

Massive online courses pose possibilities but also concerns for professors

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In October 2012, some 40,000 students from around the world enrolled in professor Al Filreis' online course about modern and contemporary American poetry.

A couple of them, who were to receive credit for the course, were part of an experiment in which Antioch University had purchased the class to incorporate it into its coursework, even though the class was created by Filreis and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania. And the arrangement raised a question: What can Antioch do with a course after it's bought permission to use it?

For the American Association of University Professors, it's a pressing issue. Among the concerns are that institutions will change online courses created by [professors](#) and that professors will sign away their [intellectual property](#) rights to the courses they create. Doing so may have long-term consequences, as a professor might not be able to use a course after leaving his or her institution, the organization said.

"I would say that the battle is with ([university](#)) administrators. Intellectual property is the source to a lot of conflicts at the moment, and will be so in following years," said the association's former president, Cary Nelson.

Worried that these issues will set a precedent, the organization has launched a campaign to educate professors about their rights. Next month, the AAUP Foundation will publish guidelines for the emerging

industry.

Since the online learning industry is young, the ownership issues are up in the air, and the professors association doesn't want to impose contracts on institutions. But it thinks terms should be established under control of the faculty.

The "massive open online courses" such as the one offered by Filreis differ from previous types of online education because of their sheer numbers of students - and because they're mostly free.

Instead of hundreds, tens of thousands enroll in the MOOCs, which are available for anyone with an Internet connection. The content is provided by professors from universities all around the world.

MOOCs are built, and operate, many different ways. They usually consist of a mixture of video lectures, questionnaires, discussions in forums and live webcast sessions.

The idea is to make education cheaper and more accessible. But most people don't receive credit for completing the courses, and providers have been struggling to find a sustainable business model.

The difficulty faced by the emerging industry was apparent last week with the release of a study by the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education that showed MOOCs have relatively few active users and that user engagement falls off dramatically during a course.

The widely publicized study analyzed the movement of 1 million users through 16 courses Penn offered from June 2012 to June 2013. Among the key findings: Course completion rates were very low, averaging 4 percent.

Currently there are three major providers: edX, a nonprofit platform that works with Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and two for-profit providers, Coursera Inc. and Udacity Inc. Coursera is the biggest, with more than 4 million users.

Universities all over the world are signing up to participate.

For the Antioch program, the contract between Coursera and Penn prohibited modifications to the course. But Antioch could use it at any time, and it could choose to use only parts of the video.

"There are a lot of factors that go into a decision like this," said Filreis, the professor. "I much preferred the general idea that if people used the course they would themselves participate while I'm offering the course."

There's no standard for agreements between universities and the providers when MOOCs are created. Generally, the intellectual property questions are solved at each university, through discussions between university administrators and faculty or staff.

"As between edX and the university, the university owns the course content. Beyond that, it is a matter between the universities and their professors," said Tena Herlihy, general counsel of edX.

"The ownership issues have not been totally worked out, but I believe that the universities are working very closely with their professors on this."

Another key issue: deciding who pays for producing the courses. Many of them have proved costly - an estimated \$3,000 for each final produced hour of content, according to Kristin Palmer, the director of online learning programs at the University of Virginia. The expenses include teaching assistants, copyright clearances, filming, postproduction

editing and hardware.

At Penn, the solution is to share the ownership: The professor copyrights the content of the course, while the university owns the video. Then the parties license use for each other.

According to Edward Rock, a Penn professor who heads the university's open learning initiatives, a faculty member can go to work at a different university and "he or she can offer the course there - if they want to go through the trouble of making new videos."

In a recent report of its online-course campaign, the American Association of University Professors said higher education was in the middle of a fundamental change in faculty rights and academic freedom. It noted that "new developments occur almost weekly," making it difficult to stay ahead of the growing field of online learning.

"This is about controlling the destiny of what you create, what happens with the things you create," said Nelson, the former president of the association. "We think that is important, and if that is eliminated with MOOCs it will be done so with other things in the future."

For now, however, it's up to professors whether they want to create MOOCs.

"Faculty isn't forced," said Cathy Sandeen, of the American Council on Education. She pointed out that the issue of intellectual property was hardly new but one that institutions have negotiated for decades.

"Will MOOCs create a completely new variant that will change things or cause additional changes?" she asked. "It seems that it would be more of a variation of what's been occurring than some radical new change."

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