

REVIEW ARTICLE



# MOOCs: an overview of the implications for counsellor education

Elif Cimsir 

Department of Guidance and Counselling, Anadolu University, Eskisehir 26470, Turkey

## ABSTRACT

This article aims to fill a gap in the counselling literature regarding the new high technology online teaching approach called Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), which makes it possible for thousands of students across the world to freely access university courses through the Internet. Specific attention has been given to the current and potential future use of MOOCs in counselling and the relevant strengths, limitations and ethical/legal considerations. Also included in this article are a brief overview of and discussion concerning MOOCs.

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While conventional tuition-based online teaching has been embraced by a number of counsellor education programmes, and is still growing as a practice, a higher technology in online teaching known as Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, has arrived. Although the definition of MOOCs has been changing constantly (Marques, 2013), the term MOOCs refers to, "Internet based teaching programmes designed to handle thousands of students simultaneously, in part using the tactics of social networking websites" (Waldrop, 2013, p. 160). MOOCs require students to engage with short video lectures, readings, questions, challenges, and a variety of text-based or media resources and to finish assignments that are graded either by computers or by peers (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014; Wilson, 2012). With more institutions starting to offer MOOCs, the literature on MOOCs and their pedagogical implications has accumulated (e.g. Emanuel, 2013; Rhoads, Berdan, & Toven-Lindsey, 2013; Waldrop, 2013). On the other hand, the question of where counsellor education stands in terms of MOOCs has received surprisingly scant attention in the literature, despite all the hype that MOOCs have created in other fields of education.

The fact that MOOCs have been overlooked in the counselling literature is surprising, especially when considering the fact that the use of technology, particularly the place of the Internet in the counselling profession and counsellor education, has been subjected to extensive attention with counselling organisations across the globe rallying to address the issue of technology in their guidelines and standards (Jencius & Sager, 2001). For example, the fact that the profession of counselling is no longer restricted to in-person, face-to-face communication, and the need to recognise technology as an important component of the profession seems to have been embraced by both the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014). Although MOOCs do not seem to currently have the potential to replace traditional counsellor education due to their existing limitations and the training standards inhibiting their usage in counsellor education (such as restrictions on class sizes, faculty to student ratios; see the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016), there are certain usages of MOOCs that can support and strengthen counsellor education and counselling services. In addition, even in limited quantities, certain counselling-related MOOCs do exist and should be explored in terms of their

implications for the profession. More importantly, it seems that MOOCs have become an important online education and career development tool globally and, thus, counsellors and counsellor educators in fields such as career and college counselling are expected to at least be aware of the existence of MOOCs. Therefore, in this article I aim to fill a gap in the counselling literature regarding MOOCs by introducing counsellors and counsellor educators to this new pedagogical technology and its implications for the field and the educational arena. Accordingly, this article includes a brief overview of and discussion concerning MOOCs and their current and potential future use in counselling along with an outline of the limitations and advantages of doing so. In addition, ethical and legal considerations regarding MOOCs are described.

## Massive open online courses

### **Background: massive open online courses**

The term MOOC was coined when two professors at the University of Manitoba, Canada, decided to involve more students in their class of 25 students on learning theory in 2008, which ended up with 2300 more people joining the class (Selingo, 2014). It took no more than a few years after this first implementation, for this business of massive online teaching to become established. A number of universities, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard University, and University of California, Berkeley, chose to unite their efforts and started the non-profit organisation *edX*, which offers a freely-available software platform for colleges who are interested in building their own courses, while others, such as Princeton University and the University of Virginia, joined *Coursera*, a for-profit company founded by two professors from Stanford University. Another for-profit company, *Udacity*, was formed to work with individual professors rather than institutions. Similarly, *Udemy*, also a for-profit company, made it possible for anyone to set up a course (Wilson, 2012).

Although courses offered in science, engineering, and technology have been at the forefront of the MOOCs movement, courses in management, humanities and the arts ended up joining the MOOCs movement as well (Waldrop, 2013). In 2013, Waldrop stated that “over little more than a year, Coursera, the largest of three companies offering online courses at the time, has introduced 328 different courses from 62 universities in 17 countries” (p. 163). For courses that were originally introduced as college courses that were made available online, MOOCs started evolving rather quickly in terms of their structure and content. A number of semester-long courses were divided into smaller courses by producers to make them more student schedule friendly, resulting in courses that could be completed within a couple of hours (Shah, 2015).

