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Confessions of a MOOC professor: three things I learned and two things I worry about

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Author

John Covach

Director, Institute for Popular Music, University of Rochester

Disclosure statement

Could MOOCs transform higher ed? U.S. Army, CC BY

We have heard a lot of talk about MOOCs, or massive online open courses, over the last couple of years. On the plus side, MOOCs often draw enormous enrollments and are easy to sign up for and use; all you need, it seems, is an Internet connection and an interest to learn.

On the down side, they have significant attrition rates – about 90 percent of those enrolled never complete a course – and, according to their most alarmist critics, these courses may even threaten the jobs of college professors nationwide.

Indeed, despite the large dropout rate, MOOCs certainly end up serving a significant number of students. If the initial enrollment in a MOOC is 40,000 and only 4,000 actually complete the course, that's still a lot of students compared to a traditional classroom. A professor teaching four courses a year in classes with 30 students each would have to teach for more than 33 years to reach 4,000 students.

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It's true that if these courses ever caught on across the culture in a fundamental way, as many have been predicting, they could significantly transform higher education.
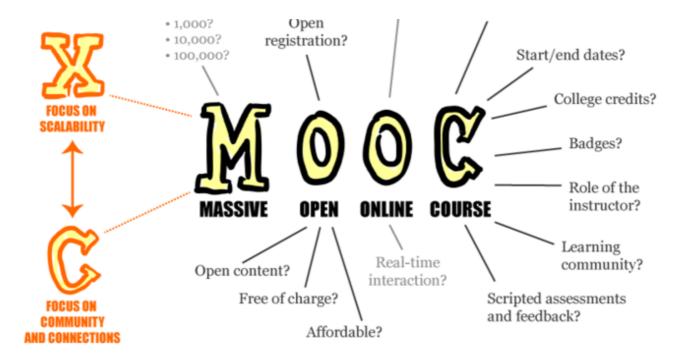
Amid all the kerfuffle, and based on having taught [several courses](#) for Coursera over the past two years (and more than 250,000 students worldwide), I have learned a few things that cause me to both hope and worry about the future of higher education as we have known it for the last several decades.

The three things I learned

- MOOC students are mostly older than college students

Roughly two-thirds of my students have been over the age of 25. Admittedly, I teach courses on the history of rock music, which might tend to attract older students. But my numbers are not much different from Coursera's numbers generally.

When we think about college courses, we assume the students are age 18-24, since that's the usual age at which one gets an undergraduate degree. There are a significant number of people out there, however, who are interested in continuing to learn later in life.

What is
massive?
• 100?

Local
cohorts?

Self-paced?

Students who take MOOC courses tend to be older and are mostly international. Mathieu Plourde, CC BY

Continuing education courses at colleges and universities have served that public to a certain degree, but it is clear that there is more demand among older students than many might have suspected. Given the chance to learn according to their own schedule and location, many find this option very attractive.

- MOOC students are mostly international and already college-educated

Only about a third of my students live in the United States. The rest come from more than 150 countries around the world. This percentage of international students is consistent with other Coursera MOOCs.

Interestingly, a majority have already earned at least a bachelor's degree, with a significant number also holding a master's or Ph.D. degree. While others are seeking skills that will help advance their careers, many of these students are learning simply for the fun of it.

Our surveys have shown that most are very satisfied with the courses – they are an older, well-educated and international cohort of students who believe in MOOCs.

- MOOC culture is mostly a "free" culture

As with music on the web, MOOC students expect the courses to be free, or very close to it. If each of the 250,000 students who enrolled in my courses had to pay even a dollar for the course, the numbers would fall significantly – probably by as much as 90 percent.

Most people would be willing to pay only for the credential that the course offers. A course with no credential has got to be free if enrollment is going to be massive.

My courses offer a free option that provides students with a statement of completion they can print out. Many have expressed great pride in earning this modest credential: they post them on Facebook.

Two things I worry about

- The flattening of expertise

In an online world that counts Wikipedia as a trusted resource, the expertise of the university professor can no longer be guaranteed to win the day. Scholars may argue that Wikipedia must be used with caution, but that's not the way everyone else sees it.

