



Learning from: Social Innovation for Tertiary Education: An Experiment with Socionext

Richard C. Gerritsen

University of Amsterdam; Socionext (The Netherlands)

r.c.gerritsen@uva.nl

Abstract

The rise of MOOCs, budget cuts, and a slimmer job market for students to enter, should force universities to reconsider what they offer students. Competition with MOOCs would suggest alternative forms of in class interaction, while job applications mostly demand the need for hands-on experience, this in the face of decreasing budgets that hardly leave room for universities to innovate. An extra limitation in the Netherlands exists because practice-oriented Bachelor and Master degrees are already offered by what is called HBO. However, using social innovation [Mulgan, 2007] as the basis for a course and a tool for application, it is possible for students, universities, policymakers, and private partners to collectively find solutions to problems faced by multiple actors. This approach aims to offer a way forward for more than the educational system alone, acknowledging that all stakeholders in society are inextricably bound together. Over the past year and a half the organisation Socionext has offered a course called "the Socionext challenge", where through co-creation [Pulford, 2011], these collective challenges are met in and outside of the university. Learning from this experience, with failings and unique successes, we can draw valuable lessons that teach us what exactly education is.

1. Introduction

On November 2nd 2012, Laura Pappano wrote an extensive article in The New York Times titled, "The Year of the MOOC", which might be considered a signifier that, what started as a single online course attracting 150.000 students, has become a phenomenon that is here to stay. In what sometimes appeared desperate attempts to challenge what came out of this first course, namely Udacity, existing educational facilities built their own MOOC platforms, whilst professors on the sideline warned us for the dangers of this new threat [1]. However, with the notable exception of Udacity, online education in general has yet to find a viable business model. Khan Academy, for instance, relies heavily on the Gates Foundation, while edX, with some of the most prestigious universities on board, has opted for a non-profit model. Moreover, the first letter in MOOC stands for *mass*, meaning that the experience MOOC can offer is different, and hence not something universities should treat as threatening competition. There are bigger fish to fry out there, and the challenges they pose for the existing education system are probably more real.

On-going migration for education from India and China to universities in Europe and, especially, the U.S., is evidence of a certain quality that universities in Western-countries still have to offer. [2] However, with budget cuts taking place spectrum-wide, and the economies of the U.S. and E.U. member-states subject to some of the slowest growth globally, the quality of their education system cannot be taken for granted. These economic difficulties also affect the output of universities, since graduated students' ability to find jobs decreases. Industries are less inclined to make a risky investment when in a financially tight position, and employing recently graduated students is considered such a risk. Even if we explain resulting youth unemployment by competition from more experienced labour, we only highlight half the story. According to a recent study by the McKinsey institute, it takes on average two years of investment before a graduate is able to perform the skills required for the job. [3] This implies that whatever universities teach students to do, it is not what most industries expect future employees to be able to do. However, it is clear that both universities as well as other job-providing industries offer valuable contributions to Western societies. Looking to blame one of the involved parties for the abovementioned problems highlighted by the slow growth or even decline of economies is therefore undesirable, as it might ignore their added values whilst foregoing the purpose of looking for solutions.

Instead, in this paper we deal with a case study of Socionext, where the qualities of students, universities, industries, and government institutions are used in order to look for solutions, attempting to turn many of the problems mentioned above into possible opportunities. First the concept of social



innovation used here and the fitting approach of co-creation is briefly explained. Thereafter we will describe the course the university of Amsterdam and Socionext offer, to give an idea of the case, before dealing with all the consequences this innovative approach brings up, both challenging as well as sometimes problematic. Finally solutions found are demonstrated, suggestions proposed, and questions raised to address possible future approaches.

2. What is Social Innovation?

A problem when discussing or applying social innovation is the many definitions that are used to describe it. [4]. As underlined in an article printed by the European Commission, “the lack of clarity of the concept impacts different regions and different industries in different ways” [5]. Colleague in the field, and co-founder of the Amanii Institute [6], Roshan Paul, solves this problem by using a “Twitter definition” when speaking in public - I hope Roshan can forgive me if I am paraphrasing – that defines social innovation as creating novel solutions to social problems. Though this definition might not be specific enough, it does offer an initial clarity on what we might be talking about. Without wanting to discredit the 140 character definition in any way, I choose to draw from a three definitions that cover a few more words, but are probably less wide in their scope.