As students and producers became increasingly interested, the issue of the credentialing of MOOCs has come to the forefront. Certain colleges started accepting some of the free courses for credit and for the first time, in 2013, the American Council on Education recommended a few MOOCs (Marques, 2013). A number of providers have partnered with certain colleges such as the University of Arizona (USA) and the University of Leeds (United Kingdom) to add a verified certificate option to some of their MOOCs, making it possible for students to earn credits that can be transferred to many other universities (Lequerica, 2016). Other providers went beyond offering single course completion certificates. For example, in 2013, *edX* started their *XSeries* programme which involves completing a sequence of courses to gain a certificate. This movement was followed by *Coursera* and *Udacity* who called their programmes “specializations” and “nano-degrees” respectively (Shah, 2015). To dispel doubts in students’ minds as to whether or not their credentials would be taken seriously by employers, MOOC providers recently came up with the idea of partnering with big-name companies, such as Google and Instagram, in designing their courses (Young, 2015). In fact, the Georgia Institute of Technology College of Computing, USA, not only introduced their first professional Online Master of Science degree in computer science (OMS CS) that can be completed through “massive online” format (Judson, 2013), but did this with input and support from AT&T (Young, 2015).

### ***Variations of MOOCs: xMOOCs, cMOOCs and quasi-MOOCs***

There are currently three variations of MOOCs: xMOOCs, cMOOCs, and quasi-MOOCs. Resembling traditional learning, an xMOOC typically involves a fixed schedule with predetermined start and stop dates, a teacher as the expert and students as the consumers (Jobe, Östlund, & Svensson, 2018; McGreal, Kinuthia, Marshall, & McNamara, 2013). Teaching is generally provided through short, content-based video lectures, readings, questions, challenges, and a variety of text-based or media resources. Auto-graded quizzes and peer-graded assessments may be involved to evaluate the learning (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014).

Although the content and requirements of cMOOCs do not necessarily differ from those of the xMOOCs, cMOOCs are based on a connectivist pedagogical model, and thus peer review and interaction are essential components of cMOOCs (Jobe et al., 2018). In cMOOCs, the teacher's role is more of a facilitator who aggregates, reviews, summarises and reflects on participant activity in a daily or weekly newsletter with learners autonomously sharing information and connecting with each other through blogs, forums, and a learning management system (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014; Jobe et al., 2018; King & Nanfity, 2013; McGreal et al., 2013). Furthermore, cMOOCs typically follow a self-regulated schedule with flexible start and stop dates (Jobe et al., 2018).

A quasi-MOOC offers web-based open educational materials to ensure specific learning objectives. A representative example of quasi-MOOCs is Khan Academy where little or no social interaction or grading is involved (McGreal et al., 2013). With all these variations and developments, it seems that MOOCs are not transitory on the educational scene and will continue their evolution, based on the changing needs of participants from all around the world (see Glass, Shiohawa-Baklan, & Saltarelli, 2016).

### ***Brief overview of the limitations and strengths of MOOCs***

With the advent of MOOCs, stakeholders began to question the future of teaching, including how MOOCs would impact the way that colleges and education programmes operate, and how the meaning and quality of a degree would be defined (Wilson, 2012). Proponents consider MOOCs as a solution to the increased cost of education, particularly when considering today's budget cuts in higher education in the United States (Taylor, 2013). Certain proponents believe MOOCs have a pedagogical value attached to them, maintaining that educators can use MOOCs to enhance their knowledge and skills regarding online teaching (Kolowich, 2014). In fact, Scholz (2013) suggested that MOOCs can encourage faculty members to reassess their own teaching practices and think more about learning new teaching strategies, resulting in the adoption of creative teaching strategies to enrich classroom instruction. MOOCs are also seen as an opportunity to create equal access to disadvantaged students, and provide alternative income options, recruitment possibilities, and credentialing grounds to allow smaller colleges to better position themselves in the highly competitive higher education arena (Scholz, 2013; see also Ong & Grigoryan, 2015).

