

BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION: THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF A “WORLD-LEADING” UNIVERSITY

TRA TRADIZIONE E INNOVAZIONE: LA COSTRUZIONE DISCORSIVA DI UN’UNIVERSITÀ “WORLD-LEADING”

Carlo Perrotta | School of Education, Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Law,
University of Leeds | Leeds (UK) |

✉ Beech Grove House, Leeds LS29JT, United Kingdom | c.perrotta@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract This paper applies critical discourse analysis to two discursive samples (“texts”) produced by Harvard University: a sample from the official course catalogue and the list of courses provided as “HarvardX” on the MOOC platform EdX. The analysis shows how Harvard legitimates its role across “innovative” and traditional forms of provision, employing an apparently neutral language to shape identities and practices. The analytic section considers the generic structure of both texts and how semiotic relationships are realised through stylistic choices and grammatical structures. The analysis suggests that the differences between traditional and open access provision at Harvard are simultaneously educational and socio-political. The analysis also opens a window onto the instructional practices at Harvard - something that seems to be missing in the educational research literature.

KEY-WORDS Critical discourse analysis, MOOCs, Identities, Innovative education.

Sommario questo articolo applica l’analisi del discorso a due “testi” prodotti dall’università di Harvard: un estratto dal catalogo ufficiale dei corsi universitari, e la lista di corsi “HarvardX” offerti sulla piattaforma MOOC EdX. L’analisi dimostra come Harvard legittimi il proprio ruolo attraverso le due forme di offerte didattiche, adottando un linguaggio apparentemente neutro per definire le identità e le pratiche di studenti tradizionali e “utenti” online. La sezione analitica riporta la descrizione delle strutture semiotiche e delle scelte grammatico-stilistiche nei due testi (in inglese). L’interpretazione suggerita è che le differenze tra i due testi siano, allo stesso tempo, di natura didattica e sociopolitica. L’articolo offre anche una panoramica originale su alcune delle pratiche didattiche adottate ad Harvard.

PAROLE CHIAVE Analisi critica del discorso, MOOCs, Identità, Didattica innovativa.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research on “education at scale” has highlighted that the MOOC phenomenon has overcome its initial hype-driven phase and is now undergoing a process of normalisation and assimilation within the pre-existing frameworks of Higher Education (HE). The initial promise to revolutionise and democratise education is being reconsidered in light of the empirical finding which shows that MOOCs have been, so far at least, the preserve of educated elites around the world (Perna et al., 2014). Equally problematic is that only a fraction of those who register complete a course and that, even amongst the “engaged” ones, not everyone appears driven by a straightforward “motivation to learn” or by the promise of certification (ibid). In other words, all the “traditional” criteria and measures of motivation, educational achievement and progress need to be challenged and revised when applied to education at scale. This translates into a call for further theoretical and methodological development as a precondition for the field to reclaim relevance and find a clear social purpose at a global level. So far, research has largely focused on behaviours, experiences and motivations of MOOC participants (often based on the analysis of large datasets). Conversely, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which HE institutions moving towards “massively open” provision actively contribute to shape the identities and motives of their students.

This paper draws upon the methodological and theoretical repertoire of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) to compare two discursive samples (“texts”) produced by Harvard University for similar purposes but for different audiences and in different contexts: a sample from the official course catalogue for enrolled students and the list of courses provided as “HarvardX” on the MOOC platform EdX. Both samples are freely accessible on the web. Why Harvard? The reason is twofold. In the first place, Harvard University plays a conspicuous role as a world-leading institution in the globalised educational landscape. This is sufficient to qualify its discourse as a unit of analysis that warrants close scrutiny in its own right. Such view is consistent with a key tenet in critical discourse analysis: a concern with how individuals or organisations in positions of prominence or power legitimate their status. Norman Fairclough’s extensive dissection of New Labour’s discourse during the 1990s is a fine example of such empirical concerns (Fairclough, 2000). Secondly, as a founding member of the MOOC platform EdX, Harvard helped lay the foundations of the corporate open access model, whilst supporting research to measure MOOCs’ educational gains (Breslow et al. 2013; Colvin et al. 2014). In this respect, Harvard’s research on MOOC instruction reflects the well-documented dominance

