

# An Unconventional MOOC as a Solution for Short Budgets and Young Researchers in Europe

Gemma Pellissa Prades, *Harvard University, USA*

Joana Palau, Pau Castell Granados, *Universitat de Barcelona, Spain*

Godefroid de Callataÿ and Sébastien Moureau, *Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium*

## ABSTRACT

---

The MOOC 'Magic in the Middle Ages', organized by the Universitat de Barcelona (UB) with the collaboration of the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL), is an unconventional course even for an e-learning platform. It is being created by a group of interdisciplinary and inter-university lecturers and a team of organizers that is intended to be self-sufficient in order to create a brand new MOOC with a non-existent budget. A hotly debated topic is whether European universities are able to compete with the MOOCs offered by North-American institutions, which are often the results of huge investments (Ruth, 2014). Our MOOC faces this problem but it also advantageously benefits from the competences that today's young researchers generally have (new technologies, social networks, multilingualism) and offers them an opportunity to pursue a teaching and research career and to make new contacts with professors from other European universities in a moment in which their affiliation to a university cannot be taken for granted.

---

## The Singularity of the MOOC *Magic in the Middle Ages*

This article is based on the experience of creating the MOOC *Magic in the Middle Ages*, offered by the Universitat de Barcelona with the collaboration of the Université catholique de Louvain. It deals with four distinctive features of this course: a) the interdisciplinary perspective of the MOOC, b) the collaboration between European universities and its benefits, c) on the one hand, the possibilities of a MOOC run by postdoctoral and pre-doctoral researchers and, on the other hand, the MOOC as an opportunity for young researchers to enrich their teaching experience and to strengthen their connections with European universities, and d) the resources and infrastructures available to a MOOC with a short budget. I will address how having young researchers joining the team reduces the need to turn to external resources to obtain services that they might be competent to perform: linguistic advise, using new technologies, managing social networks.

One of the aspects of the MOOC phenomenon that makes them extremely attractive for researchers, instructors and educators is its cooperative

format (Plotkin 2010). In fact, the high number of students willing to follow these courses compels the organizers to design an assessment plan that both encourages, and depends on, the interaction and feedback that learners receive from their fellow students, as is the case for peer-to-peer exercises (Balfour, 2013) as well as for the forums of the course. McAuley, Steward and Cormier (2010) address this topic in *The MOOC model for digital practice*. According to Cormier, 'networked learning models can support long term connectivity between peers to provide an extended impact on how learning can happen for an individual' (p. 14). But, although all the focus has been placed on students, MOOCs also offer a valuable framework for strengthening cooperation between academics from different fields and universities, not just once the MOOC has been released and it is available to other scholars, but also during the very process of creating it. In this paper the experience of designing an interdisciplinary and inter-university MOOC will be addressed.

The MOOC *Magic in the Middle Ages* is organized by ARDIT Medieval Cultures, a graduate students

association, the Institute for Research in Medieval Cultures (IRCVM) and the Master's degree in Medieval Culture of the Universitat de Barcelona. These three entities have a relevant experience working in interdisciplinary projects regarding the Middle Ages. Therefore, the MOOC was conceived as an introductory course to the study of this period from different disciplines (History, Literature, Art History, History of Science). Each unit focuses on a topic related to magic in order to offer an overview to the different methodologies and techniques applied to deal with the analysis of medieval documentation and literary and artistic manifestations. The program had to be consistent regardless of the variety of approaches to the topic; therefore a strong coordination between all the instructors was needed. Moreover, as professionals with different abilities (an advanced level of English, informatics, organizational skills, editing videos...) were required, it was decided to work in two different teams that would also be coordinated by Gemma Pellissa Prades. On the one hand, the teaching staff: Noemi Álvarez da Silva (Universidad de León), Godefroid de Callataÿ (UCL), Jordi Casals (UB), Pau Castell (UB), Sébastien Moureau (UCL), Delfi-I. Nieto Isabel (UB), Gemma Pellissa Prades (Harvard University), Sergi Sancho Fibla (Universitat Pompeu Fabra) and Blanca Villuendas (CSIC). On the other hand, the organizing team: Gemma Pellissa Prades (coordinator), Delfi-I. Nieto Isabel, Joana Palau, Pau Castell and David Carrillo Rangel (although some researchers are in both groups and we have had an important number of collaborators during this process). Surprisingly enough, working in two teams or committees never was a problem, but what are the challenges that the organizers of an interdisciplinary MOOC have to deal with?