Opponents continue to harbour doubts and concerns associated with the pedagogical, financial, and practical limitations of MOOCs, such as having a low view of the course material, poor attendance, high drop-out rates, dependence on Internet use and technological literacy, issues of sustainability and credentialing, possible plagiarism, and confusion regarding degrees (Glass et al., 2016). One serious risk proposed was the devaluing of on-campus education for which students pay a lot of money (Useem, 2014). In a similar vein, Judson (2013) suggested that smaller colleges with high tuition rates may approach MOOCs with economic and existential worries, due to free college-level courses offered through MOOCs. In addition, suppliers began charging for additional services, such as accreditation and certification (Atenas, 2015), which resulted in the criticism that MOOCs have been turned into a source of economic and commercial gain (Ospina-Delgado, Zorio-Grima, & García-Benau, 2016).

The Babson survey group, USA, an organisation that has been charting the trajectory of online education annually for more than a decade, noted concerns among academic leaders regarding MOOCs (Kolowich, 2014). According to the survey results, the percentage of academic leaders who indicated disbelief in the sustainability of the method had increased to 39% by 2013, from 26% in 2012. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who agreed with the statement that “MOOCs are important for institutions to learn about online pedagogy” was still as high as 44% in 2014, despite the 6% decrease in the percentage when compared to the previous year (Kolowich, 2014). In addition, despite some scepticism among educators, the number of MOOCs and those involved on courses have been increasing each year. Shah (2015) indicated that more than 35 million students across the globe signed up for at least one course in 2015, out of a total of 4200 courses from more than 500 universities.

### **Current and potential future use of MOOCs in the counselling field**

A number of counsellors and counsellor educators may have already decided against any form of involvement with MOOCs or may be adopting a wait-and-see approach. Part of this reluctance may stem from certain limitations of MOOCs, such as high drop-out rates, low perception of the course material, and issues of sustainability and credentialing (see Glass et al., 2016), while another part may be related to discord between the learning environment of MOOCs and that of counsellor education. More specifically, the learning environment of MOOCs is expansive, open and impersonal to some degree (Scholz, 2013), while the learning environment of counselling programmes requires small classes, selective screening, and face-to-face interaction with colleagues (see Scholz, 2013, for a similar comparison), which is more than challenging to create in a massive online learning platform. Importantly, certain ethics and standards established by counselling organisations, such as restrictions on faculty workload, class sizes, and faculty-to-student ratios, seem to inhibit the use of MOOCs as stand-alone counselling courses. For example, CACREP (2016) requires that, for any calendar year, the ratio of full-time equivalent (FTE) students to FTE faculty should not exceed 12:1, which is a standard that is in conflict with the nature of massive online learning platforms, such as MOOCs. The issue of training counsellors through MOOCs becomes even more complex when considering the training standards pertaining to the supervision, practicum and internship components of counsellor education that require weekly interaction with peers and supervisors, which makes it unlikely that MOOCs will replace traditional counsellor education. Furthermore, certain elements that are inherent in counsellor training, such as the grading of written assignments and experiential learning needs of graduate students, require face-to-face human interaction and/or individualised feedback from a human being, making it difficult for MOOCs to replace traditional counsellor education.

On the other hand, certain approaches to MOOCs, such as using them to supplement pedagogical and practical components of the profession, appear to be aligned with the ethical and professional standards of counselling. In fact, CACREP (2016) requires both doctoral and master’s level counselling programmes, especially those in the career counselling and college counselling areas, to document coverage in their curricula of standards that can be linked to the utilisation of high technology learning tools, such as MOOCs. With the introduction of machine-based Automated Essay Scoring (AES) applications (Ford, 2015; also see Ambekar, 2014) especially, and the advent of MOOCs that are based on peer-review and interaction (i.e. cMOOCs), counsellors and counsellor educators may start to identify more compatibility between MOOCs and the learning objectives of the counselling field and decide to consider actively developing MOOCs and/or utilising some of the MOOCs developed by other institutions in their programmes. Depending on the form of engagement, this can help counselling departments with increased brand recognition, counsellor educators and students with enriched training and assessment options, and counsellors and clients with enhanced convenience. Therefore, developing introductory level counselling MOOCs to promote the profession and designing career counselling MOOCs to provide career counselling services to disadvantaged youth are suggested in the following sections as some ways for counsellors and counsellor educators to

