MOOCs and the Long Tail

Originally institutions such as Stanford University devised online, high quality courses, for a large population eager to learn but who had difficulties in learning by traditional means. MOOCs are regarded by many as an important tool to widen access to higher education for millions of people, including those in the developing world and ultimately enhance their quality of life.

MOOCs have been described as a "revolution in education". Daphne Koller from Stanford university who started Coursera.org described MOOCs as a Tsunami, that is better to surf than to run from.

With mass education suddenly at our fingertips it is interesting to relate the economic concept of the Long Tail to MOOCs. In Wired magazine, Chris Anderson uses the example of Touching the Void, a book almost on the brink of going out of print, suddenly enjoying a renaissance through Amazon sales, when Joe Simpson's fellow climber, Jon Krakauer published into Thin Air. Suddenly sales of Touching the Void went through the roof. Why? Because Amazon's software suggested to readers of into Thin Air that they would like Touching the Void. This is a useful analogy that can be applied to education and the arrival of MOOCs.

MOOCs and their platforms offer the interested learner a smorgbrod of courses to follow. Just like Amazon offers me the next bestseller. FutureLearn or Coursera will offer me a related educational course that I might just find interesting. We have a long tail of education at our fingertips. Brown and Adler say exactly this:

"Whereas traditional schools offer a finite number of courses of study, the “catalogue” of subjects that can be learned online is almost unlimited."

The internet allows us to access long forgotten rubbish as well as pertinent information. Equally long forgotten pertinent information and current rubbish. Demand can shift from the most 'popular' products at the fat end of the tail to the long “tail” made up of demand for many different niche educational products.

The long tail analogy can be beneficial to both the consumer, the learner and the educator. The educators can now make their money from giving access to the long tail of educational knowledge that is accessible on the web. The learners can benefit from accessibility to a hitherto hidden long tail.

On a literal level, the long tail is also the archived material. Money is still to be made from that long tail. However, it needs judgement for us to use that long tail critically and usefully.

It is all about aggregating the long tail in one way or another. Google makes it money from from the long tail of advertising.

Chris Anderson talks of three rules when employing the Long Tail theory.

**Rule 1: Make everything available**

**Rule 2: Cut the price in half. Now lower it.**

**Rule 3: Help me find it**

This could equally be applied to the availability of education on the MOOC platforms.