## Creating an Interdisciplinary Course: From Failure to Success

First of all, preparing an interdisciplinary course meant that, in contrast with MOOCs that all of us might have in mind as valuable models, our MOOC could not be taught by just one professor (and his or her assistants) or by a group of research, because we needed experts in different disciplines. So, we selected a heterogeneous group of lecturers who would teach different topics. The syllabus was designed and the program had the same structure than now, that is, six modules dealing with medieval magic through a wide range of disciplines, but there was a very important difference compared to the current version of it. Instead of assigning one lecturer per module, we thought that due to

the quantity of time that should be invested in each unit, it would be better to ask each lecturer to prepare just one script/video. This implied that we had from three to four lecturers approximately for each module (20 in total), something which was certainly out of proportion. We tested it with one module and it was definitively too difficult to coordinate: the results were too heterogeneous, there was no consistency between the different videos and, above all, there was too much content for a unit to which a student was supposed to devote between three and four hours per week. Besides, the videos were too long (they lasted for 15 minutes or more). Consequently, the organizers decided that the program should be adapted and made more consistent, that the videos should be shortened to 6 minutes and that in general there should be only one responsible per each unit who would prepare all the materials and videos. This is the formula that has been finally retained in our MOOC. There are a total of six instructors responsible for a module and three lecturers that offer optional videos and activities. All of them had to be fluent in English in order to avoid translating costs, as we wanted our MOOC to be self-sufficient due to the lack of budget.

Secondly, in any course, conventional or not, quality is a must. So we had to find a way to guarantee it. However, each of the members of our organization is specialized in his own discipline and it was difficult to revise our colleagues' contributions, although most lecturers are experts in the topics they address in the course. This is the reason why we asked IRCVM for an external scientific committee that evaluates the scripts as if they were articles to be published in a scientific research journal. We could also count with the collaboration of renowned professors from other universities for this purpose. So, the papers underwent two revisions: a pedagogical one made by the coordinator and a blind and scientific one made by the scientific committee.

Finally, looking at other MOOCs, we thought that the best way to articulate the course was having only one lecturer appearing in the videos. Whereas the scripts, the bibliography and the activities of every module were prepared by different lecturers, we wanted to have only one 'visible face' of the MOOC; but we finally rejected this idea because we felt that the specialists in each one of the topics of the course were the best qualified to transmit and explain the contents. We currently have a conductor of the course who introduces and closes each unit (videos 1 and 6) except for module 4, which was made by two professors from the Université catholique de Louvain, a collaborating institution of our MOOC. In fact, these two professors will participate in the presentation of this session in the 2015 European MOOCs Stakeholders Summit, together with one

member from the organizing team at the Universitat de Barcelona. Moreover, the coordinator and instructor of module 5 of the MOOC, will prepare a video to promote a rich and provocative reflection and discussion.

## International Collaboration between European Universities: Our Experience

The collaboration on the MOOC between the UB and the UCL, two large and renowned European universities, was meant to be a win-win experience, and so it has been up to the present time. For the UB creators and organizers of the MOOC, the collaboration represented an efficient possibility to extend the potential interest of the MOOC to the international community, as well as a way to reinforce its content by additional expertise. For the UCL, it meant a rare opportunity to get involved in a brand-new and ambitious project by taking full advantage of the experience already acquired in this field by the partner. Concretely, the original “contract” (no such thing was needed in reality, since the collaboration entirely lays on the mutual confidence of the partners) was that UCL-based Godefroid de Callataÿ and Sébastien Moureau as experts in the history of Arabic science would busy themselves with the six units making up module 4 of the MOOC, devoted to “Magic in Islam”. What was originally agreed was that they would: 1) write the scripts of their units; 2) find at UCL, and free of charge, the material necessary to record the corresponding videos; 3) have these videos recorded on the site of Louvain-la-Neuve; 4) provide indications as to the way the videos should be edited by the Barcelona team; 5) provide indications as to the way the students taking this course would be assessed.

All this was done in the space of a very few weeks in November/December 2014, in permanent online consultation with the coordinator of the MOOC, and benefitting indeed greatly from the advice and experience from the Barcelona team (as module 4 was the last one to be recorded on videos). But curiosity for this new way of communication, and interest in the promising perspectives it opens in terms of education and teaching rapidly grew up for the two UCL collaborators, who both desired to get involved more closely to the following phases of production of their units, and more particularly to the assessment of the students.