incorporate MOOCs into the field. Utilisation of MOOCs that are already produced by other departments is also discussed. This is based on the contention that some counsellors and counsellor educators may find only certain usages, such as drawing on existing MOOCs to enhance classroom teaching and/or utilising MOOCs as a source of professional development and continuing education opportunity a more realistic and appropriate way of taking advantage of MOOCs to stay current with new technologies. The following sections will discuss current and potential future uses of MOOCs in counselling with consideration of the strengths, limitations and ethical standards/codes of counselling that apply to the use of MOOCs in the counselling field.

### ***Producing massive open online counselling courses***

Although offered by a number of departments other than counselling and/or by individual instructors, certain counselling-related MOOCs do exist and can be located in the area of counselling, psychotherapy and career development through a basic Google search. Among the examples of counselling skills training courses that are available through MOOCs are “Existential Well-Being Counselling: A Person-centered Experiential Approach (edX)” offered by the KU Leuven University in Belgium (“MOOC List Counselling skills”, 2017) and “Managing Addiction: A Framework for Successful Treatment (edX)” developed by the University of Adelaide, Australia (“MOOC List, the University of Adelaide”, 2017). Some examples of MOOCs that are relevant to psychotherapy are “Psychotherapy” offered by the Saylor Academy in the United States, and “Counseling and Psychotherapy Theory (edX)” offered by Seoul National University in Korea (“MOOC List, Psychotherapy MOOCs”, 2018). Examples of career development MOOCs include “How to Succeed at: Interviews” offered by the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom and “Successful Career Development” offered by the University System of Georgia in the United States (Class Central, 2018). Although these MOOCs share commonalities with existing online courses because they are both offered online, they feature some differences in terms of their structure and purpose (Perna et al., 2014). Unlike traditional online courses, MOOCs often attract massive numbers of learners, facilitate unrestricted and self-scheduled learning with little (or no) requirement of prerequisite knowledge, and offer content that is free or costs less than traditional online courses (see Bond, 2013; De Boer, Ho, Stump, & Breslow, 2014; Pursel, Zhang, Jablokow, Choi, & Velegov, 2016).

The fact that certain counselling-related MOOCs exist may indicate a need in the educational arena in this regard, and if they continue to be produced, they may as well be produced by counselling departments. As pointed out previously, because using MOOCs as stand-alone courses seems to be in conflict with the standards required for training counsellors, such courses can be designed as introductory level MOOCs and be provided with a “statement of accomplishment” or “badge”, rather than credits, meaning that a student has completed the particular MOOC. If designed as introductory level courses, counselling-related MOOCs can function as stepping stones; in other words, preparatory courses (see Goldschmidt & Greene-Ryan, 2014; Swigart & Liang, 2016; Yin & Kawachi, 2013) to teach counselling terminology to undergraduate students in English speaking countries, international students who study or want to study in the U.S., and practitioners preparing for a degree in counselling. Such courses can add to efforts for the professionalisation and globalisation of counselling by increasing the visibility and recognition of the profession nationally, but also, more importantly internationally, by providing equitable global access (see also Emanuel, 2013; Rhoads et al., 2013).

By offering introductory level MOOCs, counselling departments, especially those with accredited counselling programmes, can publicise their programmes particularly in countries where counselling programmes and services are either unavailable or limited, which can result in the recruitment of more graduate students. International students from such countries may especially want to look into the possibility of pursuing graduate degrees from an accredited counselling programme due to a lack of such programmes in their own countries, but may be experiencing difficulties relocating immediately to another country. For such students, taking massive open online counselling courses

from a well-established counselling programme, before making the serious decision to travel overseas for education, can help their decision-making processes by introducing them to what to expect, as well as to prepare them for the educational and linguistic components of such a transition.