of a functionalist approach in educational technology, as it is mainly concerned with the analysis of participation and usage data to develop predictive models for attendance and achievement. In response to this trend, this paper contends that the ongoing debate on the role of universities in the 21st Century could benefit from the exploration of more reflective research questions such as the following: how does a world-leading institution negotiate and legitimate its role across “innovative” and traditional forms of educational provision? How does it employ an apparently neutral and factual discourse (such as that of a “dull” course catalogue) to shape the identities and practices of learners and educators? In particular, the paper expands upon the suggestion that forms of corporate open access education enable the reconfiguration of identities along neoliberal lines, by recruiting digitisation technologies to meet a growing demand for “upgrades to the self”, thus allowing individual users to enlist the consumption of academic content as a “toolkit” for the production of fluid subjectivities (Perrotta, Czerniewicz, & Beetham, 2015; Binkley, 2008; Bauman, 2013). One caveat to close this introductory section: this paper focuses on the discourse produced by one specific institution which happens to be a prominent provider of traditional, credit-bearing education as well as of open access, non-credit bearing academic content. As such, it does not make generalising claims about the whole spectrum of global higher education, the MOOC phenomenon as a whole or, similarly, about open access in general. With respect to the last two points, this paper subscribes to the view that there are “many MOOCs” (Czerniewicz, Deacon, Small, & Walji, 2014) and that the scholarly debate surrounding open access is multifaceted and lively, with many valuable and not always damning or overly critical views. The significance of MOOCs as educational innovations may be thoroughly questionable, but at the very least they have helped bring to the fore valuable questions about technology-mediated attendance and novel forms of social configurations in education which are being theorised at the intersection of sociology and Human-Computer Interaction.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Norman Fairclough’s seminal work on the marketization and politicisation of public discourse defined the international field of critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA). In particular, his 1993 examination of higher education (henceforth HE) in the UK highlighted the intermingling of “promotional language” and more traditional academic registers, to argue that ideological and economic factors influence identities, practices and power relations in the British academic establishment (Fairclough, 1993).

Analysing the linguistic and structural (the semiotic organisation of images and words in a text) composition of apparently “neutral” textual samples (such as newspaper adverts for an academic post and a prospectus), Fairclough illustrated how academic institutions in the UK were becoming increasingly aligned with the imperatives of an emerging knowledge market, causing the proliferation across HE of “promotional genres”, shaped by the purpose of selling commodities, brands, organisations or individuals (Wernick, 1991). The time is right for revisiting this topic adopting a more global outlook. The relationship between socio-economic and educational dynamics in HE is as important an issue as ever, especially in light of recent trends in open access online education which raise interesting questions about how universities define their role and legitimate their authority in a globalised and thoroughly networked knowledge market. This paper assumes that the colonisation of HE on behalf of the market is still very much ongoing, and as a global phenomenon with cultural and economic ramifications it is worth subjecting to further (and critical) empirical scrutiny. Setting off from a social constructivist position, this paper assumes that the discourse produced by an institution for a variety of purposes contributes to the development of identities and practices in the social field where that institution operates. This entails that analysing texts that describe the nature of educational provision (such as course catalogues and prospectuses) helps illuminate the instructional and social relationships between students and educators, whilst also accounting for the broader institutional setting with its values and power relations.

THE DATASET AND THE ANALYTIC TOOL

The dataset was established by selecting samples of representative discourse from the internet. The initial, superficial analysis was carried out using

