

Explainer: What is a small private online course?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you have studied an online course at a university over the past couple of decades, you've probably already experienced a SPOC, or Small Private Online Course. SPOC is a [new term](#) for an old concept, which appears to be [frustrating members of the distance education](#) community:

[SPOCs are] the kind of online courses that distance education institutions have been providing since the mid-90s! Who would have guessed that regular distance education methods would find favour in the educational mainstream so rapidly?!

To highlight just how frustrating the term is, I should note that the above quote features the first use of an interrobang (!?) I have ever seen in a peer-reviewed journal article.

The first two letters of SPOC are intentionally the opposite of the first two letters of MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course. MOOCs are massive, taught to thousands or tens of thousands of students at once, whereas SPOCs are small, and studied by tens or hundreds. MOOCs are open and free, whereas SPOCs are private and sometimes costly. Both are online courses.

But beyond acronyms, a SPOC is really just the sort of online course that has been offered in Australia and elsewhere for a couple of decades. MOOCs [were heralded as](#) "the end of higher education as we know it"; SPOCs are a continuation and expansion of what works in online learning. So why the sudden spike in interest in SPOCs?

A cynic might say that the SPOC phenomenon is really just Northern American elite universities [discovering online courses](#). The distance education community has been at this for a long time, and all the SPOC movement has contributed is a trendy name reminiscent of a [noted paediatrician](#) or a [Star Trek character](#).

The main difference between SPOCs and traditional online learning is where each camp traces their lineage. SPOCs are presented as both [the child of the MOOC and the MOOC's antidote](#); rather than being an evolution of decades of work in [distance education](#), they are something new and exciting.

So what do we gain from the term 'SPOC'?

It gives us cause to celebrate online teaching approaches that work well with a smaller group. SPOCs are online courses taught and assessed by [real people](#) mediated by the computer; not just programmed into the computer. This would appeal to the eponymous Mr Spock, [who stated](#):

Computers make excellent and efficient servants, but I have no wish to serve under them.

Whereas MOOCs must scale to practically infinite student numbers with no additional resources, SPOCs are usually resourced based on the number of enrolments. SPOCs achieve this through competitive application processes for limited places, or by charging a fee.

SPOC students can participate in feedback dialogues with their teachers; they can ask questions and expect a quality answer; and they can participate in activities that are facilitated by real people. More resources mean their work can be scrutinised and credentialled with more confidence. Pastoral care is even a possibility; if a MOOC is like an exercise bike, the SPOC adds a personal trainer.

But it is the MOOC DNA present in these new SPOCs that really distinguishes them from other online learning. Some SPOCs are being offered on the same slick systems used to provide MOOCs, rather than the tired-looking systems used in mainstream higher education. Others make use of MOOC-quality online video, rather than the lo-fi clips everyday lecturers are able to produce.

And much like MOOCs, many SPOCs are open to enrolment by members of the public. Rather than enrolling in an entire online degree, the SPOC movement has made single courses available online, anywhere.

So although strictly speaking SPOCs are nothing new, there is a qualitative difference between this new MOOC-inspired wave, and the bread-and-butter of online education.

Will SPOCs live long and prosper? As essentially online courses with a human touch, it is difficult to comprehend a future without SPOCs. Although I'd like to live in a future without the acronym, with its implication that small, private online courses are in any way new. The danger is that in considering the SPOC as a new phenomenon, its proponents may ignore the substantial work in online education that preceded it.

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