There are certain caveats and limitations applying to potential involvement in the production of introductory level counselling MOOCs, one of which relates to the extent of personnel or technological resources that are necessary for developing MOOCs. Hollands and Tirthali (2014) surveyed faculty members, administrators, and researchers at 62 institutions based in the United States, China, the United Kingdom and Canada to understand how and why institutions engage in developing MOOCs found that MOOCs require considerable investment. They recommend that institutions should review their goals and evaluate MOOCs in terms of their capacity to help them meet their institutional goals, in a way that is both economical and realistic, before investing in MOOCs. Furthermore, the effort and time involved in the production of MOOCs can pose challenges for instructors, increasing their workload. CACREP (2016) requires that the teaching and advisory loads, scholarship, and service expectations of counsellor education programme faculty members should be planned with a recognition that counsellor preparation programmes involve extensive clinical instruction. Therefore, counselling departments should carefully plan the workloads of faculty members if they are to invest in designing MOOCs so that curricula, full-time students and the nature of on-campus education do not get disrupted. On the other hand, production of introductory level MOOCs can benefit counsellor educators by increasing their collaborative, technological and pedagogical skills because creating a MOOC requires a faculty to team up with experts, such as designers, software developers, learning researchers, librarians and videographers across institutions (see Salisbury, 2014).

### ***Using existing MOOCs to enrich classroom instruction of counsellors***

A part of the pedagogical value attached to MOOCs relates to their potential to encourage instructors to adopt creative teaching strategies to enrich classroom instruction (Kolowich, 2014; Scholz, 2013). One such usage of MOOCs that has sparked quite an interest among colleges and universities is to utilise them as a content source for flipped classrooms (Israel, 2015). The flipped classroom consists of a two-fold educational technique: “Interactive group learning activities inside the classroom, and direct computer-based individual instruction outside the classroom” (Bishop & Verleger, 2013, p. 4). Although outside instruction of a flipped classroom can be conducted through readings, podcasts, and PowerPoint presentations (Mason, Shuman, & Cook, 2013), it is commonly performed through the use of videos, which are viewed before class (Moran & Milsom, 2015). Certain counsellor educators find the usage of MOOCs as a content source for the flipped classroom more beneficial and suitable to counsellor education than producing MOOCs due to high compatibility between the interactive learning opportunities associated with the flipped-classroom approach and the experiential learning needs of graduate students in counsellor education (see Moran & Milsom, 2015 for a review of the flipped classroom).

Although a number of counsellor educators have already been experimenting with the flipped classroom approach, using MOOCs in combination with the flipped classroom may be a novel idea for many. For this type of utilisation of MOOCs, professors should first identify a MOOC of interest, or even multiple MOOCs, as it is possible to draw course materials from them (see Israel, 2015), and decide whether it is suitable with their teaching objectives and their students’ needs. This can be done by clicking on the title of the MOOC and finding the description of the course, the sponsor, and the instructor (Swigart & Liang, 2016). Then counsellor educators can ask students to sign up for the identified course and follow all the online materials, including videos and discussion forums and to complete all quizzes and assignments, or they may only require certain parts of the material based on relevancy. Some examples of the relevant topics of MOOCs that can be used in counsellor education offered at undergraduate level include sociology and psychology while, for graduate level, topics can be related to research, data analysis techniques, and statistics.

Griffiths, Chingos, Mulhern, and Spies (2014) have maintained that using MOOCs in hybrid formats can improve student outcomes and reduce costs. Existing research and literature also indicate that the flipped class application is associated with improved learning, and increased performance on assignments, projects and exams (e.g. Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Mason et al., 2013). Thus, using MOOCs as a content source for the flipped classroom can yield similar benefits. Although more closely-associated with the flipped classroom technique than MOOCs, some of the advantages of such utilisation include having an opportunity to identify and address individual student learning needs through “just in time” teaching (i.e. mini-assessments completed by students before class; Moran & Milsom, 2015), and through several different teaching methods (Mason et al., 2013). Such utilisation of MOOCs can save counsellor educators’ time, not only inside but also outside the classroom, so that they focus more of their energy and attention into the classroom for application of new knowledge, discussion, feedback, and class projects, which they may not otherwise have time to cover in a traditional classroom format.