the corpus linguistics program Wordsmith Tools by Mike Scott (2004). The more qualitative part of the analysis was carried out through a combination of targeted KWIC (Key Words In Context) queries performed with the Wordsmith Tools, and the more traditional method of “iterative immersion” in the textual data. The first sample comes from Harvard’s online Course Catalogue, which was queried on 16th October 2014 for the purpose of this study. Instead of considering the whole academic year with its 9,479 courses, only a more manageable subset of the results was selected. These are the 147 credit-bearing courses scheduled to take place during the winter 2015 Session, which begins on January 2nd and ends on January 24th. The courses cover a wide array of subject areas from Epidemiology of Mental Disorders to Finance and Law Studies. The most recurrent topics in the sample are “health” (101 instances) and “law” (185 instances), whilst the most frequent meaningful collocation (words indicating specific topics placed next to each other) is “public health” (28 instances). This first sample consists of 34,455 “tokens” (words). The second sample includes all the courses offered by Harvard as “HarvardX” on the MOOC platform EdX. The EdX platform was also queried on 16th October for the purpose of this study, and all the resulting 48 courses were selected. The EdX courses also cover a wide range of subject areas such as Computer Science, History, Poetry and the economic and social role of China in the 21st century. The most frequent topic collocation in the sample is “global health” (16 instances). This is somewhat consistent with the online syllabus result and it provides a quick, if rather crude, snapshot of what qualifies as a prominent topic area across traditional and open-access provision at Harvard. This second, smaller, sample consists of 13,283 tokens.

GENERIC STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

This section will describe the generic structure of both texts. The analysis will focus on headlines and titles, positioning of paragraphs, visual components and other design features. Both the online catalogue and the HarvardX course list can be considered as different instances of the same genre (Swales, 2004), although HarvardX adopts a more multimodal and visual format. Genres are concerned with “ways of acting” and, as such, they are largely defined by their purposiveness. Not all genres have purposes, but the texts under consideration here are rather unambiguous in this respect: their explicit purpose is to provide factual information about educational provision. Their more implicit purpose, which will become apparent as the interpretation develops, is to outline roles, expectations and responsibilities, and to convey the actual power relations among Harvard, its teaching staff and its students.

The screenshot displays a search interface for Harvard courses. On the left, there are several filter panels:

- Any Cross-Reg Status:** Eligible for cross-registration (109), Not eligible for cross-registration (38).
- Calendar Period:** Any Calendar Period, Jan 2015 (Winter Session).
- Level:** Graduate (143), Undergraduate (19).
- School:** All Schools, Harvard Extension School (29), Harvard Graduate School of Education (13), Harvard Kennedy School (16), Harvard Law School (43), Harvard School of Public Health (45).
- Days:** Any Day, Monday (101), Tuesday (109), Wednesday (106), Thursday (108).

The main content area shows:

- NARROWED BY:** Jan 2015 (Winter Session)
- 147 Courses Found**
- Sort by:** Course Name | School | Department | Day | Time
- Course Information:** Active Learning in Museums (9305), Harvard Graduate School of Education, Winter 2015, Shari Tishman, Less Detail A.
- Schedule:** tbd
- Description:** Along with schools, museums are one of society's most visible institutions of learning. Changing perceptions of museums and their role in society, combined with contemporary ideas about cognition and human development, make today's museums a fascinating context in which to investigate and encourage active, self-directed learning. This course examines the theory and practice of active learning through the lens of the museum. Through readings, discussions, and immersive museum experiences, students will explore questions such as: What is active learning, and how does it compare to other forms of learning? What is its basis in learning theory, and how is it related to theories of knowledge and theories of teaching? What counts as evidence of active learning, and how can it be recognized, documented, evaluated? What are the links between active learning and close observation, between active learning and object based learning? In what ways do museum exhibitions and experiences encourage and discourage active learning? How can an understanding of active learning in museums inform educational design more broadly? As part of the course requirement, students will work in small groups to design, implement, and critique an active learning experience in a museum or museum like environment. Several visits to local museums are required.
- Credits:** 4
- Prerequisite(s):** Permission of instructor required. Enrollment is limited to 20, due to museum capacity. Must be able to travel to local museums (museums are accessible by public transportation). A museum background not required. Selection based on lottery.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Harvard course catalogue.

The online course catalogue at Harvard University is, for all intents and purposes, a short online syllabus (Fig.1). The User Interface (UI) offers simple search functionalities and it provides itemised lists of courses with exhaustive information. A standard navigation menu on the left hand-side column outlines the search parameters. The central area features drop-down subsections which provide detailed information about the courses. These subsections include the following core elements: course title, names of instructors or professors, a synopsis, credits given and prerequisites.

