MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have been considered a springboard for Higher Education change, due to the revolution they encompassed for key, macro-level dimensions of change as accessibility, openness, universities’ business/organizational models tightly connected to very successful research and business activities. However, the attention moved quickly to the other side of the MOOCs: the learners’ perspective on MOOCs, as micro-level dimensions that could bring new light on the impact of the model. In line with this, within the eLearning quality debate the perception of learners should be taken into account. In this paper our aim is to introduce two diverse learners (from their cultural and eLearning experiences point of view) perspectives along their experiences within two different MOOCs. The learners wrote their lived experience according to the principles of phenomenology, collecting their impressions, feelings and thoughts about participation to the MOOCs. The memos collected were analyzed taking into account the expressions regarding the perceived quality of the experience at a micro-level. Furthermore, quality was defined adopting the Sloan C framework; within this framework, the parameters of analysis of the Community of Inquiry model were applied to the learners’ discourse. The final goal was to achieve a complete picture of different perspectives expressing how quality can be experienced by MOOC’s learners, showing the critical issues that require further intervention from practices and approaches at the micro-level to improve a multiperspective quality of MOOCs.

KEYWORDS: MOOC, eLearning Quality, learners’ perspective.
1. Introduction: MOOCs, the hype

There are several factors pressing universities to renew their traditions in education, connected to the critics made to academic institutions as the “ivory tower,” where pure knowledge is guarded and accessed only by privileged (academics and young students).

In this context, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have been given an impressive attention since late 2011 (Sheets, Crawford, Soares, 2012, Daniels, 2012). From Siemens’ early experiences in 2008, several proposals were launched from US and Canada. The model has seen a very fast expansion that was defined a hype due to the dimensions of coverage in both magazine articles, blogs and more recently, in scholarly literature (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013). This phenomenon was clearly connected to the idea that MOOCs could be a springboard for Higher Education change due to the revolution they encompass regarding key issues as accessibility, openness, excellence of teaching staff tightly connected to very successful research and business activities (EDUCAUSE, 2012; Knox, Bayne, MacLeod, Ross, Sinclair, 2012) The high quality of contents, produced by prestigious academics, as well as the open access to them, was supposed to put the basis for “quality for all” (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013). Beyond the enthusiastic response of thousands of students and teachers, and the presence of prestigious universities behind the initiatives, the criticism is also raising, while the first participants went through their MOOC experiences (Guàrdia, Maina, & Sangrà, 2013).

In fact, along the evolution of both scholar and policy making discussion on the issue it is possible to see how the attention is moving from the organizational innovation to the participants’ perspective. This is for example the case of the “Higher Education Chronicle Survey”1, which analyzed the point of view of 174 teachers engaged in MOOCs. Moreover, the first scholarly publications, raised significantly in 2013, focused the need to pass from the analysis of MOOCs as model to the impact it can have on learners and institutions, across diverse learning cultures: this is the case in fact for the curated Special Issues of JOLT “Journal of online teaching, targeting US-international research, edited by Siemens, Irvine, & Code, 2013; “eLearning papers”, targeting European research, edited by Mor & Koskinen, 2013; or the recent European conference on MOOCs, Emooc20142. Specifically, within the criticisms raised to the value claimed by the first MOOC implementers, for the sustainability and quality of the approach the issue of learners experience is considered crucial: as Hill declares it should be necessary to provide... an experience and perceived value that enables higher course completion rates (most today have less than 10% of registered students actually completing the course) (Hill, 2012).

Taking into consideration the above depicted situation our aim was to explore in which extent the MOOC’s experience is perceived as a quality experience by learners, in order to contribute to the debate on the role the MOOCs can play as

1 https://chronicle.com/article/The-Professors-Behind-the-MOOC/137905/#id=overview
2 http://www.emoocs2014.eu/
model in Higher Education. Accordingly, we introduce two learners’ phenomenological account on their experiences (non US, non EN native speakers) within MOOCs courses; the learners’ discourse is further conceptualized, focusing the dimension of learning effectiveness, which is one of the five pillars adopted by the Sloan-C eLearning quality framework (Moore, 2002). According to the results obtained, the concept of quality of eLearning in the MOOC experience is explored, in an attempt to understand which elements should be further analyzed to generate an integrated (macro-micro), multiperspective quality experiences within MOOCs.

