The MOOC is dead—long live MOOC 2.0! The MOOC is dead—long live MOOC 2.0. The veracity of this claim depends to a great deal on who is making it. Or is the claim an example of the false “appeal to authority” argument denounced by logicians as crooked thinking? Or even an age-old “appeal to novelty” argument whereby new terms are deemed to be better than old ones without proof? The answer depends on how much evidence is produced for the idea that experts are always right (see Thouless, 1953). The evidence provided in the book edited by Ke Zhang, Curtis Bonk, Thomas Reeves, and Thomas Reynolds, MOOCs and Open Education in the Global South: Challenges, Successes, and Opportunities, which is reviewed in this issue reminds us that while the genesis of MOOCs lies in the affordances of connection and connectivity (Downes, 2012), MOOC ventures have since then followed various pathways and found favor in very different contexts. Most contemporary MOOC initiatives are in fact driven by aspirations very different from those envisaged by Siemens and Downes (see Siemens & Downes, 2008).

So, while the aspirational goals of MOOCs may have gone unrealized, the idea of MOOCs has found meaningful traction in other forms and contexts. These include brand promotion by Ivy League institutions in emerging and open markets and monetization of online and distance learning opportunities. They also include the use of MOOCs for improving access to learning opportunities and empowerment of disadvantaged societies more broadly. The book by Zhang et al. is replete with examples from the Global South and especially from its less developed regions. These include the use of MOOCs for such purposes as skills development in a wide variety of areas, including literacy and numeracy, continuing professional development of the
workforce, and capacity building in managing global challenges such as climate change and civic education.

The editors of this book point out, and rightly so, that for people in the Global South, MOOCs offer hope and a path to empowerment and a chance to be part of a larger learning community. For many from this region, the MOOC offers not just a learning opportunity but access to award-winning teachers and researchers from top-tier educational institutions from throughout the world—people they would otherwise never know, let alone visit or learn from (Zhang et al., 2020, p. xxiv). In these regions, MOOCs are finding a useful and justifiable purpose. The story of MOOCs in this part of the world is, as such, very different from that envisaged in the Global North, where the MOOC phenomenon has been characterized as a passing fad, a failed pedagogy, and worse, an attempt by educational institutions to shake up the professoriate and replace them with a very different, and possibly cheaper, model of learning and teaching (see Baggaley, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Naidu, 2013; Rees, 2013).

Recent reports such as those by Shah (2019a, 2019b) suggest that the decline or death of MOOCs might be exaggerated. These reports show that in recent years, more than 100 million people have shown interest in MOOCs; admittedly not many will have seen them through to the end. But more importantly, full fee-paying registrations are on the rise, which is leading to new business models, and pedagogical designs, including MOOC-based full degree programs along with short courses for micro credentials (see Bhartu & Naidu, 2020; Naidu & Karunanayaka, 2020). The truth is that a new wave of MOOCs is emerging, and they are neither massive nor self-organizing learning experiences as they were intended to be. These second-generation MOOCs can be as small or as large as they need to be, as long as they are meeting a demand, as illustrated in the book by Zhang et al.
An effective and engaging MOOC experience is, nevertheless, one that promises to offer learners the best online learning experience that it can afford. Therefore, while there are a few things that are unique and different about MOOCs, there is no reason to suggest that their pedagogical design should be based on anything other than sound educational principles. The contributions in this issue of the journal remind us of several of these principles and what works in open and flexible learning environments.