In fact, MOOCs provide an ideal framework to enhance collaboration between universities. Epelboin (2013) states that, in order to engage in

the MOOC phenomenon, European universities do not need to do it individually, as creating one of these courses is an ambitious project that requires important human, technological and economic investment. He defends the use of European consortiums such as the LERU to create MOOCs in a collaborative way. Indeed, there are remarkable experiences of successful MOOCs that have been created thanks to the participation of different universities. In the area of the Humanities, I would outline, for instance, the case of LACE (Literature and Change in Europe), which counts with a network between seven institutions (Verbeken, Truyen and Baetens, 2014).

## MOOCs as an Opportunity for Young Researchers and Universities

Nowadays, one of the questions that European universities have to ponder is whether they are able to compete with MOOCs offered by prestigious universities from the USA in which an important quantity of money has been invested (Ruth, 2014). Academics such as Enric I. Canela have repeatedly outlined the difficulty of finding the necessary means to obtain similar results in the current economic situation. Scholars legitimately wonder who is paying for these free courses and which price universities and governments are willing to pay for them, since they obviously have a cost. Although it is not the ideal scenario, the MOOC *Magic in the Middle Ages* has not received any funding until now (December 2014). The only payments that have been made were for the illustrations of one of the modules (150 euros) and for the editing license for the videos (Camtasia). We also count with an assistant assigned by the UB for approximately 20 hours/week. Neither the organizing committee nor the teaching team receive any salary for this purpose.

The members of both the organizing team and the teaching group (except for the professors from the UCL) are either junior postdoctoral researchers or PhD students. Allowing young researchers to participate in the creation of MOOCs provides some remarkable benefits to the universities and to the participants. First of all, it is an opportunity to maintain the contact between the institution and its new doctors, which might find themselves in a vulnerable position (often without a university affiliation after having obtained their doctoral degree). Maintaining a link with their former universities while they are preparing for the next step is mutually beneficial. Secondly, it enables them to develop a teaching and research career, to share

the results of their PhD thesis with others and to make new connections, especially in the case of inter-university and international MOOCs. Thirdly, this is a generation of researchers that have a significant formation in foreign languages, e-learning (both as students and as instructors), communication skills, new technologies and the managing of social networks and social media. It is likely that they have been trained in all these abilities during their PhDs and that they have had the opportunity to teach courses, to organize academic events, to present papers in international conferences, to lead work teams, and so on. In other words, they have the skills to make unnecessary the more expensive hiring of professional translators, linguists, computer engineers, managers, marketing experts by the universities. Young researchers are indeed the key to form a self-sufficient team, although it should be explored how this work should be remunerated or, at least, rewarded.

## Working with a Non-Existent Budget

One can find a wide range of tutorials and other materials on the Internet that explain how to record videos for a MOOC using a Smartphone or how to re-utilize the resources created for a conventional class in a new MOOC. Regarding the first statement, we tried it and we rejected it afterwards because we did not obtain the results that we expected. We also had an innovative conception of the course that required building it from scratch, but we were convinced that these new materials should be used as complementary resources to some courses taught at university. In this section I will briefly expound how our MOOC has survived the lack of funding until now.

First of all, all the members of the organizing team volunteered to create the course in their free time. The coordinator also asked her fellowship program for permission to allow her to devote time to the MOOC. As it has been mentioned before, we are all postdoctoral researchers and PhD students who are affiliated to the association ARDIT for young medievalists. Since its foundation in 2011, ARDIT has provided a supportive environment for its members to develop organizational skills and to undertake different projects related to its research and educational goals (i.e. seminars, conferences, and training sessions). It offers them the opportunity to enlarge their experience and it is the place to look for partners for your next project. Therefore, most of the organizers of the MOOC had worked together before and made the commitment to create the MOOC in the same way they would

undertake, for instance, the organization of an international conference. As it has been said, the team was intended to be mostly self-sufficient, but we also applied for a 8.000 grant from the Secretary for Universities and Research of the Ministry of Economy and Knowledge of the Government of Catalonia (the results of the application will be announced by the end of December 2014). Secondly, we applied, to a lesser scale, the concept of cooperation developed by Epelboin (2013) about a consortium between universities that would allow them to share the existent resources. Thus, our MOOC has three organizing institutions. Although none of them had a budget to invest in this project, they all have human resources (i.e. scientific committee) and an infrastructure (an office, a computer, access to institutional spaces or contact with museums) that have proven essential for the course. In addition to it, we have had regular meetings with the Vice-rectors' Office for Teaching Policy at the UB. Last but not least, we have asked for contributions: a) we have used Twitter in order to look for someone to provide a specific service for us in exchange for acknowledging his/her collaboration to the MOOC (i.e., to obtain the right to use a recording of medieval music) and b) we have constantly asked for the collaboration of ARDIT's members, who were assigned simple and short tasks (i.e. to prepare a Power Point to be used as a teleprompter or to translate a script in order to obtain subtitles for the course).