2. Where is Quality in MOOCs? Defining Quality from the learners’ perspective.

There are already consolidated systems to analyze and award eLearning quality both in North America (see for example the case of SLOAN Consortium, (Moore J., 2002) and in Europe (see the European Framework for Quality in eLearning, EFQUEL, 2011); however, until today, the special eLearning case of MOOCs was never considered under these quality frameworks. One of the pioneering efforts in conceptualizing the models to understand the quality of MOOCS was done by Conole (2013); however, much is to be done in this sense, in line with the debate regarding the quality of eLearning, and the more general panorama of conceptualizing educational quality in higher education.

The debate and scholar research on quality is leading to the redefinition of concepts, passing from standards of quality assurance to a multiperspective, multivoiced and multilevel quality system within a learning culture as continuously evolving system (Ehlers, 2009). Quality concerns not only institutional effectiveness but also the performance of the whole system as considered by key stakeholders like students, academic staff, administrative/management staff, members of networks for inter-institutional collaboration. The learners’ perspective is hence crucial to understand, in depth, the educational quality (Ehlers, 2005; Frydenberg, 2002, Ehlers & Hilera, 2012; Jung, 2011). It is interesting to consider that the multilevel approach to the analysis of quality is consistent with Conole and Oliver levels of analysis for the eLearning practice (Conole & Oliver, 2006):

1. Macro-level or system factors such as cultural norms, social context, educational policy, curriculum standards, organizational factors.
2. Micro-level or individual factors such as, from the teachers’ side, pedagogical practice, educational background, experience with technology, etc; and for pupils, experience with technology, social and cultural background, learning processes, etc.

According to the above mentioned frameworks, it is not enough to refer to effective issues registered at macro-levels in MOOCs (business model, organizational innovation, the quality of design and resources to cover big numbers of students). Instead, an integral approach to quality requires effective practices and impacts also at micro-level, as it is the case of learners’ perspective.

Beyond the scientific literature, still immature, the learners perspective on
MOOCs is nurtured by thousands of blog posts, tweets and facebook’s posts (among other social networks) where important issues are raised, from the initial enthusiastic idea of being engaged in a high quality experience, within a global community, to the expressions of frustration due to the lack of teacher presence, the information overload, the course’s pace, the lack of support in communications and contacts with peers (Kop, 2011); (Bentley et al., 2014). Hence, the learners experiences within MOOCs could question or reinforce the MOOCs as “disruptive” technology, from an empirical and micro-level (less explored) point of view opening to new conceptual and paradigmatic change in the field of open and distance education (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Cormier, 2010).

3. The methodological approach: phenomenology of learning experience

Our starting, specific research question was: Which are the elements attempting against MOOCs quality? Specifically, how do the MOOCers perceive the elements attempting against the quality of their learning experience? From a methodological point of view, our first question was: How can complex psychopedagogical processes like the perception of quality in a situated learning experience be characterized, through an holistic, and non-reductive way? We searched the answer to this question in qualitative research, more specifically, through a phenomenological approach.

Qualitative research is appropriate to face the challenges of Human Sciences, that is, representing the meaning making process within human experiences, respecting their uniqueness and complexity (Norman & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research addresses the question of “what”? (Wertz, 2011) very often taken for granted in the search for why. It particularly focus ill-defined problems, that are frequently influenced by the socio-cultural context and forms of power, as matters of conflicting claims and ongoing debate. Beyond our own positioning as qualitative researchers, being the issue of MOOCs an emergent practice (if we take into account that the phenomenon as well as the debate about it raised exponentially during 2012), we considered appropriate to adopt a qualitative, exploratory methodology.

The phenomenological approach, within qualitative research, has a very important place (Wertz, 2011). In educational sciences the phenomenological approach can be adopted to understand the personal, reflexive perspectives of the several participants engaged in an educational experience (Selvi, 2008). In fact, within the phenomenological approach in education, personal reflection is encouraged and a systematic record of events and ideas is implemented through writing, attempting to obtain thick descriptions of the educational lived experience. Following van Manen (1990:30-31), we considered six steps:

a) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests the research group, committing it to the world (the educational practice, in this case);

b) investigating experience as it was lived by the researchers, without conceptualizing it immediately;
c) reflecting on the essential themes which characterized the phenomenon, which in our case was done along several encounters between the two researchers and the scientific coordinator, as well as with peers in other national and international professional networks;
d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; in this case the two researchers wrote “Memos” while following the online courses, creating a sort of “learner-log”. To this regard, the software Evernote was adopted to input and share Memos with the scientific coordinator of the project and between the two researchers. The selection of this software was important for it permitted easy accessed also from mobile devices (like the tablet or the mobile phone) for a spontaneous collection of ideas and feelings.
e) manipulating a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
f) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

