

MOOCs Are "Dead." What's Next? Uh-oh.

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In 2012 Sebastian Thrun, founder of Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) provider Udacity [told *Wired* magazine](#) that in 50 years, there would be only 10 higher education institutions in the world and Udacity had a “shot” at being one of them.

In 2012, Thrun was honored with a *Smithsonian* magazine American Ingenuity Award for Education. <https://blog.udacity.com/2012/11/sebastian-thrun-wins-smithsonian.html>

By 2013 Thrun, concerned that fewer than 10% of original enrollees were completing their Udacity courses, declared that Udacity offered a “[lousy product](#).”

Though, later in the same article in which he assailed his own product, he offered a different rationale for Udacity’s shortcomings. Remarking on a failed pilot integrating Udacity MOOCs into math instruction at San Jose State University, [Thrun said](#), “These were students from difficult neighborhoods, without good access to computers, and with all kinds of challenges in their lives. It’s a group for which this medium is not a good fit.”

In 2015 the *New York Times* [reports](#) “that after years of trial and error, [Udacity] has hit on a model of vocational training that can be scaled up to teach millions of people technical skills.” We’re talking nanodegrees in partnership with corporations. h

Just last week, Udacity declared an intention to move away entirely from open access courses. Company Vice President Clarissa Shen said MOOCs “are dead.”

“Our mission is to bring relevant education which advances people in careers and socio-economic activities, and MOOCs aren’t the way.”

From transforming all of higher ed to [targeted corporate training](#) in five short years.

Who could’ve predicted such a fate?

Lots of people, it turns out. Audrey Watters was [“debunking”](#) the MOOC hype not long after *Smithsonian* magazine was giving Thrun his ingenuity award.

And look, there’s [yours truly](#) expressing some healthy skepticism over Thomas Friedman’s MOOC boosterism in 2013.

I feel so smart, all of the sudden, except that this wasn’t a tough call, even back in 2013.

The roots of Udacity’s failure are in the word “product” and their belief that an educational “product” could possibly transform education.

Audrey Watters has produced a [timeline of “teaching machines,”](#) products that have failed to transform education for almost two centuries. Maybe Udacity isn’t strictly a teaching “machine” except the mentality of its designers suggest they view their platform this way. They believed that the platform itself could deliver “education,” rather than recognizing that the education is not a product but a process, one that happens (or not) inside of those being

educated. Udacity seems to view learning like a virus. As long as you're in close enough proximity to an educational product, you will learn.

Even as one fad fades, another has taken its place, "personalized learning." The term is used in a lot of different contexts and has roots in the progressive education movement (think Maria Montessori), but in the educational product realm, we're talking about "adaptive software."

Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg are two of its champions, and by champions I mean modern oligarchs who will open their checkbooks to push the [policies they prefer](#).

Does it work?

Who knows? Maybe? On some things? It depends?

A recently released Rand Corporation [report](#) funded by the Gates Foundation finds some gains in math and reading scores. To the extent one believes these scores meaningful as measures of learning – and I don't^[1] – perhaps this is a promising sign.

But Doug Levin of Ed Tech Strategies flags an [interesting finding](#) from the same report.

Students in personalized learning programs enjoy school less, feel less comfortable in school, are less likely to feel safe in school, and less likely to say there is an adult in school that knows them well.

We know already that students are feeling more isolated and alienated from their schooling. A majority of students report being either [not engaged or actively disengaged](#) from school.

Early reports suggest personalized learning will make this worse. How could it not?

The progressive education roots of "personalized education" expressed a need for students to experience personal agency in the context of their schooling. The idea was not to customize lessons for students, but for students to customize the lessons for themselves. It also emphasized the social aspect of learning, something inevitably lost when personalized learning means directing students to screens and software.

We also know the importance of relationships to learning. The Gallup-Purdue index on higher education found students who had a "mentor who encouraged me to pursue my hopes and dreams" during college were over twice as likely to be engaged at their post-graduate work.

We have a generation of students - successful students - who openly declare, "[I love learning; I hate school.](#)"

Where Udacity was trying to disrupt an existing higher ed market, their plans hinging on the phantasm of the "University of Everywhere," adaptive software providers have a [nice trough of public funds](#) to sup from, including money specifically earmarked in the recently signed Every Student Succeeds Act.

Personalized learning software will be galloping through schools as our latest teaching machine savior before we have any evidence of its effects.

Strapped public school districts welcome Gates and Zuckerberg money no matter what strings are attached because they are desperate. Gates alone [has put \\$15 billion](#) into education initiatives since 1998.

But both Gates and Zuckerberg have legacies of only failure when it comes to meddling in education.

The generosity is great, but the average oligarch's understanding of the complexities of education is near nil. Combine that with the kind of hype cycle we see with technology of just about any stripe, and we could be looking at some very bad unintended consequences.

Udacity was truly limited by its failure to impact a marketplace. Adaptive software has a much more welcoming host.

How much money will be wasted on this latest fad?