# 1 About MOOCs

# BizMOOC Discussion paper 1

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## Defining the context for MOOCs, online courses and open education

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# Defining the context for MOOCs, online courses and open education

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## 1. Abstract

This short paper describes the basic views of what is a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and discusses the commonalities between many definitions that are proposed. The criteria to decide when a course is a and when it isn't are

open to many interpretations. In this respect a European collaborative has developed a clear operational definition. Next, it is demonstrated that the MOOC have strong connections to both open and online education. As such these educational concepts are described as well and positioned in relation to MOOCs.

# 2. Introduction

MOOC stands for Massive Open Online Courses. MOOCs have made headlines in higher education over the last years and generated a lot of discussion amongst educators, higher education institutions, government policy makers and private companies. No subject in educational technology in recent years has generated as much excitement and concern amongst the academic community as MOOCs. The media coverage, although somewhat diminishing, is huge compared to all other educational innovations in previous decades. It created interest of both private and public stakeholders resulting in serious investments.

What is seen as a MOOC is open to interpretation. There does not exist an unambiguous, straightforward definition of a MOOC that is broadly accepted. Every letter in MOOC is negotiable (see figure 1) and there is a lot of discussion going on about the meaning of each letter. Consequently each MOOC initiative (like BizMOOC project) is potentially ill-defined as well. supported in numerous other fields of human activity, including social, academic and cultural behaviour.

The MOOC territory is still very much a space of innovation and experimentation. It is therefore understandable why researchers in this emerging field of online education practice have not reached yet a standard definition for massive open online courses. Important differences can be identified in how this phenomenon is perceived by the various communities of practitioners.