However, in order to ensure that the categories of quality could be defined in precise terms, the emotional, social and cognitive impact of the experience was considered on the light of an eLearning quality framework, the Sloan C. The Sloan C is a comprehensive framework composed by Five principles, known as the pillars of quality, guide (...) process of identifying goals and benchmarks, measuring progress towards goals, refining methods, and continuously improving outcomes. The pillars are learning effectiveness, cost effectiveness and institutional commitment, access, faculty satisfaction and student satisfaction. (Moore J., 2005) To define learning effectiveness, the Sloan-C refers to the extensive research based theory of community of inquiry, CoI or Community of Enquiry model (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000), as part of the Sloan C approach to quality and as key dimension of micro-level analysis (Swan, 2003). In fact, Garrison explain that learning effectiveness depends upon the appropriate balance and integration of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Where:

- Cognitive presence reflects the intellectual climate and interaction between learners and content;
- social presence is defined as the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as “real people”;
- teaching presence consists of two general functions: the design of the educational experience (the selection, organization, primary presentation of course content, the design and development of learning activities and assessment) and facilitation (to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes) (Garrison, et al. op.cit).

In order to detect the types of “presence” within a CoI, Garrison et al. (op.cit) developed a method (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 4), where the three elements of presence (Cognitive, Social, Teaching) are to be referred to a set of categories, which in time are based on indicators emerging from learners’ online discourse. This method was adopted in a second phase of the research; therefore, the discourse of the two participants collected in memos written during the

3 http://evernote.com/
experience was analyzed in search of the CoI indicators supporting Cognitive, Social or Teaching presence.

Two MOOCs were selected according to the two diverse learners’ interests, but also taking into account the two different types of MOOCs identified in practice: cMOOCs and xMOOCs (Siemens, 2012b). In fact, these two types are the expression of different learning environments and pedagogical approaches. The first type was born in the context of connectivist approach, with a first completely open course created by Siemens and Downes (the CCK08, “Connectivism and the Connective Knowledge”), but the actual term was coined by Dave Cormier and Brian Alexander when commenting the successful experience, not only open but also massive (Cormier, 2008, Siemens, 2012). The pedagogical approach was based on open access to resources and the generation of personalized spaces for learning where the learner would have collected reflections and addressed communicational processes with those peers “connected” to the own course of learning. The second type adopted the term MOOC but actually referred to a completely (somehow opposite) pedagogical approach. It was based on a highly structured learning environment where students are expected to follow the video-recorded lessons, complete quizzes and accomplish assignments as part of a structured weekly pace. xMOOCs had their explosion in 2011, when a “160.000” students’ classroom attended the first course of this type on Introduction to Artificial Intelligence (CS221) lectured by Sebastian Thrun and Stephen Norvig. The alliances made between prestigious universities and private companies, as well as the influence of the University of Stanford influenced the denomination “Stanford branch”; but the actual name xMOOCs adopted later came from the EdX company created by the University of Harvard with the MIT.

Being so different, but yet equally denominated, it was decided to explore one and another type as separated experience.

The learners were two women, a Chinese and an Argentinean, as researchers engaged in an Italian unit devoted from several years to the analysis and conceptualization of Quality of eLearning in Higher Education. The MOOCs were followed from the beginning to the end, with the aim of understanding, from a deep personal lived experience, the characteristics and personal/educational impact of the MOOC.

The corpus of data analyzed regarded the two researchers’ memos. No messages or resources revealing the identity of other participants or the identity of the MOOC under analysis are presented so far. Both experiences took place between the summer and the autumn 2012.