The HarvardX typical course page on the EdX platform features colours and images, and it displays a more refined web design compared to the course catalogue (Fig.2 and Fig.3). The course synopsis occupying the central section is surrounded by an interesting set of elements that warrant further examination. Photographs of professors and teaching assistants, as well as “course reviews” seem to have been included to “humanise” the course and to reinforce HarvardX’s commitment to openness. Individual faces and “voices” (previous students who left reviews), in addition to links to social media with their explicit invitation to “share”, could be interpreted as expressions of intertextuality (Bakhtin, 2010; Kristeva, 1986). Intertextuality is an essential feature of democratic and dialogic relationships - a form of discourse where multiple worldviews and voices are allowed to interact within texts and in the flow of communication. The challenge for the critical discourse analyst is to distinguish between genuine intertextuality, and more ambivalent types of discursive action which employ intertextual conventions to achieve their results, according to a logic of instrumental rationality (Habermas, 1984). This phenomenon is effectively illustrated by Fairclough as he describes “the apparent informal chattiness” of interactions between employees and customers in the service industries which is “at least in part strategically motivated by the instrumental purposes of business organisations” (2003, p.72). Also “genres of governance (...) are pervasively characterised by simulated social relations which, we might argue, tend to mystify social hierarchy and social distance” (ibid p.76). The next section will deal with these more ambivalent features of discourse, delving deeper into the relationship between syntactic elements and semiosis.

SEMIOTIC/SYNTACTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The most challenging task in CDA is the study of how semiotic relationships are “realised” through stylistic choices and grammatical structures. The relationship between grammatical mood and the functions of discourse is particularly relevant when exploring the texturing of identities and “world building” in general. Mood indicates the functions of verbs

and agents (subjects) within clauses. Declarative or epistemic clauses, which denote the stating of facts, are different from interrogative or obligational clauses which denote, respectively, a question and a normative expectation. As an example, consider how certain processes in the mainstream political discourse are systematically construed through a very subtle use of modality and grammar. Statement such as “the modern world is swept by change” (Fairclough, 2003, p.13) are represented as “unmodalized” truths where agents and historical conditions are conveniently absent from the text. The result is that specific linguistic choices and omissions act as primers for the remainder of the text, as they ease shifts from declarative to obligational

