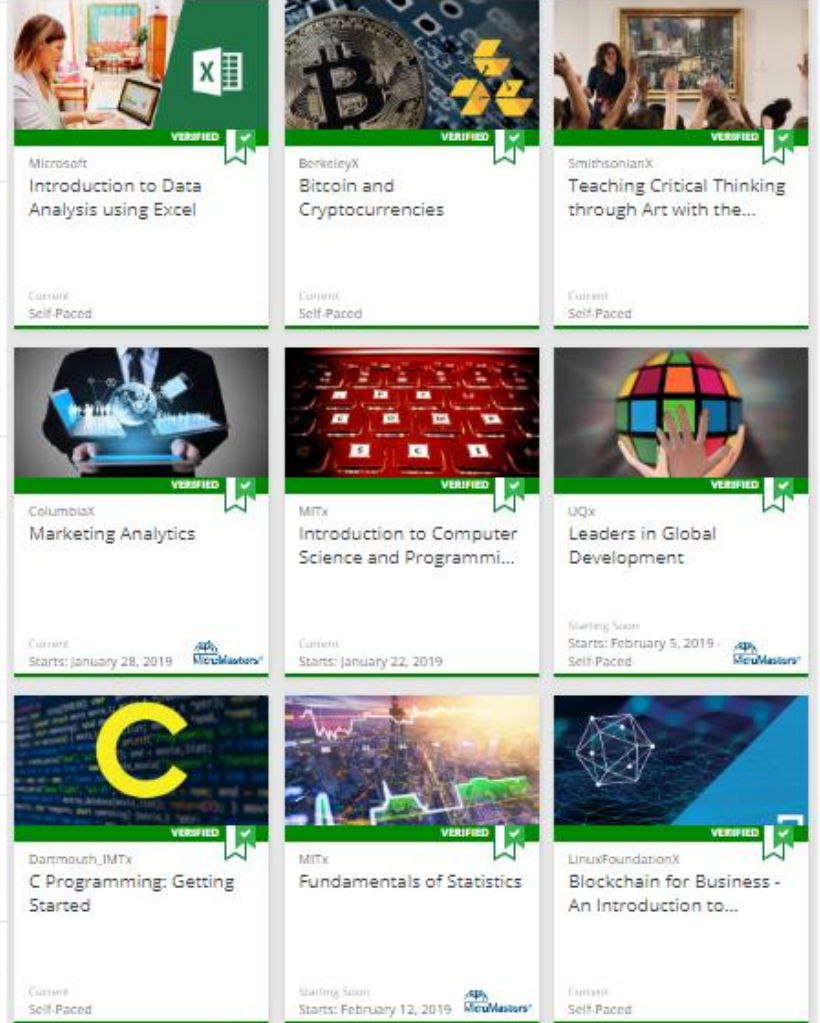
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Why studying MOOCs?

- The phenomenon remains remarkable in real terms, and keeps growing

- A socially relevant fact: beyond pedagogical aspects there are social implications:
  - do they really contribute to widen access to education?
  - which education? Issues of quality and cultural models
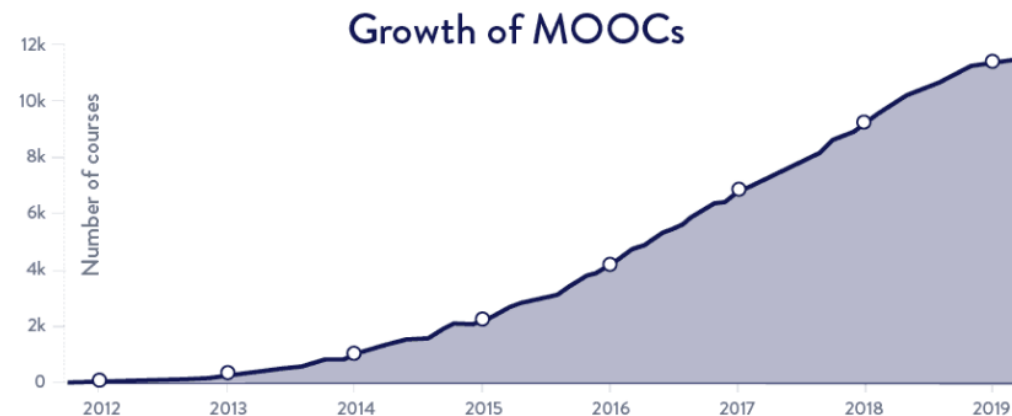 - which is the impact on existing Higher Education systems?

By the Numbers: MOOCs in 2018

By the Numbers: MOOCs in 2018

Why studying MOOCs (II)?

Something in common with the sharing economy:

- MOOCS as an instance of the Open Education Resources movement
- narrative of disruptive innovation and Silicon Valley tech-positivism
- concerns about the risk of creating new inequalities, further reinforcing existing ones
- technological innovation implies a profound reorganization of labor

BUT, unlike experiences in the transportation (Uber) and hospitality (Airbnb) sector…

- the structure itself of the HE sector (barriers to entry difficult to overcome)
- the presence of regulation (accreditation and governance)
- the implementation of innovation required the collaboration of the faculty

→ successfull opposition by faculty and setback of MOOCs

Research question

Did the introduction of such type of digital transformation:
- challenges the existing distribution of power among actors
- generates (new) tensions at the macro level in the HE system
- or further increases inequality among social groups?