4. The Study

4.1 Learner’s Experience 1: xMOOC

4.1.1 Introduction of Learner and Course

The first learner came from China and she was a PhD candidate in Education with the previous background in information sciences. The learner had no prior experience on eLearning courses so she provided a perspective as an initial online learner. The course (Table 1) she attended, that is to be considered an xMOOC,
was provided by a Northamerican consortium that implemented an international eLearning platform where several prestigious universities are contributing. The course lasted six weeks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Duration</th>
<th>Six weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field of Study</td>
<td>Computer and Information Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prerequisites</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Quizzes &amp; Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Style</td>
<td>Self-pace with a recommended minimum pace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. Brief Information on the xMOOC**

Before the course started, the teacher uploaded all the video lectures and quizzes to the platform, so learners could set personalized study schedules according to their own situations. Besides, there was a recommended study pace based on the deadline for every quiz in order to remind learners whose pace was too slow. Every quiz corresponded to a specific video lecture and learners were free to retake quiz once, the final quiz’s score depending on the higher score achieved. There were no homework or other assignments. The overall course score was based on the average of the individual quizzes scores. In the end, the certificate would have been issued to those learners whose course score was successfully exceeding a certain threshold determined by the teacher.

**4.2.2 Analysis on the Quality of xMOOC by CoI model**

The learner/researcher wrote eleven memos during her study. Table 2 introduces the analysis of most significant bracketed issues regarding the CoI categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Col element</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Presence</td>
<td>Triggering event</td>
<td>M1.2. I feel sometimes I watch the video is only to find the answer in the quiz... M1.3. Now I used to check the quiz before I watch the lecture video in order to spend as little as possible time for finishing the quizzes. M1.3. I started the course with strong interest and motivation, now after watching several videos and finishing some quizzes, the main atmosphere in the course that the top priority is to finish the quizzes assimilated me...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td></td>
<td>M1.3. I browsed the online forum and most of discussions are about assignments... assignment is really become the central issue in most students’ learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. xMOOC learning experience

| Integration       | M1.9. I am not so satisfied...the reason is that I feel I can pass all the quizzes and get the certificate without actual learning... I can just remember the content for the quiz then give it back to the teacher... without participating actively in the discussion, thinking on the network issue in my real life situation. Watch the video and finish the quizzes become a task...then I go back to my own work.
|                  | M1.5. Students start to ask for explanation on the wrong answers. It’s true that we can learn from the mistake we have made during learning. But we only have two attempts on the quiz, if we failed to give a right answer on the second attempt, how can we know the right answer.
| Social Presence  | Open communication | M1.10. I am not sure whether I am the minority that inactively participate in the discussion forum...Today I see some evidence that learners try to connect to each other by Skype, Facebook.
|                  |                   | M1.3. I don’t want to say that we need the physical universities with bricks and walls, I want to say we are eager for the real and sincere interaction between teachers and learners, and among the learners especially in the digital age.
| Teaching Presence| Instructional management | M1.1. After I sign in, immediately I receive a welcome message from the professor in my mailbox. Though I know it is automatic, it is still very nice because it attach the professor’s homepage link and I can gain a general understanding on him and his research even before I start the course. That’s really great.
|                  |                   | M1.1. I didn’t see any posts from the professor in the discussion section. It seems there is no eTutor, either...How the students interact with the professor?

From the learner’s experience, all the three categories of the cognitive presence seemed to have one central issue – that is assignment/quiz. Watching video lectures appeared as just an activity to accomplish quizzes; other learners discussed together in the online forum for quizzes and asked explanations on the wrong answer, still about the weekly quiz. Regarding social presence the category considered was open communication (risk-free expression). The quotations taken from memos reveal also that there were probably less interactions with instructors and among learners than expected by the learner; as well as the fact that it was surprising for the learner that interactions often occurred in the personal level off-class (e.g. Skype, Facebook) rather than within the space officially provided by the MOOC for the online learning community. Teaching presence was mainly represented by the category of instructional management. Since the professor recorded all the video lectures, there was no other instructional activities actually happening in the online course. This provided a good start by greeting enrolled students and providing information about the instructor. However, the absence of teacher’s presence showed to have a negative impact on the learner’s engagement for online learning.
In sum, analyzed three presences of CoI model showed the following results: firstly, a weak cognitive presence, in the sense that the learner in this study choose the approach of surface learning which is to achieve the result (finish the quiz and get the certificate) by minimum effort without deep understanding on the course topic; secondly, weak social presence, in the sense that the online community failed to enhance group cohesion by encouraging collaboration, with the learners mainly leaving their Skype id or Facebook link to connect others in personal level; thirdly, weak teaching presence, that is, no direct instruction during the online learning. The teaching presence was represented by recorded video and announcements for course organization issue rather than as support to facilitate online discussion around course topics or to design collaborative activities among learners. This showed to have a negative impact on the way our learner engaged with the own learning process.