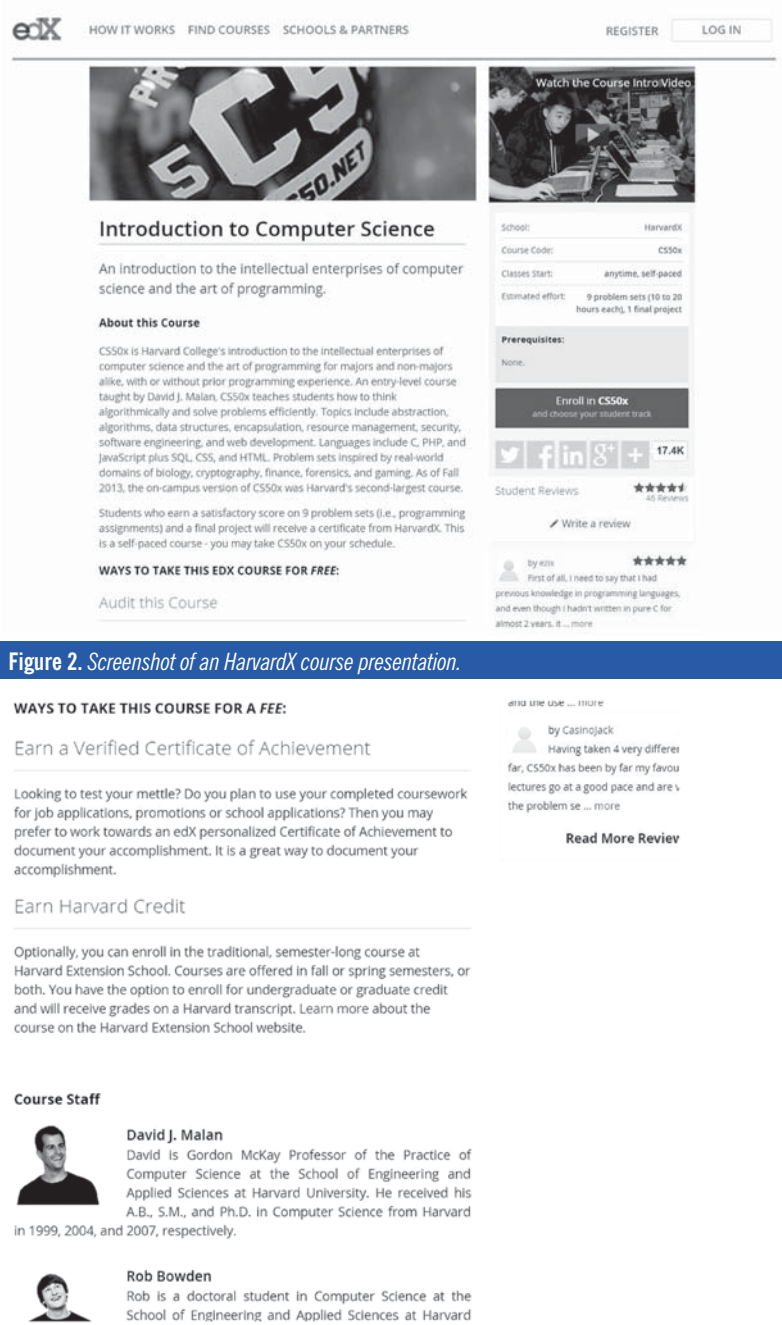


Figure 2. Screenshot of an HarvardX course presentation.

Figure 3. Screenshot of an HarvardX typical course page.

mood (“change is a fact, we ought to act in certain ways in order to respond”), while at the same time making it impossible to ask critical questions about causes and agents (e.g., “who and what ideologies are driving the change?”). One important point to keep in mind is that the relationship between social phenomena and grammatical structures is never a simple correspondence but is always tendential (Fairclough, 2003; Halliday, 1994). This invites caution when establishing links between evidence and claims, and reinforces the role of interpretation. The key grammatical character of the Harvard online syllabus is the co-presence of epistemic and deontic (obligational) modality. The most frequent subject + verb collocation (72 instances) in the sample is “students will...”, which often aims to share information about course content and the instructional process, but it can also express obligation or necessity. Examples are as follows:

Epistemic

Students will... collaboratively conduct a needs assessment and develop a research proposal.
... have an opportunity to interact with faculty from Harvard as well as faculty (...) from Brazil.
... meet public health workers, researchers, and students from Brazil.
... learn how to recognize opportunities and assess needs for informal learning interventions.

Deontic

Students will... be expected to keep a journal and write a short paper.
The journal is submitted weekly.
... be expected to become familiar with the principal rules and authorities and with the basic tools used to regulate ethical behavior of government officials.
... work long hours, including on the weekends.
... be expected to read all assigned materials.

In the HarvardX sample, the most frequent grammatical subject is no longer “students” but “you” (n: 86). Although deontic obligation is not completely absent, it appears to be largely replaced by epistemic possibility: “you can” features 30 times in the sample, mostly to indicate more flexible and “open” attendance opportunities. Examples are as follows.

You can... enroll at any time.
... complete all lessons at your own pace.
... move around the lessons at your own pace.
... explore the fun, interactive learning environment and virtual labs.

When deontic obligation is expressed in the HarvardX text, it is often tempered by possibility and “choice” in order to emphasise personalised and self-paced engagement with the content:

You can complete all lessons at your own pace, but to receive a certificate you must complete the exam during the 2 week period in August. You can move around within the lessons at your own pace. The only ‘graded’ part of the course is your final exam. You don’t have to get everything correct to ‘complete’ lessons, you just have to engage with the content!

Another interesting difference between the two texts is the role of the grammatical subject “the course”. This is frequent in the syllabus (n: 54), but seems to be largely replaced by the more conversational “we” (n: 88) in the HarvardX sample. The purpose of “The course will...” in the syllabus is arguably twofold. On the one hand, it complements the declarative function of the text (e.g. “the course will focus on...” or “the course will draw on...”). On the other hand, the word “course” is in a metonymical relationship with “Harvard” and, as such, it helps to establish Harvard’s authority and institutional role in its interactions with students and members of staff. Consider the following excerpt:

The course will draw connections between these issues to promote a comprehensive understanding of education policy (...) Students will be expected to read relevant statute, regulations, research and commentary, write reflection posts on the readings, and actively engage in assignments related to the simulation.

