

May 16, 2016

Greetings!

While scrolling through my Facebook feed the other day, I saw that one of my friends was making an observation about MOOCs that is not uncommon: “Remember when,” he said, “we were told [that] MOOCs were going to change the entire university system? Turns out that they’ve done nothing and disappeared.” I almost jumped in and offered a response. However, I realized I would be fighting a losing battle to challenge every person who made such a claim. While it is clear that we are in the so called “trough of disillusionment” as far as MOOCs go, opinions will only change as the fruits of our current efforts take effect in the university setting of the future.

Today I offer a few thoughts on the ways in which MOOCs continue to shake up or transform education, both at the margins and increasingly toward the center, although perhaps not in the ways we originally expected. Below I provide a few passing comments on what MOOCs didn’t do, what they have done, and what they might do in the future.

1. *The MOOC revolution did not occur as predicted.* Part of the reason we have MOOC disillusionment, of course, is that early claims were overly optimistic and overly revolutionary. Honestly, this is often the case with the establishment of new technologies and digital approaches. After only a few years, the claims that the world could be educated “for free,” and that universities with walls would come crumbling down, are somewhat cringe inducing. While it is true that many universities have found ways to host their basic courses online or have built flipped or hybrid classrooms, we also have seen a strong reaffirmation for face-to-face, synchronous meetings with students. At least until technological advances displace the benefits of synchronous learning—and that will likely be some time—MOOCs will continue to shape education, but not in an overnight, revolutionary fashion.
2. *The MOOC evolution is occurring in unforeseen ways.* In some sense, the movement of MOOCs from an idealistic state of “educating the earth for free” to something a little different (perhaps, educate some of the earth for free but find ways to monetize this education) should have been predicted from the outset. Running MOOCs and improving the platforms obviously takes a great deal of capital, and the only way to cover those investments is to produce revenue streams. As a result, almost all of the platforms have found ways to produce revenue. Platforms from Udacity to Coursera offer a variety of levels of certification for the traditional MOOCs (indeed, Coursera now requires that students must be given the option of paying for the lowest level of certification) and have begun offering specializations and closed courses with much higher buy-in rates. In short, what was once seen as a playground for free courses has evolved into a diversified platform of a range of courses—some free, some (mostly) revenue free, and some most definitely designed and marketed for revenue. That said, the changes are ongoing for all of us. It is likely best if I put it this way:
3. *The MOOC evolution is poised to continue to transform how Vanderbilt educates students and reaches learners in the future.* So, taking a look at where VU is and where we might go: while we remain committed to hosting a traditional MOOC from each of our undergraduate and professional schools, we have also initiated a series of other projects. The Owen School of Management is producing a closed course (i.e., you can only enroll for a fee) on Management Fundamentals. The Law

School is currently considering the development of a number of courses similar in nature. How will these MOOCs change education? On the one hand, Vanderbilt MOOCs reach a world-wide audience, establishing a fragmented global village of accessible learning and scholarship. However, each time we produce a MOOC or develop online content, we learn more about the production of quality online education that can advance learning on our campus. We now know more than ever before about how to reach students and design online assignments. With the advances in online pedagogy, we are imagining ways to offer, for example, select summer courses to our full-time students who live off-campus during the summer. We are also considering the production of online content to introduce prospective students to Vanderbilt, the development of voluntary online courses for students, and the creation of coursework that is designed for the local community. The point is, MOOCs are not transforming education by just being MOOCs; they are transforming education by sparking our imaginations to consider what is possible, who our audience might be, and the meaning of a classroom and the digital commons.

Ultimately, those not involved directly in educational technology may be collectively disillusioned by MOOCs. But, we are not. We are simply in a period of adjusting and reimagining what we mean by online education and our path forward.



John M. Sloop
Associate Provost for Digital Learning