4.3 Reflections: xMOOC as “Assembly Line”

In this learner’s experience of xMOOC, she finds a metaphor for her own learning experience —, the one of the assembly line in the factory (Table 3). The learner reflected about her experience in the following terms:

The teacher designs the course by dividing the study topics, recorded the instructional videos, providing quizzes for each learning unit. So most of the teaching activities have been done before the course start, learners just like the original model that will pass all the procedures in the assembly line in order to become a final product. First, learners need to watch the lecture videos to gain certain information just like preparation on the individual components for the product; then learners are mandatory to finish the quiz on that topic just like checking quality on the individual components for further assembling; in the meanwhile, the course provides an online discussion opportunity, so you can exchange ideas with peers just like polishing components in the process; in the end, when you finish all the quizzes just like the final product is assembled by all the requested components, the teacher will issue a certificate to learners just like the quality assurance for the final package of the product.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Element</th>
<th>Assembly Line Metaphor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>The designer of assembly line and the final quality assurance for the product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners</td>
<td>The original model for the product in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Lectures</td>
<td>Various components for the product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Discussion</td>
<td>Polishing in the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiz</td>
<td>Quality assurance on the components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>Final Package for the product</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. xMOOC as “Assembly Line”
4.2 Learner’s Experience 2: cMOOC

4.2.1 Introduction of Learner and Course

The second learner came from Argentina and she was a post-doc researcher in Education with the previous education background in psychology and educational sciences. This cMOOC experience was her first time of participation in a MOOC, while she had extensive experience (about 10 years) in instructional design and eLearning initiatives coordination. Her experience provided a description on the learners’ experience of cMOOC with a previous impression about online learning.

The course she attended (Table 4) was provided by a consortium of institutions, some of them universities, some others foundations and private organizations giving support to the specific initiative. The main language was English, being the consortium entirely composed by Northamerican institutions. The duration of the course was also six weeks, every week representing a thematic block, with the presentation of different personalities in the field. The main topic of the course fell in the field of social sciences and humanities. The platform adopted was based on the connectivist approach to MOOCs, where a web space is used as aggregator of communications, being promoted ‘free connections’ between participants through the own personal learning environments (Downes, 2011). According to this model, there was a web space with several resources regarding a topic launched at the beginning of the week; this was accompanied by an online forum as traditional tool for exchanges between participants. In addition to this, a ‘course newsletter’ gathered all the free interventions in open spaces like personal blogs and twitter. No assessment was proposed but the free reflections – as form of self-evaluation and comments by others on the own reflections – as form of peer evaluation. Finally, once a week there was the possibility to access to webinars; during this synchronous sessions, key personalities on the topic where invited, and the students were allowed to ask direct questions via chat. No final certifications were awarded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Duration</th>
<th>Six weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field of Study</td>
<td>Social Sciences and Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prerequisites</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Style</td>
<td>Self-pace, no recommended minimum pace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Brief Information on the cMOOC
4.2.2 Analysis on the Quality of cMOOC by CoI model