This is in contrast with the more informal and personal style found in the HarvardX sample. As already noted by Fairclough in its examination of academic language in Britain (Fairclough, 1993), the frequency of “we” and “you” in corporate and political interactions is an expression of synthetic personalisation: a form of discourse, most common in the service industries, that simulates a conversational and informal relationship between an institution and its addressees. This creates the (often inaccurate) semblance of an equal relationship, whilst discrepancies in power and status are elided from the text. Synthetic personalisation is also consistent with the language of collaborative learning and “connectionism” which have been recruited to provide MOOC instruction with a degree of academic legitimacy (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Cormier, 2010). Such superficial subversion of traditional power relations has a number of instructional and curricular implications. Whilst Harvard brings invaluable branding clout to its open access provision, the institution seems conspicuously absent from actual educational practice, to be replaced by a nebulous collectivist entity that conflates instructors and users. Conversely, the course catalogue construes an educational process where identities are clearly

established (students, the institutionally-sanctioned courses and the instructors), and where relations are underpinned by unambiguous requirements and expectations. Moreover, a simple categorisation of the epistemic clauses “students will...” observed in the syllabus opens a window onto the actual instructional practices taking place in the Harvard lecture halls - something that seems to be missing in the educational research literature.

THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE ACROSS “TRADITIONAL HARVARD” AND “OPEN ACCESS HARVARD”

The majority of epistemic clauses (n: 16) in the Harvard online syllabus are concerned with high-level cognitive learning objectives, including self-assessment and reflection. The modal “will” often accompanies verbs like “examine”, “review” or “analyse”. Examples are as follows:

Students will...

- ... examine the nature, functions, dynamics, and ethics of such tasks as interviewing, investigation, examination and cross-examination of witnesses.
- ... examine the challenges of starting, counseling, serving, assessing and funding social ventures through the eyes of the entrepreneur.
- ... critically assess theories and evidence on the impact of welfare state institutions.
- ... analyze the challenges and successes experienced by a diverse group of school leaders.

Interestingly, the second largest group of clauses (n: 15) are concerned with extramural visits and field-work, as well as interaction with external parties such as foreign peers, experts and professionals. Common verbs are “travel”; “attend” and “interact”.

Students will...

- ... attend arguments at the Supreme Court, view a moot court, and meet with leading members of the Supreme Court bar.
- ... travel to 6 program sites and work with CDC and state or local public health officials.
- ... travel to Chiapas and experience the contrasts between a rural and urban health system.
- ... have an opportunity to interact with faculty from Harvard as well as faculty, public health workers, researchers, and students from Brazil.
- ... be hosted by the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), which has an active research program on NCDs.

The third largest group of epistemic clauses (n: 11) is concerned with skills development and applied knowledge. Typical verbs are “practice”; “hone” and “apply”.

Students will...

- ... acquire the basic skills in applying a human rights framework to health issues in a professional work environment.
- ... practice a concrete strategy for approaching the work of leading school improvement with the Data Wise ‘habits of mind’ (...)
- ... complete a final project that allows them to apply their learning to a real world context.
- ... hone their practical skills in persuasion through case studies, video examples, exercises, and role-plays (...)

Eight clauses are concerned with collaborative work or study.

Students will...

- ... work in small teams to develop proposals.
- ... be assigned to small teams (...)
- ... work in small groups (...)
- ... participate in group-based contract-drafting exercises.

Finally, only six clauses are concerned with more traditional forms of knowledge acquisition, usually typified by verbs such as “learn (about)”, “will become familiar with” and simple transitive clauses (“will study” and “will read”).

Students will...

- ... learn about several infectious diseases.
- ... learn about refugee health.
- ... Become familiar with the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Fourteenth Amendment (...)
- ... study the Massachusetts juvenile courts (...)
- ... read a sampling of normative and empirical accounts (...)
- ... learn to recognize opportunities and assess needs for informal learning interventions.