→ Case study on resistance to the adoption of MOOCs for academic credit, which occurred at three (very) different universities in the United States
- At the peak of the hype (2013)
- Institutions of different status and mission

The diffusion of MOOCs

- Accompanied by a rhetoric of 'disruptive innovation', virtuous by itself (Head 2017)

- a narrative of 'secular evangelism' and 'digital universalism' (Losh 2017b): a mix of missionary and philanthropic spirit of MOOCs, associated to the belief that computational technologies can solve all types of problems, including social problems.

- Risk of generating new inequalities, exacerbating existing ones and even betraying the original intent of accessibility and openness of the Open Educational movement (Literat 2015; Rhoads, Berdan, and Toven-Lindsey 2013; Rhoads et al. 2015, Schor et al. 2016).

The Higher Education system in the USA

- Stratified and diversified structure, with different types of institutions serving different missions (and different segments of the population) (Meek et al. 1996, van Vught 2009)

- Co-existence of exclusivity at the top and inclusiveness at the bottom, in a highly competitive market (Labaree (2017)

- Elite institutions (<10% of total students population) vs. *broad access schools* (Scott and Kirst 2017, Carnegie Foundation 1970s)

- High demand of access to HE, further increasing due to growing demand of qualified workforce in the tech sector (Meyer at al. 1997; Frank, Meyer 2007; Stevens, Kirst, 2011; Scott and Kirst 2017)

- Increasing cost of HE, associated to high levels of students debt (Kamenetz 2006; Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2013)

Data and method

- Bibliographic resources, newspaper articles, internal documents publicly available

- 6 interviews to selected experts:

Semi-structured interviews:
- Identification of major topics
- Elaboration of *a priori* thematic codes
- Inclusion of emerging themes
- Coding of interviews with Atlas.ti

|	Role	Type of institution
1	Tenured Professor	public, non-elite, comprehensive college (4-year)
2	Tenured Professor	
3	Tenured Professor	
4	Tenured Professor	private, élite research university
5	Tenured Professor	
6	Tenured Professor	private, élite, liberal arts college (baccalaureate college)

Three case studies

- April and May 2013: opposition of faculty against the decision of introducing MOOCs for credit, in regular curricula

- Three universities very different for status, prestige and size:

	founded in	No. students	diversity
Large public university	1857	30.000	17% white ethnic background >50% first generation college students
Large private research university	1838	15.000	45% white ethnic background 10% first-generation college students
Small Liberal Arts College	1821	1.850	45% self-define themselves as person of color 11% first-generation college students

Common pattern among the three cases

1. **Top leadership & edu-tech companies** make an agreement on gradually integrating MOOCs in regular curricula (2 out of 3 covert deal)

2. **Top-down approach**: together with sense of urgency or, in the worst cases lack of communication, avoidance of representative bodies

3. Recognition of **academic credit to MOOCs** included in the agreement (=substitution)

   → any reform of the curriculum requires the approval of the faculty representative body

4. **Resistance** from the faculty:
   - Internal solidarity across positions (tenured and non-tenured)
   - Heterogeneity of disciplines
   - Success at micro and macro level
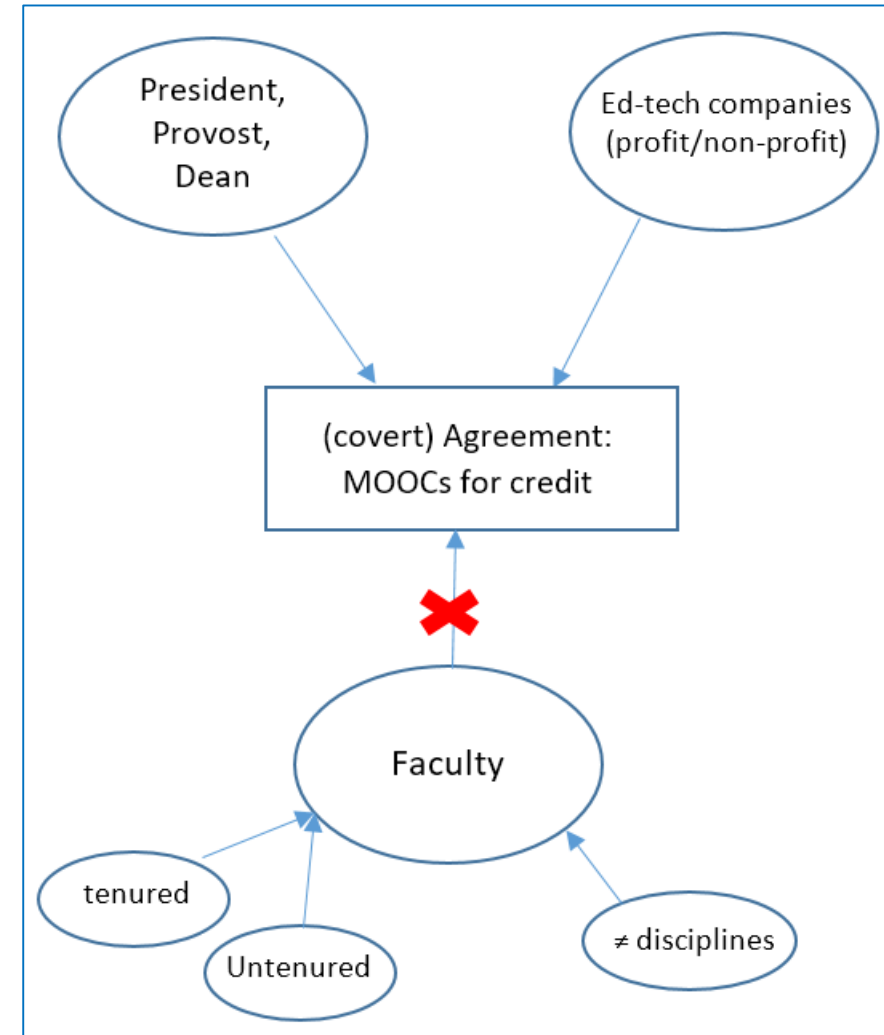
Results