The learner wrote 25 ‘memos’ on the experience; however, 11 of them were notes on the content and on assignments, which were not considered in this analysis. Instead, 14 Memos where triggered mainly by critical incidents during activities, reflecting the learner’s feelings about the problems but also positive situations she was dealing with. The CoI coding template was applied to memos; the analysis is presented at Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CoI element</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Cognitive Presence | Triggering event     | M2.1. Ready to go! What an exciting and high quality presentations during the webinar. I’ll have the opportunity to interact with key thinkers, and with people around the world.  
M2.2. Browsing the webpage with resources is a little bit disappointing. From the key message sent by the facilitators this week I get lost in several connections that jump from one file to a blog post to the forums. I'm not able of dealing with all this information. |
| Exploration      |                       | M2.2. I move from the initial message to the newsletter to some interesting blog posts. Everything is so good! I read and read and think and think and think.  
M2.4. I would like to write my own blog posts, but I can see also that the discussions in the forum are interesting and formative. What should I do first?  
M2.6. Enjoying a wonderful discussion here -at the webinar- ...Clearly I'm not a multitasking and I prefer to just listen. But we have only half hour with everything. I couldn't post my question. |
| Integration      |                       | M2.8. I devoted so much time to my blog posts that I couldn't participate to the forum. The blog posts were really rewarding to me. But I have a feeling of isolation. This is not collaborative learning.  
M2.21. I'm happy for the quality the resources, I feel informed. I'm happy about my skills with the blog. Apart from this, I must say I didn't connect with none of my interesting mates, which make me feel a bit frustrated, for I really believed in the connectivist approach to learning and I thought I would have networked more, much more. Nobody commented my blog posts, but I must say I didn't commented other that much. I discover networking requires more, much more time than I usually dedicate to a traditional pedagogical method. This makes me think a lot on how I will design courses in the future. |
| Social Presence  | Open communication    | M2.10. The online forum is like the story of the 'ten small Indians'...we were in hundreds here -at the beginning- and we are now not more than fifteen-twenty people here.  
M2.11. I commented a post written on Google plus and got answer! I twitted the conversation: I want to see what effect does it make on conversations , after being delivered by the newsletter!  
It is certainly an important thing: why we call "universal" what it is Northamerican? Why is the European perspective so poorly represented -also by learners-?  
M2.13. No comments on my last tweet. :-|
| Teaching Presence| Instructional management | M2.1. I must say I like their (the teachers) clever style beyond-the-tradional. I see in their actions they are contesting the model.  
M2.4. I cannot identify facilitators. The newsletter is just an aggregator of what we 'learners' say. Ok we are smart enough to comment and criticize and collaborate. But I feel the need of that person that "ties loose ends" and let me see the strategy.  
M2.22. The webinar dedicated to feed-backs was a failure.  
M2.24. I understand that for someone conducting the course it must be difficult to say what happened in a week, with thousands of participants. |

Table 5. cMOOC learning experience
Regarding the first dimension of analysis, cognitive presence, and taking into account the three subcategories, namely, triggering event, exploration and integration, there was an emergent feeling of a complexity that cannot be governed. The initial motivation, due to the fact of excellence of lecturers and resources, became increasingly a sense of “helplessness” were the learner was unable of selecting the adequate inputs making sense of her learning experience. This was reinforced by the critical incident narrated under the dimension of social presence (M2.21): once the learner selected a path for integration, attempting to do what she believed could lead her learning experience to a better level –collaborating with others-, she got frustrated with the lack of answers from the others. The fact that the presence of others was diminishing in the online forum surprised the learner but still reinforced her idea of isolation in the complexity.

Lastly, the teaching presence showed, in convergence with the previous interpretations, the feeling of lack of “human” support, though the quality of lectures was considered very high. It seemed the learner was aware that this was a different experience, and traditional standards would not apply. However, deep in her mind and soul, she was searching for closer relationships.

In terms of learning effectiveness, as dimension of quality analyzed in this paper, it could be said that the experience was both challenging and dramatic. The challenge regarded the great effort put in elaborating blog posts coming out from key resources selected by the same learner as well as the struggle for making her voice heard in a global network. But the frustration appeared at the time of discovering the loneliness in the middle of the multitude.

4.2.3 Reflections: cMOOC as “the Garden of Forking paths”

To make sense of her learning experience, the second learner adopted the title of Jorge L. Borges short story *In the garden of forking path* as metaphor of the hypertextual landscape constituting the complex and wide MOOC’s space of learning where she moved. Borges conceives the garden as “a labyrinth that folds back upon itself in infinite regression”, asking the reader to “become aware of all the possible choices we might make” (Murray, 2003). This seemed to be the case along the second learner MOOC’s experience. In the learner’s words:

The teaching staff is present in terms of excellent resources and lectures, the classmates are so many and from so interesting, diverse socio-cultural belongings. However there is everywhere, along the whole experience, a feeling of being overwhelmed, and a struggle to find the own, unique sense for the experience, which is a key principle of the connectivist model. Neither feedback nor assessment is implemented in the course. The good and the bad can be measured in the terms of interactions, but neither these are organized, framed, in a way I feel supported. The result is a stressful situation, even when good learning results are achieved. It is crucial to me to make a final reflection on the connectivist approach: even when celebrated as the key for significant, personal learning experiences, it requires resources and support that need to be customized. While probably other learners were able of fully enjoying the experience, for me it meant a feeling of being unable to find “a path” to walk ahead, even when significant learning was achieved (blog posts).
4.3 Discussion

In this study we have analyzed the emerging situation of MOOCs and the urgent need to research and conceptualize on the participants’ perspectives, in order to understand which social and cultural impacts this new approach could have. We have selected two very different profiles and experiences, being our attempt to represent facets of the complex picture the MOOCs are in this moment.

