

MOOCs

MOOCs: Promise or Plight

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“What is in a name?” More than 400 years ago Shakespeare memorialized how charged emotions may become when even hearing a particular name. Education is filled with titles and acronyms that define programs, tests and instructional initiatives. Technology in education appears to top the list of unusual terminology that describe innovations with phrases like *Flipped Classrooms, Cloud Computing, and Blended Learning* and becoming broadly known among educators. Such terms provoke sentiments dichotomously positive or negative. For example, views on the impact of online technology trends in education are often polarized with educators either in support or resistant (Carter, 2013). Though opinions may vary, the fact remains that online learning is a formidable instructional platform and embedded within the 21st century learning mindset.

Massive open online courses (MOOC’s for those up close and personal with it), is a current trend in educational technology that has caused much debate. This format for online classes has resulted in a response in higher education, with opposing perspectives ranging from “nightmare” to “tremendous opportunity” (Carter, 2013). For example, Penn State University is responding with enthusiasm and promise, while Duke University professors have been more skeptical about the effect on the future of higher education.

It is the “m” in MOOC that is one aspect that delineates it from other online course environments, with student audiences reaching hundreds of thousands, even millions. For example, *Coursera* (a Silicon Valley start-up MOOC platform), student enrollment has reached 1.7 million in just a year and currently has courses in French, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, and of course English, from sixty-two universities on four continents (Theisen, 2013). The cost of the courses is also undeniably reasonable: *free*. The future of online learning formats, particularly for

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higher education environments, calls for a discussion on the many ethical, financial and logistical issues with respect to MOOCs.

With new technologically based instructional and/or educational platforms, considerations about the pedagogical practices are crucial. Delivery of best practices in any learning venue is necessary and MOOCs are no exception. As the trend for online learning began to surface, Kim and Bonk (2006) analyzed responses to a survey in a study they conducted about online education. In this study, instructors and administrators who were associated with online education answered survey questions that included demographics, current online teaching status as well as predictions about the future of online learning. A significant result from this survey was that monetary support and pedagogical competence of instructors were seen as important factors to the success of online programs. Since this study is now ancient (seven years in the world of technology is just that) the results may be paired with current research to gauge that relevance.

Though the New York Times dubbed 2012 “the year of the MOOC” its formal origins dates back to 2008 in Canada with the online course *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge*, offered by the University of Manitoba (Sandeem, 2013). The innovators expected attention when enrollment spiked at 100 registered students, but now are looking at the current format use as lacking. According to Parr (2013) the creators view the present barrage of MOOCs as placing less emphasis on providing an “interactive and dynamic” approach to learning (as was intended) and more on “static and passive” education. As MOOCs become more commercialized it will be the lack of creativity and innovation that will fuel dissenters’ opinions. As with all educational and instructional worth, effectiveness is measured by the quality of those delivering the learning.

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The economic question that is critical to higher education learning institutions is how such massive, open courses will impact the future of colleges around the globe. As non-profit universities begin to partner with MOOC platforms, there is an emerging possibility that all of this will turn into a money making business. The intent indeed was a revolutionary innovation, making education available everywhere at no cost. However, similar to how books are available in public libraries and documentaries available on public television, there is no certificate or degree issued upon completion (CFHE, 2013). That is, without a fee. Pseudo-transcripts are available at a price and “Premium Services” for MOOCs have developed with as well, offering more detailed information about a student’s participation in a course.

Sandeen (2013) discussed the fast changing evolution of the MOOC in terms of a 1.0, 2.0 and an emerging 3.0 states of development. She describes MOOC 1.0 as “built on the notion of open educational resources, where MOOC 2.0 focused on a more top-down video lecture format” (pg. 1). MOOC 1.0 may be best subscribed to the original Canadian format, currently 2.0 appears to be more about “leisure learning” market. Coursera for example accounts for more than 80% of the enrolled students as already having earned one or more degrees. Sandeen likens MOOC 3.0 as a kind of hybrid version in which institutions have MOOCs available for course preparation, additional practice or advanced coursework placement. Also, MOOCs in the form of video lectures, simulations and exercises have taken on a more *flipped classroom*¹ likeness.

As with every new technology, whether in education, business or social environments there are levels of hype that are reached before stabilizing. Rivard (2013) discussed that when there is an intersection of low cost and high quality education attention would be expected,

¹ Term used by Bergmann and Sams, teacher pioneers in classroom flipping in their book, [Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day](#) (ISTE, 2012).

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however that attention heeds discussion which has been overstepped with respect to MOOCs.

Rivard noted that as with any technology “hype-cycle” it will span a “peak of inflated expectations” to a “trough of disillusionment” before institutions figure out how to really use and benefit from a new technology.

Disillusionment has surfaced as many faculty groups are worried MOOCs will cost them their positions, assume their intellectual property rights all while neglecting to educate students. Rivard (2013) noted that the provosts at the Committee on Institutional Cooperation cautioned that corporations and not universities may control the future of higher education and urged a more careful analysis of MOOCs. Udacity CEO, Sebastian Thrun, predicted that “within a half-century there would only be 10 institutions of higher education left in the world” (Leckart, 2012). It is no wonder there is a call for pause, however do the benefits outweigh the disillusionments? That is a discussion for another paper.

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