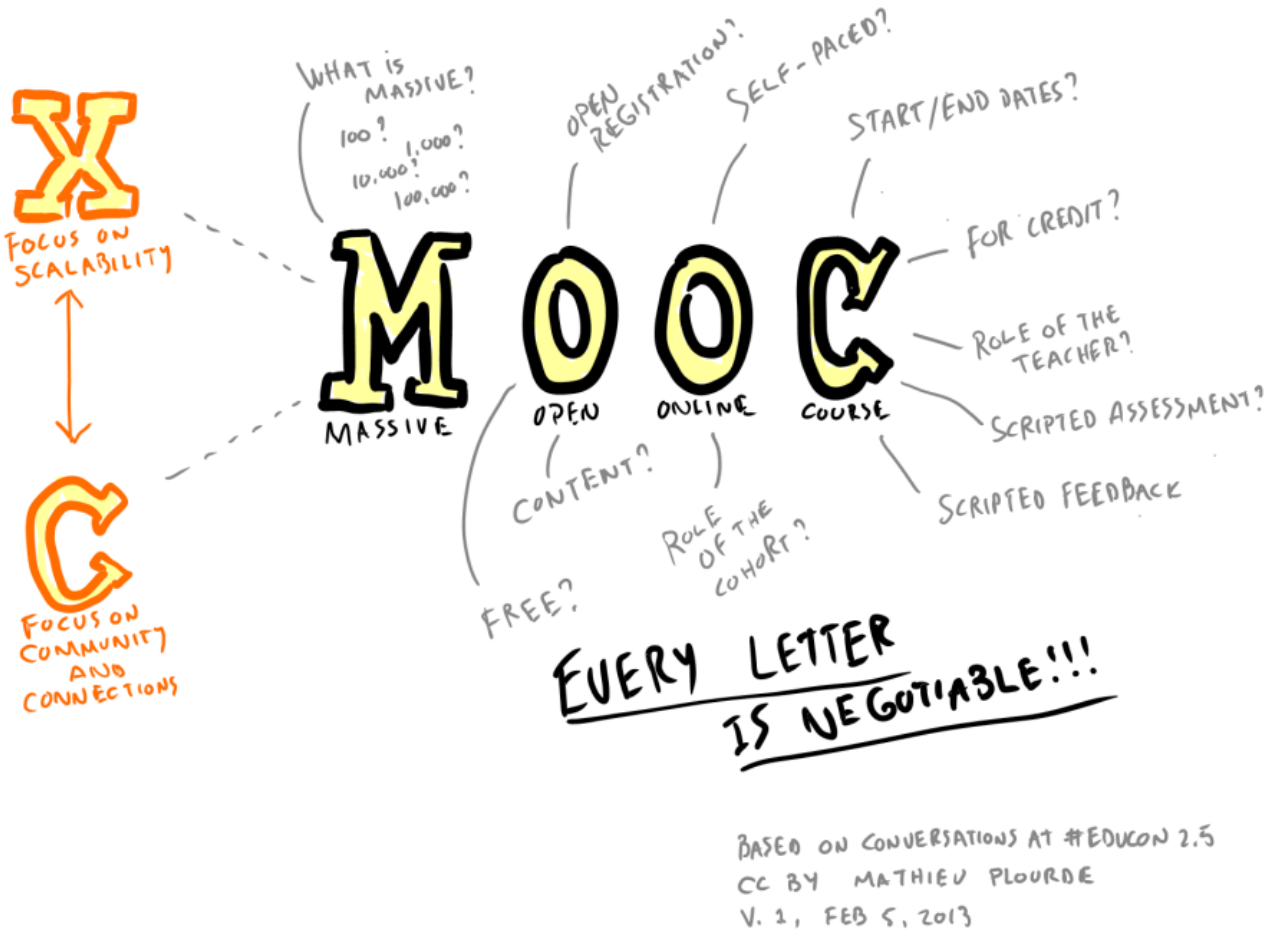


*Figure 1: MOOC poster explores the meaning of "Massive Open Online Courses" by Mathieu Plourde1 (CC-BY licenced) (https://www.flickr.com/photos/mathplourde/8448541815)*

# 3. MOOC definitions

## International Context

Selwyn, Bulfin, & Pangrazio (2015) state that "*MOOCs are courses available to masses of online learners for little or no cost*". The definition proposed by Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_Open_Online_Course) is more extended: "*an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web. In addition to traditional course materials such as videos, readings, and problem sets, MOOCs provide interactive user forums that help build a community for students, professors, and teaching*

*assistants*".

However, these definitions are not strict and can be disputed. The Commonwealth of Learning (2015) proposes a definition that already includes some specification:: "*A MOOC is an online course that requires no prior qualifications for entry, can be accessed by anyone who has an Internet connection, and includes large or very large numbers of learners*". However, this also creates some discussion related to prior qualifications needed for entry, but in many cases prior qualifications are necessary to understand and success in the course.

## European Context

In the framework of the pedagogical research developed as a collaboration with different EU-funded MOOC projects, a more comprehensive definition was adopted *"an online course designed for large number of participants that can be accessed by anyone anywhere, as long as they have an internet connection, is open to everyone without entry qualifications and offers a full/complete course experience online for free*" (Brouns et al., 2014). In 2015, this definition has been validated amongst European institutions (Jansen et al., 2015). In addition different criteria for MOOC development were defined as well (http://www.openuped.eu/images/docs/Definition_Massive_Open_Online_Courses.pdf), for example related to massive dimension and scalability (The pedagogical model of the course is such that the efforts of all services (including of academic staff on tutoring, tests, etc.) does not increase significantly as the number of participants increases).

## Overall characteristics of MOOC definitions

Bates (2015) specifies the essential elements behind each

acronym of MOOC. Common in these definitions are the following aspects to give meaning to the elements of a MOOC:

- **M**assive: designed for in theory unlimited number of participants. This means that the course is designed such that the efforts of all services does not increase significantly as the number of participants increases.
- **O**pen: access to the course is free without entry qualifications.
- **O**nline: the full course is available through the internet.
- **C**ourse: the offering is a course, meaning that it offers a complete learning experience, i.e. structured around a set of learning goals in a defined area of study and includes the course materials, quizzes, feedback, examination and certificate of completion.

The discussion is about what are essential definitions of each of those characteristics. For each of the elements different opinions are available. Dependant on which opinion one adheres to, the scope of what can be called a MOOC can be narrower or broader. To name a few differences:

- Open can be narrowed down to free availability only ; learning materials are not available under an open license) ; not all MOOC are open accessible (e.g., age limit, sanctioned countries)
- Online can be limited to all learning materials are available online during course period and some elements of a MOOC are only available offline
- Course can be narrowed down to exclude a certificate or even exclude any form of (formative) assessment.

Consequently, some online courses are not a MOOC according to the more strict definition.

# 4. MOOCs as part of a bigger movement

## MOOCs and open education

MOOC can be seen as a form of open education offered free through online platforms. The (initial) philosophy of MOOCs is to open up quality higher education to a wider audience. However, although the concept of open education is often mentioned, it is not usually combined with a clear and solid description of what the term means. What "open" means in open education has been the subject of some debate (Open Education Handbook, 2014) and is increasingly becoming associated with "*free*" only. Note for example that the Open Education Consortium focusses its description to the free and open sharing in education (http://www.oeconsortium.org/about-oec/).

In his book "The Battle for Open", Martin Weller (2014) gives an overview of the open movement, and concludes that "adopting a single definition is counter-productive" and that motivations for the open approach are the most important. In the traditional historical context open education is aimed at education for people with no or limited access to the educational system. In a somewhat broader context it is recognised that primarily open education is associated with removing barriers to education (Bates,2015). Instead of providing a definition one could adopt the following statement related to the most common referred purpose of open education: *The aim of open education is to increase access to and successful participation in education by removing barriers and offering multiple ways of learning and sharing knowledge*.

This potential of open education was strongly marked by the Cape Town Open Education Declaration (Shuttleworth/OSF, 2008). Note that the above aim of open education is not related to barriers of access only (i.e., not only aimed at the entry barriers), but at all barriers along the learning paths.

