

Are MOOCs the Future of Higher Education? A Collective Judgment Forum
William Davis, Martin Evenden, Gregory Sandstrom and Aliaksandr Puptsau

Over the last several months, discussions surrounding the possibilities and pitfalls of massively open online courses (MOOCs) for higher education have continued to grow. These discussions were amplified when “An Open Letter to Professor Michael Sandel From the Philosophy Department at San Jose State U” was published via the Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Document-an-Open-Letter/138937/>).

MOOCs as ‘a’ Future for Higher Education
William Davis, Virginia Tech, USA

As a current graduate student aspiring to teach at the university level, the notion that Massive Open Online Classes (MOOCs) are the future of higher education gives me pause. This Collective Judgment Forum (CFJ) question requires us, at a minimum, to address: 1. What higher education is; 2. What MOOCs are; and, 3. What MOOCs can, and should, do. What follows is an attempt at a limited answer, but one that I hope sparks further discussion and criticism on this board.

First, what is higher education? Minimally, I see higher education as a means of transmitting and facilitating structured content (e.g., syllabi, lectures, activities, debates, discussions) on specific topics to a limited number of interested individuals in designated spaces and at particular times. However, the educators themselves do more than design and facilitate courses and activities, lectures and assessments. They also transfer and embody academic values (Brey 2006, 92). I do not imagine I have fully defined higher education as there are so many other players and factors left out of the above (e.g. administrators, students, funding groups, accreditation boards, the actual goals of higher education), but perhaps writing in such general terms is a useful start to engage the topic of whether MOOCs can fill the (better: ‘a’) role in higher education.

A Massive Open Online Course is also tricky to define because there are numerous variations. To save space, I will examine one purveyor of MOOCs, [Udacity](#). Udacity [offers](#) facilitated and structured content (syllabi, recorded lectures, activities and assessments) for free (no credit, only a certificate of completion), or for a [fee](#) (for credit if an accredited university accepts the course¹). The classes are online and open to, potentially, tens (hundreds?) of thousands of participants.

¹ Udacity offers undergraduate courses for free. If one wants credit for the course to be applied toward a degree at a traditional U.S. university, she must contact her desired university to determine if the school accepts Udacity courses for credit. If the university does accept Udacity courses, Udacity [charges](#) \$150 U.S. per undergraduate course (3 credits). For comparison, my own institution, Virginia Tech (VT), [charges](#) \$1,202.25 for in-state students and \$3,096.00 for out-of-state students per 3-credit course (additional fees apply for engineering and business courses). There are numerous other fees charged by VT — from student fees, to bus fees to library fees—that must be added for students actually to take courses, and these fees go up depending on the number of credit hours taken (refer to the link above for complete descriptions).

Assessments are usually graded by automated systems, or peer or crowd-sourced (participants grade each other anonymously) networks.

Ostensibly, it seems Udacity represents a viable option for higher education. Udacity provides courses to greater numbers of students than a traditional university does, and it does not currently have entrance/admission requirements. Though Udacity’s course offerings are limited, let us imagine that in the future they can offer any course one would take at a traditional institution of higher education. Udacity represents a form of education that, rather than isolating people, could potentially bring them together with other individuals from different socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds that they might otherwise never meet. Udacity also permits one to escape the rigidity of traditional higher education: a participant can take courses on her own time and in disparate disciplines with only an interest in a topic/subject as a prerequisite. (I will set aside how Udacity and other MOOC assessments are graded as that subject might be worth a separate CJF topic.)

In order to be the future of higher education, Udacity, and any other MOOC provider, should also do more than offer the basic functions and services I have outlined. Higher education should also inspire students to think critically and creatively, work in teams, and embody the other types of academic values Brey (2006) outlines.²

Clearly, I have not really answered the question of this forum.³ I do, however, think MOOCs force us to reevaluate what we mean by ‘higher education,’ and, further, what it means to ‘know something.’ The future of higher education is unclear and that might be a good thing. Opening up debate on what we want higher education to be, and by what means it will achieve those ends, is a topic that will need constant revision. And if a generation of MOOC-educated individuals arises, will I still be able to write with such seeming certainty about ‘traditional higher education models’ that set MOOCs as outliers?

Are MOOCs the Future of Higher Education?

Martin Evenden, National Taichung University of Education, Taiwan

While the motivation for the inception of MOOCs remains dubious — it has been trumpeted as enabling the global masses to gain access to some of the world’s top minds for ‘free’— what is clear is their potential to have a significant impact on higher education.

² These values include: “honesty, objectivity, fairness, trust, collegiality, respect, accuracy, thoroughness, independence, openness, curiosity and responsibility” (Brey, 2006, 92).

³ I have also not addressed: 1. For which demographics should/are MOOCs be a service? 2. Should MOOCs work in tandem with traditional higher education, simply replace it or some other permutation? 3. Can the asynchronous discussion forums found in MOOCs replace/displace face-to-face or synchronous class discussions and debates? 4. Who should teach these MOOCs and how will they receive remuneration? 5. How should MOOCs be priced and accredited? 6. Can/do MOOCs achieve the same learning goals found in traditional higher education? 7. What does it mean that some wish to move away from traditional higher education and embark upon MOOCs in the first place? 8. What will universities become if MOOCs become the norm?