Finally, I will give some guidelines to maximize the use of university resources and infrastructures in order to facilitate the organization of a MOOC, as it is a very recent phenomenon for some of the European universities engaged in this process. All these suggestions are open to further discussion. With an effective use of university resources, the amount of time and the cost required by a MOOC can be swiftly reduced.

The Vice-Rectorship for Teaching Policy of the UB selects and approves the MOOCs that receive support from the university. They facilitate the contact with the platform that will hold the course, they assign an assistant to help to edit the videos and they offer advice and information about various aspects of the creation of a MOOC. It is a recent initiative. Furthermore, it should be stressed that the formation that the academics from our university (and it is my impression that it can be applied to the Catalan universities in general) receive about the process of creating a MOOC is excellent, as there are conferences devoted to the topic since some years ago. In 2014 there was a free online course offered by the Institut de Ciències de l'Educació to all the academics of the UB wishing to learn about MOOCs and there was a series of workshops

promoted by the Catalan Government at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra and at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili.

In addition to this, I consider that there should be an established and permanent network within each university that would provide the organizers with the necessary institutional contacts for undertaking this kind of project. Based on our experience, these are some of the actions that it would be very useful to implement: a) the organizers should be able to borrow cameras and microphones from the audiovisual services of the university free of charge without further negotiations; b) there should be a list of spaces that might be booked by the organizers of a MOOC in order to record the videos. It is convenient to make available some of the most emblematic spaces of the university, as it helps to promote the international image of the institution; c) free editing programs should be prioritized; hence, there would not be license expenses; d) the university should facilitate a model of documents regarding the cession of the intellectual rights of the scripts for the videos and authorizing the use of image of the instructors that appear on the videos; e) the language advisory services of the university should revise the documents of the course if it is necessary; f) the possibility to offer assistantships to students from the university to collaborate in the organization of the course should be encouraged; g) having fluency in English (minimum: C1, European

framework for language learning) should be a requirement for selecting the assistants that will work in MOOCs taught in this language (the same criteria should apply to other languages); g) the university should facilitate the contact between the different teams that are creating MOOCs (or having done it in the past) and encourage the exchange of experiences; h) pedagogical advice regarding the design of the assessment for MOOCs should be granted.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the innovative conception behind the MOOC Magic in the Middle Ages and the process of its creation has offered us an invaluable opportunity to reflect about the way MOOCs offer some answers to the challenges of the European higher education system today. This is a fresh perspective to hotly debated issues such as the price that universities can afford to pay for a Massive Open Online Course or the benefits of working together with other institutions in an international collaboration. At the same time, it was our purpose to consider other aspects of MOOCs which have not frequently been addressed, such as the role of young researchers in the changes produced in education or the importance of universities and institutions as active agents involved in the process of the creation of MOOCs.

## References

- **Balfour, S. P.** (2013). Assessing writing in MOOCs: Automated essay scoring and calibrated peer review. *Research & Practice in Assessment*, 8(1), 40-48.
- **Epelboin, Y.** (2013). MOOC, a European view. <http://wiki.upmc.fr/display/tice/MOOC,+a+European+view> (14/03/2015).
- **McAuley, A., Stewart, B., Siemens, G., & Cormier, D.** (2010). The MOOC model for digital practice. [http://www.davecormier.com/edblog/wp-content/uploads/MOOC\\_Final.pdf](http://www.davecormier.com/edblog/wp-content/uploads/MOOC_Final.pdf) (14/03/2015).
- **Plotkin, H.** (2010). Free to Learn Guide. Creative Commons. [https://wiki.creativecommons.org/Free\\_to\\_Learn\\_Guide](https://wiki.creativecommons.org/Free_to_Learn_Guide) (14/03/2015).
- **Ruth, S.** (2014). MOOCs and Technology to Advance Learning and Learning Research. Can MOOCs Help Reduce College Tuition? (Ubiquity Symposium), 1-4. <http://ubiquity.acm.org/article.cfm?id=2591685> (14/03/2015).
- **Verbeken, S., Truyen, F., & Baetens, J.** (2014). LACE: using a MOOC for regular networked curricula. *Proceedings of OpenCourseWare Consortium Global*. [http://conference.oecconsortium.org/2014/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Paper\\_25-LACE.pdf](http://conference.oecconsortium.org/2014/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Paper_25-LACE.pdf) (14/05/2015).

*This article has counted with the support of the Secretary for Universities and Research of the Ministry of Economy and Knowledge of the Government of Catalonia.*