Now compare all of the above with the more prominent epistemic clauses in the HarvardX sample. Here the frequent use of “we will...” (n: 30), “you will...” (n: 11) and the speculative “you can...” (n: 30) paints a picture where synthetic personalisation goes hand in hand with a more stripped-down form of instructional practice. As noted in the previous section, the clause “you can...” is overwhelmingly used to convey the facultative, self-paced and playful nature of open access attendance and learning. In addition, the “we will...” and “you will...” permutations reflect mostly a homogenized blend of high-level cognitive objectives and knowledge acquisition, which is not sufficiently patterned to be distinguished as in the online syllabus. Examples are as follows:

We will/you will

- ... *explore how neurons communicate with each other*
- ... *draw on a range of sectors and fields of study.*
- ... *see from the lively prose narratives of such learned and captivating authors as Herodotus and Philostratus.*
- ... *get the chance to read and analyse (...)*
- ... *learn the importance of focusing on (...)*
- ... *consider ways of rearranging objects to create new ways of thinking.*
- ... *identify and develop your personal theory.*
- ... *learn a framework for (...)*

Interestingly, only four clauses were concerned with interactive or technological aspects explicitly associated with distance learning. Out of four, two referred to a virtual neuroscience lab, while the remaining two described the less technologically ground-breaking activity of watching videos. Here are the instances in full:

1. *You will be able to use virtual labs simulating neurons and circuitry.*
2. *You will explore the fun, interactive learning environment and virtual labs.*
3. *You can watch the videos and study the reading materials.*
4. *You will watch as chefs reveal the secrets (...)*

DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that the differences between traditional and open access provision at Harvard are simultaneously educational and socio-political. Traditional Harvard is a more visible institution in the discursive representation of teaching and learning conveyed by the online syllabus, and the identities of students and teachers are shaped accordingly. Teachers are identified but not prominent, and their role seems consistent with traditional professional expectations in HE. Students are also clearly identified and while their relationship with educators and the institution appears more regimented and formal, the range of educational opportunities offered to them is broader and assumes a much richer interplay between pedagogy, attendance and learning. These findings offer a few insights into Harvard's credit-bearing "world-leading" curriculum which seem to be missing in the educational research literature. Even so their main function in this paper is to provide necessary context for what emerged from the open access sample. HarvardX provision and the related identities are construed as fluid and informal. Instructors are given a more prominent, visible role whilst the institution seems to retreat in the background, endowing provision with its brand capital and reputation but also avoiding for-

mal commitments towards users. The pedagogical role of instructors is diluted through recourse to the language of collaborative learning and, syntactically, through an earnest use of synthetic personalisation, which shifts part of the instructional burden to users ("we/you will..."). The inclusion of photographs and "voices" (in the guise of user reviews) does not come across as a genuine form of intertextuality, but as advertisement and enticement, thus configuring all the trappings of a promotional genre (Fairclough, 2003; Wernick, 1991). HarvardX users are not addressed as students but as customers who navigate purchasing choices, while the seductive and conversational language of advertising obscures traditional differences in power and status.

At this point, some might argue that the nature of "open access" learning is demonstrably more distributed and collaborative than the traditional instructional model, and this should be cause for celebration rather than be criticised. Whilst this may be the case, a discourse analytic approach brings evidence to the claim that "openness" often comes at the cost of significantly reducing the complexity of educational dynamics and confusing roles and expectations. Personalised, informal language emphasising choice is abundant in the HarvardX experience; but the leisurely, self-paced interaction with content goes hand in hand with a rather limited form of pedagogical engagement. In the end, the construction of a consumerist identity and a type of "escapist" involvement takes priority over one that favours "learning" as more traditionally understood in the educational research community. These findings run counter to the enthusiastic accounts which over the past three years celebrated the disruptive, innovative nature of MOOCs, whilst also challenging the more critical claim that MOOCs are best seen as online versions of familiar classroom pedagogies (Bulfin, Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2014). The way Harvard University construes its instructional offering across traditional and open access contexts suggests that there is much variety and richness in classroom pedagogies, at least at the higher end of the global educational spectrum. These features are substantially lost even in Harvard's very own high-profile incarnation of open-access education. The main contention here is that MOOCs are not just the online repackaging of "business as usual" practices, but still present peculiarities the critical analyst should not dismiss too lightly. Along these lines, this paper points to a need to investigate how power relations and struggles are realised not in abstract, but at the intersection of forms of attendance, knowledge consumption and identity construction. What about the role of technology? The analysis strongly suggests that it is rather secondary, at least as far as the relationships considered above are concerned. Technology is mostly deployed in the Har-