The first definition chosen is from the OECD’s LEED programme (Local Economic and Employment Development) Forum on Social Innovations, launched in 2000. They state that:

“‘Social innovation’ seeks new answers to social problems by: identifying and delivering new services that improve the quality of life of individuals and communities; identifying and implementing new labour market integration processes, new competencies, new jobs, and new forms of participation, as diverse elements that each contribute to improving the position of individuals in the workforce” [7].

What is distinct about this definition, and different from the “twitter definition” is the focus on the form as well as the affect. There is either an improvement in the quality of life, or an improvement of the position in the workforce. The quality of life can be improved by services, and the position in the workforce by identifying certain elements as diverse.

A leading figure in the field of social innovation, Geoff Mulgan, defines the concept with a less limited focus towards which particular improvements might be considered social, with a notable difference regarding the “workforce” element from the previous definition. The definition on social innovation Mulgan and his co-authors coin in 2007 reads:

“‘Innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social.’ This differentiates social innovation from business innovations which are generally motivated by profit maximisation and diffused through organisations that are primarily motivated by profit maximisation” [8].

As mentioned, and also becomes clear from the authors’ comment directly after the given definition, their approach towards innovation within businesses is a different one. Even if, for instance, conditions in the labour market are improved, or quality of life more generally, this may only be considered social innovation if the purpose indeed is social, as opposed to profit maximisation. In other words, the type of improvement made is not most significant here, what matters most is the motivation behind it.

Finally, a definition of social innovation in a European context, produced in a collaborative piece by SIX [9], SI Park [10], and Euclid Network [11], and published by the European Commission department of Enterprise and Industry, where the definition draws upon another definition from the Open Book on Social Innovation [12].

“Social innovation is about new ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs. We simply describe it as innovations that are both social in their ends and in their means. Social innovations are new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations” [13].

Perhaps this can be seen as a combination of the previous two definitions, as it is more specific regarding the type of new ideas - products, services and models - and how they should be met - more effectively than alternatives, but is also clear about the means as well as the ends having to be social. An addition in this definition is the need for social relations and collaborations to be created, which tells us something about how social innovation can best be reached.

2.1 How Co-Creation Relates



“Some of the brightest ideas for social change grow in the spaces between organisations and sectors” [13], which is why co-creation has come up as a concept in relation to social innovation. The collaborative piece that the last definition on social innovation was derived from, is already a small example of co-creation. The idea is that when individuals and organisations from different fields and disciplines are brought together, novel ideas on how to deal with social dilemmas are found more easily. The problem within one field or discipline is that those who operate in it are too familiar with the processes and boundaries, which makes it difficult to imagine these boundaries or processes being challenged. Whereas complex issues may lay within the processes, with alternative solutions existing across boundaries. Hence the process of co-creation enhances possibilities for social innovation, requiring that participants allow for unexpected partnerships and ignore traditionally hierarchical approaches [14].

3. Socionext the Social Entrepreneurship Challenge

The course Socionext the Social Entrepreneurship Challenge (SSEC), is the outcome of an initial quest to constructively improve opportunities of education for talent from disadvantaged communities in South Africa. The Socionext Foundation, established in 2010, pursues this mission by creating a network in which talents from European universities co-develop talent in disadvantaged communities in South Africa through entrepreneurial and social-oriented projects. By integrating these projects into the university curriculum and focusing on the personal development of students, Socionext lays a solid foundation of professional business and event planning, marketing, presentation, and cross-cultural communication skills development, along with international social engagement for students.

3.1 ‘Incorporating’ Social Innovation

What makes SSEC an effort in social innovation is not necessarily the fact that tertiary education in South Africa is funded by the income generated with student projects in Amsterdam. Indeed South Africa suffers from severe inequality for which education can be a solution [15]. So supporting education for the disadvantaged is undoubtedly social. However, the funds that are supported by SSEC already existed, and thus the support is not an innovative way of dealing with a social problem in South Africa. If the Socionext Foundation succeeds in reaching more universities in Europe with SSEC and manages to intensify the connection with students from disadvantaged communities in South Africa, then we can indeed call the result an example of social innovation even in South Africa. Though the prospects for social innovation in South Africa are good, it is the approach at the university of Amsterdam that already meets the challenges of social innovation. The ends are social as the goal is to fund education for the disadvantaged in South Africa. But the means are also social because SSEC challenges the conventional system of teaching at universities. Rather than focussing on a theoretical framework taught in class, students have to implement each theory within a 4-month timeframe into their group projects. Moreover, teams are supported by coaches from smaller or larger organisations, and relate their project to a problem offered by a business, organisation, or company. This exposure to different ideas, and people from various fields and disciplines, offers an added value to the learning experience of students, and demonstrates how the process of co-creation can be used in an academic course.

