Perceptions of socio-ethical stances surrounding massive online open courses
David Kernohan and Vivien Rolfe
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Open education provides opportunities for anyone with digital access to engage in learning far beyond the classroom and throughout their lives, although this notion is not without challenges. When learners formally enrol on a course with an institution they are under the jurisdiction of academic policies, and are immersed in the cultural norms of their community, which are both motivational and supportive. For distance learning where students are enrolled but isolated, the transfer of academic values is more troublesome (1). For "open" learners, either using open educational resources (OERs) or massive online open courses (MOOCs), students are autonomous and even more isolated from institutions and communities.

The question remains, what strategies should institutions or individuals running open courses have in place to ensure that educational opportunities are implemented in a socially and ethically sound way?

Research by Rolfe in 2013 (2) concluded that more work was needed to explore the academic and socio-ethical stances surrounding open courses, with only a small number of identified empirical studies addressing the issue. One might surmise that these are therefore not important matters, but an accompanying narrative synthesis of blog articles from educationalists and experts found that there were quite significant concerns over academic quality, inclusivity and engagement, and data privacy and protection of learners (2).

The present research aims to extend this work by using phenomenological approaches to explore people's perceptions of the academic values and socio-ethical stances associated with open learning.

A series of semi-structured interviews were carried out based on the domains of enquiry from the review (2). Volunteers included university management, lecturers, technologists and open course users. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Important statements of text were copied into Microsoft Excel, and the two authors clustered the statements to match the original domains or to form new themes. A follow-up questionnaire consolidated the conclusions drawn. The work was ethically approved.

Those interviewed agreed that the quality of open courses and learner experience was extremely variable, regardless of the form of the course, e.g. connectivist MOOC or xMOOC. It was felt that institutions engaging in MOOCs should be more socially and ethically responsible to ensure students have equal opportunities and safe spaces to learn. A narrative is emerging around the

important role of the facilitator or educator in preventing exclusion and disengagement, again, regardless of the form of MOOC.

A lack of socio-ethical responsibility toward learners is accompanied by poor online experiences in some open courses. Our thinking and research needs to catch up with the technology to support institutions in developing policies and strategies for open education, and to ensure that learners can genuinely reap the benefits on offer.

REFERENCES

1 Brey P. (2006) Social and Ethical Dimensions of Computer-Mediated Education. Information, Communication and Ethics in Society, 2, pp. 91-102.

2 Rolfe V. (2013) MOOCs and social responsibility toward learners. In OPEN-ED Open Education 2013. Utah, Park City, November 2013.