- Tensions at micro-level
  - ✓Contrapposition between faculty and top leadership
  - ✓Ideological contrapposition
  - ✓ Concerns for the profession
  - ✓Mobilitation of the academic component

- Tensions at macro level
  - ✓Setback of MOOCs at national level (?)

a) Contraposition between faculty and top leadership

- Concentration of power in managerial roles at the top, weakening the role of representative bodies

- Top-down approach (urgency, pressure)

- Climate of mistrust about top leaders, edu-tech companies and their links

"there was mistrust of the administration plan that was done and the urging of the negotiation with [company name] and the urging of the faculty. Nobody had heard about it until the proposal was pretty much signed. " [professor, large private university]

"in the procedure, if you want to do something like this you have to go to the Academic Senate and has to be approved. But he [the President] knew that would never happen so he did it during winter session, when nobody was here (...). When faculties were not on campus. So when faculty came back in the Senate they were furious, according to the behind the scene ..." [professor, large public university]

b) Ideological contraposition

- education as a public good vs. neoliberal approach

- private use of a collective good

- belief of solving problems of long-standing origin with technological solutions, eventually widening existing inequalities (students and faculty)

"(…) students in the flipped classrooms will see privileged college students interacting with the "real" teacher, Professor Sandel, whereas they only get to interact with other students and their "lesser" teacher at [University name], a teacher whose own views on justice are now seen as having no importance because he or she is no longer a "content provider" [letter to M. Sandel]

"We know that some big Silicon Valley entrepreneurs were, and I am sure are on the Board, …that… it really was from the top, so …no, they never admitted it was part of it." [professor, private research university]

c) Concerns for the profession

- decrease of teaching positions in the short term, in the long run decrease of tenure positions and whole departments

- downgrading of status and autonomy of faculty:
  - Teaching Assistants to star professors;
  - no longer autonomous in deciding what to teach;
  - establishment of an hegemonic curriculum/ideology

"why should we get Harvard professors to give a class in Greek philosophy (…) But the idea is…it's a very kind of…academic snobbishness that you are from the Ivy League and (…)…and some intended that the purpose, the only purpose of State Universities professors is to read our own scholarship" [professor, public university]

"what it looked like, was you essentially do these lectures, you do not own them anymore, and many low level PhDs and other academics would become the…they would be doing most of the labor but that labor will not be remunerated. It's like everybody will become a TA." [professor, private research university]

d) Mobilization of the academic component

- tenured professors were outspoken on behalf of untenured colleagues

- defined strategy to avoid retaliation

- solidarity across institutions: at elite institutions concern for colleagues at lower tier institutions

"we also tried to make it … you know, distributed, so that the punishment would not go…you see what I mean? We didn't have leaders at that time. It was clear there were leaders, but there is definitely retribution. And so you don't…it was a weird thing, to try to be effective but also to deal with …to deal with…you don't want be delegitimized or attacked …so this is the big reason why we included so many." [professor, private research university]

"So the faculty member at College said: well, we are very lucky, that we so not have to worry much about it, but what about our colleagues? We all know people who are professors at some State Universities, something like that (…). That didn't seem right either." [professor, liberal arts college]

Conclusions

- MOOCs as a digital innovation potentially disruptive of the HE system

- Generates risks in terms of new inequalities or reinforcing existing ones
  - Students at elites institutions vs. lower tiers
  - Faculty vs. top leadership
  - Reorganization of labour (as for other sharing economy experiences)

  BUT with a key difference:

- Here the mobilization was successful:
  - micro: MOOCs no longer introduced for credits
  - macro: setback of MOOCs diffusion and hype

- Barriers to entry, the presence of regulation, the inclusion of faculty in the implementation of innovation reduced the disruptive potential of MOOCs in HE

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