Another advantage of using MOOCs as a content source for the flipped classroom is the ability to deliver the outside instruction component of the flipped classroom through high quality teaching materials that are exclusively created for independent learning that is promised by MOOCs. As a result, counsellor educators who have felt the need to create their own videos for outside instruction, due to the limited number of relevant and quality videos that are offered by outside video sources (such as YouTube) on counselling topics, might enjoy this type of utilisation of MOOCs as it would save them time and effort from having to create online content from scratch. Another advantage of such usage of MOOCs is the opportunity to expose the students to multiple facilitators, one in-class instructor and the other online instructor of MOOC, and thus to receive two different viewpoints on course content (Israel, 2015).

There are also certain limitations and caveats applying to the use of MOOCs in flipped classrooms and, as is the case with the strengths, some of these relate to the use of the flipped classroom. One such limitation is an expectation from students to be self-motivated as they are required to learn material on their own before class, so that they are able to apply knowledge to the in-class activities (Moran & Milsom, 2015). Using MOOCs in flipped classrooms can also be challenging for instructors due to the initial preparation time required (Mason et al., 2013; Moran & Milsom, 2015), whether it be reviewing and identifying appropriate MOOCs or carefully planning what is expected of students to learn and complete before class versus in-class.

### ***MOOCs as a source of professional development and continuing education***

Pursel et al. (2016) found that about 80% of those taking MOOCs already had a college degree. This finding supports the claim that MOOCs may be an effective professional development tool for learners with enough self-motivation and discipline as these qualities happen to be the same qualities one needs to earn a college degree. Another study conducted with participants residing in the United Kingdom, Canada, El Salvador, India, Ireland and the Netherlands further revealed that elementary and secondary school teachers, college professors, and graduate assistants take MOOCs as a form of professional development in the areas that they teach (see Veletsianos, Collier, & Schneider, 2015). As a result, it can be proposed that MOOCs may be a cost-effective method to provide quality education in order to advance professional counsellor development (see Jobe et al., 2018) or in other words, contribute to continuing professional development of counsellors.

Many counselling graduates, particularly international ones, who return to their home countries after receiving their graduate degrees in countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom find themselves in need of quality professional development opportunities. Locating new sources of further education can be particularly difficult for some international graduates due to the limitedness of such sources in developing countries. There are existing professional development opportunities that are offered and/or endorsed by professional counselling organisations, such

as the BACP and the ACA, in the form of online courses, webinars or podcasts, and these can be extremely suitable and attractive for some counsellor educators and professionals who are looking to earn continuing education credits (CECs) for license or certificate renewal. On the other hand, others may find MOOCs as a better match for their individual needs than the aforementioned online modalities of continued education. For example, there are international graduates who are not interested in CECs due to different or non-existent licensure/certification procedures in their own countries, but they may still need continuing education for professional development purposes or to increase job opportunities. These graduates and some native graduates may find MOOCs more attractive as a source of professional development because, in MOOCs, participants are not required, nor advised, to try to engage with all the course materials; the level of time commitment is self-determined (Bond, 2013), the range of available topics can be vast, and the content is usually free of charge or costs less than other professional development sources. Furthermore, if offered in the form of cMOOCs, MOOCs can offer opportunities for peer review and multiplatform communication that can provide professional networking and rejuvenation without the constraints of geographical and/or physical limitations, which could also help internationalisation of counselling, while other online sources of continuing education provide no, or only limited, interaction and peer review.

On the other hand, some limitations and caveats apply to the use of MOOCs as a source of professional development for counsellors and counsellor educators. One of them is the need to ensure that participants recognise each other's professional expertise and boundaries, which can be challenging on a platform of this magnitude and diversity. Employers' potential reluctance regarding MOOCs and lack of specific course offerings for the professional development of counsellors and counsellor educators can be other limitations associated with the use of MOOCs as a professional development source. Furthermore, although it is possible to choose from existing MOOCs, such as those created specifically for professional teacher development, participants may find these courses less structured and centralised than other continuing education opportunities, including those that are offered online. Therefore, there needs to be professional development course offerings specifically for the field of counselling in order to be able to evaluate potential success and limitations.