Challenging the conventional system of education with the alternative belief that “learning by doing creates a deeper learning experience” [17], is what makes SSEC an innovative approach, even with in mind what HBO schools offer. HBO schools are nowadays translated as ‘universities of applied sciences’ [16], and in other countries often called vocational universities. They aim to offer students training into a certain profession. Therefore SSEC has to remain of an academic high level, regardless of the professional experiences students gain, as to distinguish itself from the HBO schools. In the experience of providing SSEC as an academic course, the precarious balance between challenging a conventional system with an alternative that offers solutions for problems of today, whilst remaining academic has been one of the many difficulties.

4. The experience and Findings

A number of experiences are dealt with hereunder in order to demonstrate possible hurdles faced when applying social

“After four exciting months I can truly say that it has been a very valuable experience to participate in such an innovative and different course! You learn practical skills that you can use later on in your career while at the same time giving South African students a life changing chance to achieve their goals in life.” -- Lene Wie Krog (Socionext student, Denmark)



innovation in an academic surrounding, and how they may be overcome.

4.1 Collaborating

Collaboration with network partners and students in South Africa, as mentioned, is necessary for a good process of co-creation as well as the possibility for social innovation in South Africa. However, there are two problems here. First, coaches and other network partners are often limited in time and unable to answer all of the students' questions. Second, collaboration with individuals from underprivileged neighbourhoods in a developing country can be an ambitious effort. Many times students were unable to connect, or Skype-calls would abruptly end.

In both cases preparation can help but offers no guarantees. Our experience with the course is that when students are clearly instructed on what they can use their contacts for, then time with their network partners is used more efficiently. On the other side partners need to be informed that when students are in a phase of prototyping, for instance, that the partners should make sure to be available for testing. In South Africa preparing the educational facilities more has helped make communication better, yet this is still not flawless. From a distance it seems as though incentives for the students there might also encourage communication.

4.2 The University and institutional arrangements

First of all, the University of Amsterdam has been extremely patient with SSEC and allowed for some experimentation without which this course would not have been possible in its current form. Nevertheless, as with all universities, academic standards are kept in high regard, which at times has been a problematic experience. One part of the problem simply lies within the structure of universities that has been dealt with already when discussing the gap between higher education and job application. For most jobs that require a university degree, the university is not a perfect preparation. Having students gain more practical experience with the theories at hand can be a solution, but then another problem arises.

Where companies consider failure part of a learning process, universities allow very little room for this, of which the grading system is a skewed outcome. Even if redoing assignments is an option, a grading system is not rewarding towards failures. In the case of a group failing to bring their group assignment to a successful end the problem becomes even more apparent. Simply because a group has not succeeded in their final goal, this does not mean they failed to learn, probably quite the opposite. Grading skills has been tried as an alternative, but only to find that not all skills learnt are very tangible. Currently a solution has been to implement a great number of grading points throughout the semester. The more structural solution, however, has to be offered by, or at least with, governing institutions.

4.3 Companies

As mentioned, businesses and companies seem surprisingly open towards failures. However their motives to offer a problem to a student group is not always clear. In principle the motive is important for social innovation to be successful. If for-profit partners have no affiliation with the cause of the Socionext Foundation, then there is the risk of them being too unreceptive or caring too little about whether the student project succeeds. This forms an unpleasant experience for students, without them being able to do much about it. Selection at the gate can help in this case, though occasionally a company doesn't seem too aware of their motives themselves.

4.4 Students

Something that has become clear through two years of offering the course is that the majority of students have never had to take responsibility. The foremost question from any professional partner has been why students constantly try to find a scapegoat if things don't go as planned, instead of looking for solutions. Albeit I lack an answer to this question, it seems as though the current educational structure allows for such an attitude too easily. This would again be an argument for encouraging more practical experience for students, where things going wrong are a direct consequence of ones own actions.

