

Probing Question: Are MOOCs here to stay?

June 20 2013, by Melissa Beattie-Moss



Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) allow students to take college-level courses entirely over the Internet. Credit: Patrick Mansell

In higher education, 2013 may be remembered as the year of the MOOC. For those playing catch-up, MOOCs, or Massive Open Online Courses, are college-level classes taught entirely over the Internet. Like students in brick-and-mortar classrooms, students enrolled in MOOCs take notes and tests and participate in discussions. Unlike traditional

courses—or even typical online courses—MOOCs are usually free, draw hundreds or even thousands of students, and are run with minimal direct contact with teachers, with an emphasis instead on brief and (presumably) engaging video presentations.

Colleges and universities are scrambling to get onboard the MOOC train—hundreds now offer some form of Web-based curriculum—while at the same time debating what the trend means for the future of [higher education](#).

Is MOOC-mania justified and are MOOCs here to stay?

"We know a lot about teaching small classes and even large lecture classes," Penn State Associate Professor of English Stuart Selber said. "And we know a lot about creating online courses for the scales we're used to. But the 'massive' part of MOOCs is a new frontier for higher education. We know very little, if anything, about teaching and learning in a context involving tens of thousands of students."

Selber directs Digital Education in English, teaches courses in computers and composition and oversees English [grad students](#) participating in the University's "Teaching with Technology" certificate program.

There are about 450 MOOCs currently available worldwide, he explained, and students can take classes on an array of topics, such as "Understanding Einstein," offered by high-profile consortiums such as Stanford's Coursera (Penn State already has five course offerings through the Coursera network), or "The Ancient Greek Hero," offered by EdX, run by MIT and Harvard. Computer or peer-graded quizzes are the norm, and the honor code is in place regarding cheating. The disadvantages? Perhaps the most glaring ones are the lack of accreditation—although that's starting to change, Selber noted—and the loss of a customized learning environment and teacher-student

interaction. The chief advantages are self-paced learning and convenience, and the tuition price-tag (zero dollars and zero cents) is pretty appealing to many students, too.

"MOOCs may not be free forever, at least not all of them," Selber cautioned. "People are trying to figure out business models that can support their design and delivery. They're an expensive proposition if approached seriously." The hope of their proponents is that MOOCs will democratize education, he added. "The dream is that this approach will open up learning opportunities to both traditional and non-traditional students, increasing access to the best and brightest teachers in higher education, and reducing the costs of higher education. But it's too soon to know what the effects of MOOCs might really end up being." As Selber pointed out, technology is only one component of learning contexts. "All on its own, technology is unlikely to bring about dramatic cultural change," he said. "There must also be social and political alignment. Right now, MOOCs are aligning with concerns over the high costs of higher education. That's giving them traction."

There's no denying that MOOCs were born during a "perfect storm" of economic recession, climbing tuition rates, and widespread Internet access. But its advocates are quick to add that this is an idea whose time has come, even without the recession. Does the research bear that out?

"Well, I've heard people reference 'the MOOC literature,' but that doesn't really exist yet," said Selber. "There are lots of experiments going on out there and anecdotal evidence is starting to emerge, and that's certainly a good start. I'm looking forward to getting past all of the hype—the hype has been epic—and learning from evidence-based accounts of MOOC activity from thoughtful teacher-researchers."

Some of the needed research, Selber added, is about dialogue. "Learning has a social component and dialogue is important. How will MOOCs

impact that? Do online discussions really work in education?" Dialogue, he said, is "an essential part of any learning setting, online or off, massive or not. What happens in a course when there's the potential for 50,000 students to join a conversation? And how should the [MOOC teacher](#) treat that conversation, a conversation she can't possibly follow closely? These are examples of the open questions researchers need to study."

It's possible, Selber noted, that we're going to need to think in other ways about the role of dialogue in an academic course. "If MOOCs encourage us to revisit taken-for-granted assumptions, that would be very positive indeed."

Although the future of MOOCs is uncertain, Selber said, what we can expect to see is the development of multiple types of MOOCs. "That is, these courses won't end up being just one thing. Some will be free, others will charge. Some will offer credit (in various forms); others will provide relatively little feedback and assessment. Some will serve traditional students; others will focus on working professionals or on those interested in enrichment. The types that emerge at any particular school will be a function of larger social, political, and economic contexts."

The bottom line, according to Selber, is we should curtail the hysteria about MOOCs destroying or saving the American college campus. And if you have trouble thinking rationally about it, you could always turn to the Duke MOOC, "[A Beginner's Guide to Irrational Behavior](#)."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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