I don't think that MOOCs pose a serious threat to universities as the main providers of higher education for reasons I will outline shortly, but there is definitely a threat to the traditional model of higher education in terms of how courses are put together and delivered. The reasons why I don't think MOOCs will replace universities as the main providers of higher education are as follows: First, education is not just about learning; it's about gaining credentials. Academic accreditation will only be taken seriously, or at least will be taken more seriously if it's from a recognised university. Also, I don't think that top companies are seriously going to want to recruit people who have been more or less largely glued to a screen without having engaged in the kinds of social interaction that you would get from a traditional university experience. Furthermore, to study properly, you need a good library and access to restricted journal resources. In addition, a lot of important university teaching comes from seminar-based discussion led by academics in small groups or science classes that require necessary lab resources (such as materials and complex and expensive equipment) in addition to an element of supervision when using them that is not easily replaceable.

What is more easily replaceable though is the traditional lecture as a method of disseminating information, especially in an era of high course fees. One of the big dangers will be if universities begin to accredit online courses in some way. This could mean, as the San Jose philosophy professors point out, the door opening to pre-packaged courses being sold (thus providing a solution as to how MOOCs could become monetised), replacing traditional lectures, and with them presumably professors as well. However, I don't think substituting a DVD lecture for a live one would be in itself detrimental to the learning process (on the basis there isn't really that much genuine social interaction). In fact, given that you could watch it over and over, it would even enhance it in some ways. Moreover, using the UK as an example, they could be used to offer a lower cost alternative to the £9000 per annum course. For instance, if a student had a choice of paying £9000 at a 'lower' university for a relatively unknown lecturer or a significant drop in the level of fees and a substitute package of lectures put together by a leading professor in the field, then I think that would actually be preferable to them.

One question that would arise from such a development, should it occur, is who would then be responsible for selecting course lectures given that there are bound to be competing packages/courses on offer (packaged lectures could also come with pre-designed essay and exam questions)? If professors were eventually dispensed with, presumably it would be a bureaucrat. The major concern, as many fear, arising from such an envisaged scenario is a two-tier higher education system emerging with so called 'elite' institutions on one side and the rest having homogenised programmes with deskilled course 'monitors' on the other. This McDonaldisation of the lower tier would also then centralise knowledge production, incurring particularly important losses from those specialist subject departments that exist outside the locus of elite universities.

Ultimately, it seems that the main driver towards ushering in a standardised higher education system would not necessarily be technology itself, but high course fees. If a traditional university education was subsidised enough by the public sector, the incentive to offer or receive pre-packaged courses at the expense of replacing professors would not be as great. Governments

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have some questions they need to ask themselves about the kinds of people and diversity of knowledge they want to produce. Standardised programmes in many cases won't meet specific local needs and will also breed weakness in innovation through lack of synergy if too many people end up interacting with knowledge that is too similar. The resulting outcome is likely to lead to losses to the knowledge economy both locally and nationally in addition to derived social benefits such as informing public policy and decision-making. Thus, while the economics of higher education may need rethinking, it should not come at the expense of the multitude of academics who facilitate the enrichment diversity brings that leads to social and economic benefits through their pedagogical input and research output.

Would You Like a MOOC with Your Education? EHU's distance learning program
Gregory Sandstrom and Aliksandr Puptsau, European Humanities University, Lithuania

Do we need MOOCs? Are they inevitable? With the help of MOOCs, can we distinguish between the medialisation (Gornykh 2012) of higher education and the desire for globalisation of knowledge, teaching and learning?

This contribution draws on the European Humanities University's (EHU) experiences over 8 years with distance education, learning and instruction. Only 1/3 of EHU's students attend courses 'in person,' while 2/3 are 'low residence,' i.e. they study on-line at a distance. Like MOOCs, the majority of 'coursework' is done on-line. EHU has graduated 118 'low-res' bachelor's students since it was exiled from Belarus in 2004 and the number is substantially rising each year. In 2013 it will graduate more than 100 distance students. However, the drop-out rate for distance students is 3 times higher than for high-residence students, who receive a more personal on-site (local campus) educational experience. This is still considerably lower than the very high (90%+) incompleteness rate of most MOOCs. EHU offers about 60-80 on-line distance courses for undergraduate and graduate students each semester.

EHU's on-line learning program does not properly qualify as a 'MOOC' due to the limited number (100s, not 10,000s) of students that regularly 'attend' it. Its audience is more nationally and regionally specific. The courses are also carefully blended with traditional in-person teaching methods. In EHU's model, distance students take exams at EHU's Vilnius campus, defend their theses here and attend opening and closing sessions to personally meet their instructors and fellow students. On-line education at EHU is therefore not as 'impersonal' as most MOOCs. In addition, EHU has developed criteria for assessing the quality of on-line courses and regularly (3-4 times per year) conducts distance education workshops for faculty members, most of whom (more than 70%) have taught on-line courses.

Which 'mass' are MOOC's targeting? In EHU's case, students that are living in Belarus and those who are interested in problems and themes specific to Central and Eastern Europe are the audience. Students from Ukraine, Russia, Latvia and Lithuania have enrolled in EHU's distance courses also. Up to now, however, EHU has offered only a few courses on-line in English. But with the prospect of MOOCs, it seems to make sense to utilize the unique media capacities that EHU has via donated BBC-quality audio and video equipment and studio recording space. EHU

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professors and local talents are therefore considering active production of educational programming that involves the medialisation of knowledge.

We would like to know if students (and teachers) around the world would be interested in MOOCs about Humanities and Social Sciences in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. If there is interest, how could we attract an audience (i.e. network) for these MOOCs, since we are a small, regional and not a ‘branded’ elite globally-recognised university? We would be grateful for feedback on these questions.

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