Some of my students use Wikipedia and other online sources very effectively. The democratic access to information that digital technology facilitates flattens the hierarchy of expertise: a university professor's claim to superior expertise is no longer unquestioned.

- Alternative modes of awarding credentials

The rise of badges and certificates makes it possible for students to earn an alternative credential to university credits and degrees. Universities can argue all day long about whether or not an online course is equivalent to a traditional one, but if alternative credentials come to be acknowledged by employers as useful in assessing a candidate's skills and preparation, and if students value them, this is in many ways a moot point.

And when older, more experienced students have a satisfactory experience with a MOOC, the validity of this form of learning and the credential it provides increases within the culture.

Finally, it is difficult to control the validity of such credentials outside of the United States. Just because some American employers may be wary

of an online credential does not mean that all employers are.

- The threat to colleges and universities

College and universities "sell" an education. The price they can charge for this product depends to a great extent on the fact that they have an almost exclusive ability to grant credentials, based partly on a culture that acknowledges that university faculty possess superior expertise.

How will the online transfer of knowledge change higher ed? ashley cooper, CC BY

But if the culture embraces the idea that there are other valid sources of expertise, then universities are in for a severe downturn in business. This will not be the case in all areas of education, but it certainly will spell trouble in many of them.

We can no longer expect to be the only viable alternative for education and training. This is maybe not the end of college as much as the end of an educational monopoly.

Some colleges will fail.

What can be done?

Colleges and universities must work to secure their claim to superior expertise, not within the ivory tower but within the culture at large. MOOCs are very useful in spreading the word about the fantastic thinking and teaching that goes on inside of universities.
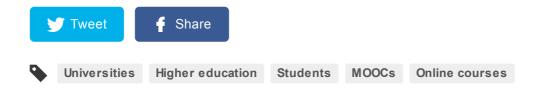
The public should know more about what we do – they need to be invited in. Schools also must make certain that the credentials they provide really are the best preparations for success, and, just as importantly, that they are perceived this way among the general public.

We also should stop thinking of higher education primarily in terms of American students between the ages of 18 and 24.

In a world that will surely introduce significant and substantial competition in many areas of education very soon, universities must act now.

Consider this: Napster, the online music store, was introduced in the year 1999. In the 16 years since, the music business has been transformed by file sharing in ways that have been quick and deep. Nobody could have predicted it then.

Higher education must be sure it is not the same kind of victim of change. Let us not fiddle while Rome burns.
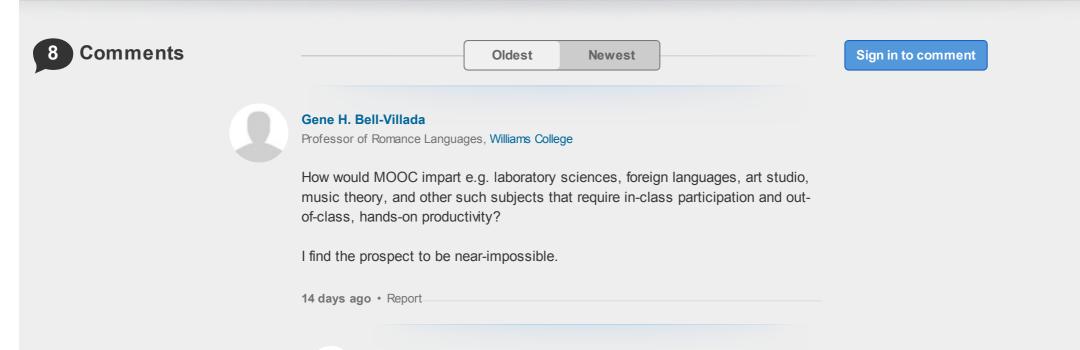
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Gene H. Bell-Villada
Professor of Romance Languages, Williams College

How would MOOC impart e.g. laboratory sciences, foreign languages, art studio, music theory, and other such subjects that require in-class participation and out-of-class, hands-on productivity?

I find the prospect to be near-impossible.

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Gene H. Bell-Villada
Professor of Romance Languages, Williams College

In reply to Gene H. Bell-Villada

I would also add mathematics and computer science to my above list.

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