### ***Using MOOCs to provide and/or supplement career counselling services***

Thus far, the value of MOOCs has been discussed in terms of their capacity to extend the education and training of counsellors and counselling graduates, but their use may extend beyond the training component as they can also be used to provide and/or supplement counselling services. Given that career counsellors are required to have the skills and the strategies to assist clients in the appropriate use of technology for career information and planning (CACREP, 2016), a subcategory of counsellors with the most potential to use MOOCs as a practical tool to enrich their services is career counsellors. Recently, a survey of MOOCs learners revealed that over 30% of the participants had experienced substantial career advancement as a result of their coursework, with 26% stating that enrolling in MOOCs had helped them land a new job (Zhenghao et al., 2015). The percentage of respondents reporting some kind of career benefit, such as promotion, pay increase, and gaining skills to start their own businesses, as a result of having taken one or more MOOCs accounted for 85% of all the respondents (Zhenghao et al., 2015). Given the positive career results obtained by MOOC learners, career counsellors may want to advocate the use MOOCs among clients who do not have the time or the resources to enhance their employability skills through traditional education, as with MOOCs it is now possible for anyone to take quality classes or even to earn a certificate or a degree in any given area.

MOOCs can also be used to provide counselling services to disadvantaged youth. As already accepted within the professional counselling literature, the Internet has already made counselling services more available for groups of disadvantaged individuals (e.g. Manhal-Baugus, 2001; Stevens & Lundberg, 1998), who otherwise would not have been able to secure counselling services, due to financial or geographical constraints. MOOCs, as a form of advanced technology that draws heavily on the Internet can, in fact, make it possible for counsellors to reach an even wider range



of clientele. Taylor (2013) maintained that MOOCs can be used to bring counselling services to poorer communities and, as an example, she cites low income students who cannot afford the high costs of college consultants to whom they need to turn due to the overloaded caseloads of their school counsellors. She argues that this group can greatly benefit from free massive open online counselling sessions, based on her observation that, "It's clear that the current model is woefully dependent on shrinking resources and scarce manpower" (p. B25). Although massive open online counselling sessions can be difficult to implement due to the unrestricted nature of MOOCs, providing career counselling-related services to disadvantaged youth can still be possible through a special form of MOOCs that is called cMOOCs. As noted earlier, a cMOOC follows a connectivist pedagogical model and thus includes a peer interaction component along with facilitation from an instructor. This type of implementation would still resemble an online career counselling course where students can learn about career decision-making styles and strategies and be taught to process internal information (e.g. interests, values, abilities, cognitions, and emotions) and external information (e.g. occupational and educational information and assessments) but would be free of economical, geographical and structural (e.g. size and schedule) restrictions of existing online career counselling courses. Although MOOCs appear to have more potential with regard to practical usage in career counselling services, further discussion and inquiry can reveal how counsellors practicing within other specialty areas can take advantage of MOOCs.

### **Ethical/legal considerations regarding the use of MOOCs in counselling**

With the Internet being increasingly accepted as a widely-utilised educational tool, ethical guidelines surrounding its use in counsellor education, supervision and practice have already been formally established by counselling organisations across the globe (Jencius & Sager, 2001), such as the following: the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA, 1999); the International Society for Mental Health Online, USA (ISMHO, 2018); the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2018); the National Board for Certified Counselors, USA (NBCC, 2001); the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014); the Association on Counselor Education and Supervision, USA (ACES, 2007); and the National Career Development Association, USA (NCDA, 2004). Although many of these professional codes feature certain nuances, depending on the type of organisation or country of origin, they still have numerous parallels, such as "confidentiality, identity of client and professional, informed consent, duty to warn or protect, appropriate counselling relationships, availability of services, and practitioner competence" (McCrickard & Butler, 2005, p. 105). Many of the same ethical/legal considerations followed in the counselling profession also guide distance counselling, technology, and social media and they are therefore applicable to the use of MOOCs. However, only the ethical/legal considerations surrounding MOOCs are outlined in this section.