4.5 The Socionext Foundation

Finally, we deal with the Socionext foundation. When it comes to creating a network of shared value it can be an advantage to work with start-ups such as the Socionext Foundation because they are more



flexible than established companies [19]. However, start-ups have a very high rate of failing, which made this undertaking a high risk as well [20].

And indeed, the foundation has struggled, with a turnover rate too high for a healthy continuity, an occasional lack of students enrolling, and losing touch with their original purpose when the first successes were booked. But even though these are always factors that need to be kept in mind, with more universities participating, and the first steps made towards a conference on social innovation in education, it seems as though at least the initial problems have been overcome.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, tertiary education needn't fear the rise of MOOC as much as other phenomena in our current day society. Applying social innovation in a co-creation process may, however, offer solutions. This application in education will come across obstacles as the example of Socionext the Social Entrepreneurship Challenge clearly demonstrates. Some of these obstacles can be overcome by managing the expectations of all the stakeholders involved, informing them on the range of tasks they are expected to perform or not to perform. Other problems may be more demanding because they are structural in nature, impede with existing beliefs, for instance, on what education should be, or relate to a lack of access to resources in poverty stricken areas. The latter type of problems are all the more reason for efforts such as SSEC to be founded, working cross-culturally, through co-creation, for social innovation to be applied in the field of education.

References

- [1] At the Amsterdam Privacy Conference of 2012, Hellen Nisselbaum, professor Media, Culture, and Communication at NYU, opened the conference on the 7th of October with the public lecture "Privacy in the Modern Society". In this lecture one of the arguments was that the privacy of the MOOC participant was not guaranteed as these websites, a.o. Udacity, were able to change their Terms and Conditions without notifying the user.
- [2] Varghese, N. V. "Cross-border higher education and national systems of education." *Education Across Borders* (2009): 33-48.
- [3] Mourshed, Mona, Diana Farrell, and Dominic Barton. "Education to employment: designing a system that works." McKinsey. (2012).
- [4] Phillips, James A., Kriss Deiglmeier, and Dale T. Miller. "Rediscovering social innovation." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 6.4 (2008): 34-43; Mulgan, Geoff, et al. "Social innovation: what it is, why it matters and how it can be accelerated." (2007); Murray, R., Caulier-Grice, J., & Mulgan, G. *The open book of social innovation*. National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Art. (2010).
- [5] This is European Social Innovation, http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/flipbook/social_innovation, (2010)
- [6] Amani Institute, <http://amaniinstitute.org>
- [7] OECD LEED programme (Local Economic and Employment Development), (2000), <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/socialinnovation>
- [8] Mulgan, Geoff, et al. "Social innovation: what it is, why it matters and how it can be accelerated." (2007)
- [9] Social Innovation eXchange, <http://www.socialinnovationexchange.org>
- [10] Social Innovation Park, <http://www.socialinnovationpark.org>
- [11] EUCLID Network, <http://www.euclidnetwork.eu>
- [12] Murray, R., Caulier-Grice, J., & Mulgan, G. *The open book of social innovation*. National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Art. (2010).
- [12] This is European Social Innovation, http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/flipbook/social_innovation, (2010)
- [13] Nambisan, Satish. "Platforms for collaboration." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 7.3 (2009): 44-49.
- [14] Co-Creation Guide: Realising Social Innovation Together (2011), <http://www.kennisland.nl/uploads/fckconnector/80dfe57f-937a-4300-bbeb-b3cf8cd5ee0a>
- [15] Minton-Beddoes, Zanny, "Special report: The world economy, for richer, for poorer." *The Economist*, October 13th (2012)
- [16] Nuffic, February, 2008 <http://www.nuffic.nl/nederlandse-organisaties/nieuws-evenementen/nieuws-archieff/nieuws-archieff-2008/februari/engelstalige-naam-voor-nederlandse-hogescholen>



[17] A quote from Tjaart Theron, director of the Socionext Foundation, Jan 2013

[19] Porter, Michael, and Mark R. Kramer. "Creating shared value." *Harvard business review* 89.1/2 (2011): 62-77.

[20] Ries, Eric. "The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation To Create Radically Successful Businesses Author: E." (2011): 336; Blank, Steve, and Bob Dorf. *The startup owner's manual*. K&S Ranch Incorporated, (2012).