In this context, MOOCs form part of open education and should be defined as such. Mulder and Jansen (2015) explore if MOOCs can be instrumental to open up education. They conclude that some barriers will not or probably cannot be removed easily by MOOCs and ther providers. Moreover MOOC themselves do create other barriers like network connectivity (learners need good internet connection), digital literacy and for now also cultural language barriers (as still most MOOC are from Western countries in English). They state that in general MOOCs are (still) a promising tool for open education.

## MOOCs and online education

It is important to know that online education is not the same as open education. Moreover, like with MOOC and open education, it is hard to define a broad accepted definition of online education. For example the following definition of online courses exists:

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| A course where most or all of the content is delivered. Online (>80% of content is delivered online). Typically there are no face-to-face meetings (http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradelevel.pdf, page 7). |
| An umbrella term used to describe any education or training that occurs online. In online education the learning is a result of (online facilitated) experiences that are not constrained by time and/or distance. The label ‘online’ applies to both delivery of course material and to the interaction between teachers and learners, and between learners (http://empower.eadtu.eu/glossary#0). |
| All course activity is done online; there are no required face-to-face sessions within the course and no requirements for on-campus activity (http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/updated-e-learning-definitions/). |

In the context of MOOCs, online courses must be seen as a course that is offered fully online. If it’s not, then it’s a blended or hybrid course. The deciding factor should not be

only related to the amount of course content offered online but all other course elements as well (i.e., study guide / syllabus, educational content, facilitation of (academic) interaction, activities/tasks, tests, including feedback, assessment and exam). As such even if a single in-person, on-campus class is scheduled and required, then the course is blended. Thus, students in online courses rarely if ever need to step on campus.

## How does a MOOC differ from an online course?

In relation to the MOOC definition it is essential to understand the differences with other educational provision. For example MOOC differ from 'regular' online courses by at least three aspects

- MOOC are designed for in theory unlimited number of participants and as such are related to the scalability of education services
- MOOCs are for some part open, at least are accessible for free without entry qualifications.
- All elements of course provision are provided fully online

Consequently different acronyms for different kind of online or blended courses are proposed:

- SPOC (**S**mall **P**rivate **O**nline **C**ourses) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_private_online_course)
- ROOC (**R**egional **O**pen **O**nline **C**ourse)
- TORQUE (**T**iny, **O**pen-with-**R**estrictions courses focused on **QU**ality and **E**ffectiveness) (http://www.let.ethz.ch/projekte/closed/Concept_TORQUE_ETHZ.pdf)
- DOCCs (**D**istributed **O**pen **C**ollaborative **C**ourse) (http://femtechnet.org/docc/)

- SMOC (**S**ynchronous **M**assive **O**nline **C**ourse)
- MOORs (**M**assive **O**pen **O**nline **R**esearch (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_online_open_research)
- OOC (**O**pen **O**nline **C**ourse)

Some of the above abbreviations might even not be characterised as online course as they require attendance to class room at a campus. The above type of online courses differ from MOOCs by some essential elements, mainly they limit the number of participants. Note that these type of online course can, for part, still be open by removing some barriers to education but are not open to everyone. And as such they are still contributing to the opening of education for all by designing a course to a limited by still multiple target group.

# 5. Conclusions

Although there are different definitions, open and online education are recognized as underlying principles behind MOOCs. What's unique about a MOOC is partly related to the embracing of both the open (for free, no-entry requirements – open to everyone) and online component of education. The scalability and massive dimension seems the main driver behind the MOOC movement. There is no precise number to define "massive" and it might even depend on characteristics like the number of people speaking the language of the MOOC offered. It's generally agreed that in MOOCs the number of participants is larger than can be teached in a 'normal' campus class room AND that the design of the MOOC is scalable ('designed for in theory unlimited number of participants'). In this context the definition as agreed on by many European MOOC initiatives (Jansen et al, 2015) seems to be the most operational, also as it defines various criteria for an open and online course to be a MOOC.

Due to the success of MOOCs many other, almost similar, abbreviations are used. Consequently, MOOCs and the term ‘open’ are also misused to boost sales and increase funding, e.g. using the word MOOC in funding applications increases the success rate significantly. Especially if there is no clear definition anyone can claim to be involved in open and online education, MOOCs, etc. Other parties with more private and commercial intentions are increasingly using these hype words to sell their products or to get additional funding for their efforts. I.e., commercial and private products are labelled as MOOCs in order to boost sales despite failing to comply with the criteria – definition of MOOCs let alone to comply with their initial goals. The term used for these practices is called ‘MOOCwashing’ (Bell, 2012), comparable with greenwashing, which is when environmentally unfriendly products are positioned as green and eco-friendly in order to boost sales (Weller, 2014). It is therefore essential to adopt a clear definition of concepts of MOOCs and open and online education.

# Note

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