

Humans, the Latest MOOC Feature

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One of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's most popular massive open online courses is adding a feature not seen in any of its other humanities MOOCs: instructors grading essays.

Learners in [Introduction to Philosophy: God, Knowledge and Consciousness](#), which started on Monday, now have the option to have their essays graded and reviewed by real, flesh-and-blood philosophers -- in this first case, one of MIT's own graduate students. The goal, according to MIT, is twofold: to give learners from all over the world an introduction to basic philosophical topics and -- for those who pay \$300 for an identity-verified certificate -- an opportunity to improve their written argumentation skills and to experiment with new employment opportunities for philosophers.

The philosophy course, now in its third iteration, mirrors the development of MOOCs in general. When it first launched, it featured lecture videos and multiple-choice questions to test learners' reading comprehension. The second time around, it evolved by adding peer grading, where each learner evaluates a handful of papers written by course mates.

Teaching the MOOC has been a "marvelous experience," said Caspar Hare, the professor of philosophy who created it. Nearly 90,000 learners signed up during the first two runs. The discussion forums buzzed with debates about religion and free will. Yet Hare said he was left "feeling you could do more" -- referring to the lack of writing assignments.

"It's really central to the way you come to understand the field," Hare said. "I just don't think you can get rid of that."

Essay grading in MOOCs has been a tricky issue for institutions to solve. MOOCs can enroll tens of thousands of learners, which means assigning even a single essay will lead to more content than an instructor and a small army of teaching assistants can read, let alone give meaningful feedback on. EdX, the MOOC platform MIT helped found, has [piloted](#) automated essay grading, but the technology is not there yet (not to mention that some instructors, including Hare, are highly skeptical of it).

The model MIT is experimenting with in the philosophy MOOC keeps the automated elements already in place -- lecture videos and quizzes -- which are still available for free. Learners who are interested in instructor-graded writing assignments can pay to access that additional level of interaction. In most cases, only a fraction of MOOC learners opt for a certificate, making the workload much more manageable.

"You can still achieve scale through partially automating courses, but keeping some bits of human interaction that are really important, like the interaction between you and the person you are writing a paper to," Hare said. "There's no automating that."

Hare stressed that the model is still a work in progress, and that details may change. This time around, MIT is paying one of its philosophy graduate student to serve as a course facilitator. The facilitator will effectively run the MOOC, moderating the discussion forum and grading papers. Hare declined to say how much the facilitator is paid, but added that it is a flat fee and more than what an adjunct instructor is paid to teach a residential course at MIT.

If a large number of learners opt for the identity-verified certificate, the institute will use its own teaching assistants to help the facilitator with grading the papers. There is likely an upper limit to how many such learners the MOOC will enroll, though MIT has yet to determine how many it can accommodate, Hare said. The first writing assignment won't take place until later this month, and since learners don't immediately have to sign up for a certificate, the institute expects to get a clearer sense of the interest in instructor-graded writing assignments then.

Should the MOOC require grading help, the plan is for each TA to work with a set number of learners over the course of the MOOC's multiple writing assignments, which Hare said is intended to help them build relationships with the person to whom they are writing their essays.

If that model proves successful, MIT could in the future hire people with philosophy backgrounds from outside the institute to run the MOOCs, Hare said.

Together, the instructor-grading option and plans to hire facilitators are an effort to expand the base of the "funnel" of people who are able to enroll in or teach a philosophy course, Hare said. For some learners, the MOOC will be a one-off experience. Some will pay for the identity-verified certificate. A handful may even pursue a degree in philosophy as a result.

The \$300 price tag will still be a barrier to some learners, Hare said, but it is a product of trying to make the MOOC more affordable than a face-to-face course while also covering some of the costs of offering it. The price point may not work without the institute continuing to subsidize MOOCs, he added.

"There's going to have to be a lot of refining of the model and tinkering and trying to get it right, but something in the vicinity of this seems eminently doable to me," Hare said.