

December 17, 2015

Greetings!

A couple of weeks ago, I attended a conference at George Washington University that focused on the use of [OpenEdX](#) as a platform for MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course). Like all such conferences, there was an interesting mix of vendors, MOOC instructors, online educators, and administrators from a wide variety of institutions. The preconference chatter and discussions ranged from the different online learning experiences in our own home institutions, to preferred digital platforms and the future of online education. While at the conference, I had the extra pleasure of speaking with [Paul-Olivier Dehaye](#), a University of Zurich math professor who engaged in an interesting, if not controversial, experiment with Coursera a year ago. (Please read about the [experiment here](#).)

Whenever MOOC platforms are discussed, a common topic is the comparative advantages/disadvantages of platforms like OpenEdX and [Coursera](#). As you likely know, Vanderbilt has thus far utilized Coursera as the platform for our MOOCs, though we run a number of online initiatives on campus through other platforms, including a substantial online program in the [School of Nursing](#). At this conference, it became clear that the largest issue about platform choice rests on whether they are open- or closed-source.

OpenEdX is an open-source platform (hence the name!), meaning that users have access to the source-code through a free license and, therefore, users like Vanderbilt, can program the platform to optimize for our particular needs. Coursera is based on a closed-source model, denoting that, while small adjustments can be made to how a course is run, only Coursera's engineers can access the code and alter the functioning of the platform. There are clear benefits to each model: for instance, one model facilitates adaptability and the other is easier to use straight-off-the-shelf.

Another element pertaining to platform choice is the degree that the educational institution is marketed as the driving force behind the courses. When we offer a MOOC, is it seen as being a "Vanderbilt" MOOC or does it appear to be more of a "Coursera" or "OpenEdX" MOOC? While branding by a platform generally provides access to a large global audience, the "source" university often becomes something of a forgotten partner. While such branding does not alter the content of a course, it is important, in the long run, that Vanderbilt MOOCs are associated with our world-class instructors teaching the courses.

The upshot is this: there are multiple questions to consider as we think through the options in front of us. It appears evident that diversifying our platforms to develop "experts" for each platform provides us with varying experiences and ways to test different platforms for various usage styles. It is likely that Vanderbilt will initiate platform diversification as one way of maintaining our investment in an online presence.

While it already seems like we have been in the 'online education' game for quite a while, these remain, in some very important ways, the early days of MOOCs. The questions raised at this conference are sure to be very different than the questions raised in one, two, or ten years from now. That said, the more we are involved in the discussion, the more Vanderbilt shapes the questions that will be asked, and the way these discussions will evolve.

I very much look forward to watching the future unfold and shaping that future along the way.



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