A key pedagogical construct is student motivation and persistence, and how best to nurture it. MOOCs are notorious for their high dropout or non-completion rates, which should be no surprise to even the uninitiated. If you put very large numbers of students in one cohort and offer them minimal to no support and guidance, most are bound to give up when the going gets tough, and especially so if they were there only to browse around. But even then there are strategies that have been tried and tested to hold the attention of the most casual of the visitors, as explored in the article “Going over the Cliff: MOOC Dropout Behavior at Chapter Transition,” by Chen Chen, Gerhard Sonnert, Philip Sadler, Dimitar Sasselov, Colin Fredericks, and David Malan. One of these strategies is cliff-hangers, which is a widely used strategy for retaining viewer attention in the field of broadcasting, such as radio and television. Common examples include ending an episode with suspense or stopping for a commercial break just before the replay of a critical score or decision in a sport. This article suggests that there is merit in the adoption of this strategy in MOOCs where learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for their learning with minimal guidance and support. The effective use of this strategy in educational settings, however, will require teachers to act as architects or designers of independent student learning experiences, and not simply deliverers of the subject matter content (see also Naidu, 2016).
Teachers as designers is a subtle, and an important, transition that the vast majority of MOOC developers have failed to comprehend with their overt reliance on the star power of teachers and the affordances of the technology. The first round of MOOC developers assumed that if we built it, they would come, but they didn’t come in droves as was expected. Many came, saw, and left rather quickly, mostly because many of these efforts offered little that was worth their time and effort. Many MOOC initiatives also failed to consider the motivations of teachers, not only why they might want to teach MOOCs but more importantly, what kind of professional development and support they would need to be effective MOOC developers and teachers. The article “MOOC Instructor Motivation and Career Development” by Min Young Doo, Ying Tang, Curtis Bonk, and Meina Zhu explores the implications of this consideration in some detail. This study reveals that most MOOC teachers are motivated by intrinsic motivation which is driven foremost by a deep interest in their subject matter with a tinge of altruism to promote it beyond the fee-paying community; interest in the affordances of emerging technologies, and their own professional development as educators. But to be effective with this, MOOC teachers need the help of extrinsic motivators as well, which include clear institutional direction and support.

This kind of support needs to include assistance with the design and development of the MOOC, as well as support with its teaching, especially if the numbers happen to be large. This point is underscored by the article “Online Learning Performance and Satisfaction: Do Perceptions and Readiness Matter?” by Huei-Chuan Wei and Chien Chou. This article highlights the critical role of learners’ perceptions of technology and their readiness for technology-enhanced learning on their achievement and satisfaction. Its findings suggest that paying careful attention to both interface and learning experience design are critical for learning achievement and student satisfaction.
with their learning experience. A critical component of this kind of learning experience design is the creation and assessment of student learning activities and the provision of feedback. And this is the subject of the article “EduZinc: A tool for the Creation and Assessment of Student Learning Activities in complex Open, Online, and Flexible Learning Environments” by David Becerra-Alonso, Isabel Lopez-Cobo, Pilar Gómez-Rey, Francisco Fernández-Navarro, and Elena Barbera. This article reports on the design, development, and implementation of a tool for use in both campus-based as well as online distance learning contexts. Developments along these lines are useful as they help allay concerns about the security of online assessment.

The management of time by both students and teaching staff is another critical support strategy. And this is the subject of the following article, “Time Matters: Faculty Perceptions of Helpfulness of Online Time-Management Strategies” by Beth Oyarzun, Florence Martin, and Robert Moore. While time management is a critical competency for students and staff in any educational setting, it has particular potency in more open, flexible, and technology-dense educational contexts, such as in MOOCs. Neglecting this or passing on the responsibility for the management of learning to students themselves, in any kind of educational context, and especially open, flexible, and online learning environments, is tantamount to relinquishing responsibility for teaching—for teaching is about helping learners learn, as well as how to learn.

Building and sustaining a sense of community among learners is another one of these highly desirable support strategies, and much has been stated about the importance of this strategy especially in more open and flexible learning environments (see Garrison, 2007). However, not much has been said about the importance of a sense of connection and community with the learning organization (as opposed to learners and teachers, and among learners), as suggested in the next article “Connecting Online
Students to their Higher Learning Institution” by Shannon Skelcher, Dazhi Yang, Jesús Trespalacios, and Chareen Snelson. This study suggests that promoting a sense of belonging to the learning organization is just as important as promoting a sense of belonging within the learning group (see also Thomas et al., 2014). An important part of this effort is adopting strategies for enhancing teacher presence, especially in technology-dense educational environments. This is the subject of the article “Educators’ Perspectives on Transmedia Identity Management: Re-defining Tele-Teacher Presence” by Julie-Ann-Sime and Chryssa Themelis. This study extends the conversation around teacher presence to include tele-teacher presence and transmedia identity management, given our access to multiple channels of connection and communication in contemporary educational environments. This study suggests that identity management across visual media is critical in promoting a sense of community.

That being said, it is important to be aware that there will be students, possibly mature-age and part-time distance learners, who may actually cherish a bit of freedom and independence, and who may not wish to be too engaged with the educational institution or their learning group. This does not mean that connection and communication between learners and their educational institution should not be nurtured or kept to a minimum. The trick is to get the balance right and let the learners decide how much independence they want and how much interaction they need with their educational institution (see Anderson, 2003). So, enjoy! As always, we will be looking forward to your own thoughts and reflections.

References


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