vardX text to construe the optional and self-paced opportunities that characterise the open access experience (“watch videos and engage with content at any time”); with only hints to more sophisticated forms of technology-enhanced instruction. This suggestion is consistent with the view that one of the most interesting technological “effects” of MOOCs has been the assimilation of academic instruction into the ontological space of digital TV watching, with its Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) apparatus (Perrotta, Czerniewicz, & Beetham, 2015). Over the past decade TV watching has been freed from the spatiotemporal constraints imposed by traditional broadcasting. The consequence has been the emergence of a new form of consumption where intense, personalised TV watching turns into a fully-fledged, identity-defining hobby. In line with this position, this paper and its findings lend some credence to the contention that the real “technological innovation” of MOOCs lies solely in the offer of (relatively) novel opportunities to enlist the consumption of knowledge for the production of subjectivities, as part of individual projects of commoditised, pick-and-mix self-improvement.

CONCLUSION

Open access knowledge is a reality of growing significance. However, its broader cultural impact is not yet understood. The traditional practices of scholarship are being challenged by technological progress, fierce competitiveness for resources and a broad “crisis of legitimation” disrupting educational institutions, increasingly expected to justify their economic and cultural role. Open access knowledge rose to prominence over the past two decades partly as a response to these trends and, more specifically, to deal with a perceived entrenchment of inequalities and elitism in traditional academia. Although open access as a whole can be viewed in light of these developments, the implications are by no means univocal. By focusing on the wide spectrum of “free” access to knowledge on the internet, clear differences as well as subtle - yet significant - similarities can be observed. For instance, while open access scholarship and Massive Open Online Education may share little apart from an adjective, they are both implicated in the important, and largely understudied, process of making “academic” content available for extensive public consumption and appropriation. This paper has examined these trends focusing on the discourse produced by one prestigious institution which operates at the “highest end” of both traditional and open-access provision. The main conclusion is that Harvard (and presumably other institutions equally involved in these new trends) is encouraging specific forms of engagement with formalised knowledge, which result in new practices and identities

at the intersection of knowledge consumption and education. This phenomenon can be described as the appearance of “knowledge audiences”, and refers to individualised, on-demand and commodified access to formal knowledge outside of traditional education settings. These results reinforce the view that MOOCs are part of a broader trend whereby the lines separating lifelong learning and participation in, and consumption of, digital media are increasingly blurred. Indeed, MOOC research could perhaps benefit from a more explicit and robust interface with the contiguous fields of media studies and Science and Technology Studies (STS), which successfully met on several occasions to deal with comparable issues at the intersection of collective media engagement and social theory.

This study also shows that the analysis of the linguistic features of texts can still illuminate key research issues. The paper rests on the assumption that discourse does not only represent and describe, but it is also constitutive of social reality. There is only enough room left for a conclusive caveat about this crucial assumption. CDA accepts that discourse is socially shaped as well as shaping the social. However, it rejects extreme versions of the view whereby the world is thoroughly constructed through semiosis. As Fairclough notes, extreme versions of social constructivism tend to be idealist rather than realist.

“A realist would argue that although aspects of the social world such as social institutions are ultimately socially constructed, once constructed they are realities which affect and limit the textual (or “discursive”) construction of the social. We need to distinguish “construction” from “construal”, which social constructivists do not: we may textually construe (represent, imagine, etc.) the social world in particular ways, but whether our representations or construals have the effect of changing its construction depends upon various contextual factors – including the way social reality already is, who is construing it, and so forth” (Fairclough, 2003, p.9)

This theoretical position underpins and inevitably restricts CDA’s entire empirical project. This paper is no exception given its premise that the discourse produced by a HE institution construes identities and practices in the social field where that institution is situated. As such, the suggestions made here should not be viewed as exhaustive or conclusive, but as partial and in need of further corroboration, which can only come from the careful analysis of a wide array of contextual factors. An important part of this analysis ought to focus on the impact of those contextual factors on the “model” proposed above, which aims to describe and understand the interactions between novel forms of attendance, knowledge consumption and identity construction.

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