The issue of technological competence surfaces as one of the most important ethical considerations with regard to the use of MOOCs in counselling. Professionals who would like to integrate MOOCs into the field of counselling should take into consideration that the BACP (Anthony & Goss, 2009) recognises that online practice is a specialist area which requires a level of competence at least as high as that for counselling in-person. Therefore, counsellors who would like to take advantage of distance counselling, technology, and/or social media are expected to build knowledge and skills regarding related technical, ethical, and legal considerations. In this regard, the BACP (2018) has strongly recommended undergoing further training, including an experiential element related to the use of technology. As a result, counsellors and counsellor educators who would like to integrate MOOCs into their teaching may want to enrol into an MOOC of interest or one of the MOOCs on the design and development of learning technologies to undergo technological training that involves the experiential component (see *edX*, 2017). There are also courses offered on topics such as online therapy, online supervision and online group therapy that are endorsed by the BACP (see Anthony & Nagel, 2009). Faculty in counselling departments and individual practitioners may also want to take these courses before considering any integration of MOOCs into their practice.

Following competence, issues of confidentiality and informed consent, are the most important ethical/legal considerations when using MOOCs for teaching purposes. Although generally optional, there are self-revealing components of MOOCs, such as discussion forums (Hutchens & Hulbert, 2016) and MOOCs accumulate information on their participants, which can include educational records, student performance, and online activity (Young, 2015). Depending on the MOOC provider, this information may be collected for both educational and economic purposes. Therefore, it is extremely important for counsellor educators to inform students of potential limitations to confidentiality (McCrickard & Butler, 2005). If MOOCs are intended to be integrated into counselling services, clients and students should also be informed of the potential risks and benefits of online counselling, of the steps that are planned by the counsellor to mitigate risks, and of the alternatives that they can pursue in place of online counselling (Manhal-Baugus, 2001), which can be conducted “through a formal process whereby the practitioner educates the client about therapeutic modality” (McCrickard & Butler, 2005, p. 106). Practitioners are also required to ensure that all software devices and other technological tools are up-to-date and do not disrupt the therapeutic process (Anthony & Goss, 2009).

Another ethical issue relates to dishonesty; a potential limitation in online learning environments such as MOOCs. It is currently challenging to verify the identity of a learner in MOOCs (Jobe et al., 2018), so issues such as plagiarism and ownership of work can surface as difficulties when using MOOCs for teaching purposes. If MOOCs are to be used for counselling applications, the difficulty of being able to verify client identity and contact information can pose challenges due to security concerns, as highlighted in the literature on distance counselling (e.g. Attridge, 2000; Manhal-Baugus, 2001). Without having contact information of clients, professionals may have difficulty adhering to their ethical duty to warn and protect in the event that a client communicates serious intent to harm themselves or others (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2003). Although integration of certain technical solutions, such as facial recognition algorithms of the type currently used to stamp photos on Facebook, can solve the issue of ownership of work when using MOOCs for training purposes (see Ford, 2015 for a thorough discussion), if MOOCs are to be employed for counselling purposes, professionals should consider the fact that, regardless of having a client’s contact information, performing their duty to warn can be challenging. This is due to the number of clients living in other counties, where the practitioner cannot locate qualified emergency personnel or appropriate authorities to direct to their location (Hughes, 2000; Mitchell & Murphy, 2004).

## Conclusion

With the Internet increasingly becoming a part of our daily lives, it is inevitable that the training and practice of professional counselling include the Internet and other similar technological competencies to keep pace with the evolving needs of the field and the individuals involved in the field, be it professionals who train prospective counsellors, or students who receive training to become professional counsellors, or clients who utilise counselling services. MOOCs, a new Internet-based trend in education, present an area of exploration and opportunity for counsellors and counsellor educators as certain usages of MOOCs may be used to increase the reach and impact of the profession across the globe. Therefore, this article was written not only to introduce MOOCs but also to highlight the need for counsellors and counsellor educators to keep an open mind regarding new technologies such as MOOCs, without disregarding the limitations and ethical/legal issues surrounding their use in counselling.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Elif Çimsir** is a Postdoctoral Scholar in the Department of Counselling and Guidance, Faculty of Education, Anadolu University, Turkey. She recently joined Anadolu University after receiving her PhD degree in Counselor Education and Supervision at Penn State University in the US. Her research interests include disadvantaged groups including people with disabilities, international students, and internationalisation of the counselling profession.

## ORCID

Elif Cimsir  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2726-6522>

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