Going through the two experiences, the two “metaphors” selected by learners making sense of their own experience, show the big gaps the MOOC experience generates on the learners’ “feeling” of quality. In fact, while one metaphor (the assembly line) indicates the depersonalization, the lack of intrinsic motivation the model generated in this specific learner; the other metaphor expresses the feeling of overwhelming complexity. These two perspectives on the experience seem to be rather different; it could be said that they only converge in the idea of the participants’ “isolation” in the effort required to make sense of their learning experience, as well as to achieve concrete results. It is probable that the two learners were in search of the “traditional” eLearning scaffolding (teaching presence), as experienced in prior (general) learning in their lives. Instead, they found a massive structure where only self-directed learning could lead to genuine learning outcomes. Another interpretation of the negative feelings experienced comes from the weak “social presence”; to this regard, the fluidity of relationships within the MOOC space required effort and attention from the single in order to crystallize significant relationships; probably these two learners entered into the MOOC experience with their own conception of “collaboration” as something facilitated by tasks and the course design. As a result, in the first case the cognitive presence is weak and related to the content; while in the second case it is deviated from the declared learning goals of the course and become a personal challenge, more focused on transversal skills (digital and narrative competence).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Element</th>
<th>Garden of Forking Paths Metaphor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>The designer of complexity, an invisible “Master of the Game”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners</td>
<td>The orchestrators of complexity and builders of new gardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Webinars</td>
<td>The “fleeting moment”, the illusion of a space to find the right “path”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Discussion</td>
<td>The more “traditional” path to find peers and make sense together. Driven by others’ “path”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs / Social Networks</td>
<td>The innovative path, to make “refined” sense and network. Driven by the own “path”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. cMOOC as “Garden of Forking Paths”
Conclusions

What did we learn about the quality of the MOOC as experienced by our two learners in two different (but representative expression) of massive courses? Independent learning is a key dimension of massive, open experiences. The high numbers of dropouts (Hill, 2012) demonstrate that from one side, the utopia of wide, massive, open access should be reconsidered: in fact, learners are exposed to high levels of frustration if they are not well prepared to manage self-learning paths. Clearly, MOOCs are there to be accessed and fruitfully adopted. However, the question of how inclusive they can be, in intercultural and social terms is still a big issue.

The negative expressions collected within the bracketed memos regarding social, teaching and cognitive presence indicate that the learning experience was not completely effective even if challenging, and hence an important dimension of quality was not satisfactorily reached, for the reasons mentioned above. Further research should emphasize the way MOOCs are designed to promote, for example, better teaching presence through pedagogical mediation regarding the diverse cultures of learning.

However, every learning design and the quality embedded is a unique situation. As it has been manifested by George Siemens, declared in his eLearning Space blog,

It is important to realize that MOOCs are not (yet) an answer to any particular problem. They are an open and ongoing experiment. They are an attempt to play with models of teaching and learning that are in synch with the spirit of Internet. As with any research project, it is unlikely that they will be adopted wholesale in traditional universities. Most likely, bits and pieces will be adopted into different teaching models (Siemens, 2012, March 5)

The quality of a MOOC should be searched, within institutions and by learners, understanding that this type of “learning architecture” generates new complex issues regarding the design and pedagogical approach. The exploration of this complexity implies learners efforts to navigate this new massive learning environment, the tensions experienced as well as the negative feelings emerged. Only through careful reflection and contextualization, educational quality at a micro-level will be achieved. As we observed, there are discrepancies between the manifested “quality” of MOOCs, as we pointed out at the beginning of the article, based on the high quality of resources provided by first level academics, as well as sophisticated eLearning platforms, and the learners’ perception of quality.

References


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