

MASSIVE Open Online Courses

By Shawn Graham

Are we all going to lose our jobs? Will digital media finally do to education what it has done to newspapers and music? Will there only be, in fifty years' time, ten universities left in the world?¹

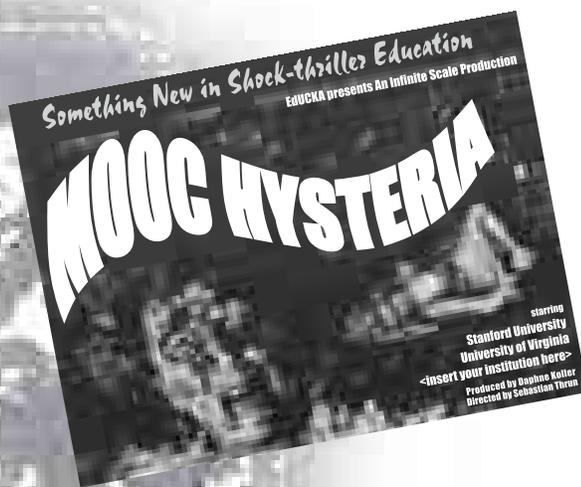
That was a bold prediction to make. To listen to the hype, it would seem that the idea of a MOOC – a so-called *massively open online course* – appeared fully formed in 2012 and its dominance seemed assured. Their most famous proponents have been Sebastian Thrun, a computer science professor from Stanford and founder of Udacity (and prophet of universities' doom), and Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng, again computer science professors from Stanford and co-founders of Coursera.

What we all call 'MOOCs' were originally developed in Canada, and were once very different creatures. Conventionally, one can differentiate between the two kinds as xMOOCs and cMOOCs. cMOOCs (connectivist-style) attracted some attention, until they were overshadowed by xMOOCs, the venture-capital corporatized versions, to the point where few remember the earlier kind. In 2008 George Siemens and Stephen Downes developed a course at the University of Manitoba built on a connectivist philosophy of teaching enabling students to build personal learning environments from online tools, which then became connected in an online ecosystem (the container of the course). This opened up their course from the students at U Manitoba to a wider engaged group of about 2000 individuals. The history of the emergence of cMOOCs and their eclipsing by xMOOCs is covered by Audrey Watters, a well-known observer of key trends in higher education, in her address to the Ed-Tech Innovation conference in Alberta.²

What would these new-style xMOOCs do? Why, they'll solve the problems of access to university! They'd bring the best (Western) superprofessors to the rest of the world to lecture over video! Students will teach themselves! But most importantly, from an administrative point of view, they'd save money:

*How can this lead to cost reductions? The savings can accrue rapidly if the course is massively enrolled and subsections are taught by less well-paid individuals; or if the course lasts several years and the designers and lead professor may be paid over time.*³

These new xMOOCs are a kind of techno-solutionism, where the key issue is not, 'how can we use technology to help students learn,' but rather, 'how can I build a platform that can scale up.' They naturally seem to be an excellent solution to the problem of costs, for which we employ administrators to solve, and which is why administrators are far more excited about them than those who teach. But these platforms are not value-neutral, and they reify various power relations. They make the learners fit the technology, rather than the technology to fit the learners. They literally turn



students into passive consumers. There's also the whiff of colonialism too in the suggestion that western *superprofessors* (whoever and whatever that may be: who decides?) will impart their wisdom to the grateful masses in the rest of the world.

But they have already failed. 'Never mind the high attrition rates,' say their proponents, 'we just had the wrong kind of students.'⁴ 'No you can't have the answers to the questions because then I couldn't reuse the questions.'⁵ Indeed, many students who enroll in MOOCs already have college degrees and don't really need whatever credential it is a MOOC might offer.⁶

In terms of pedagogy or use of technology, there is nothing uniquely 'new' about MOOCs, as we have come to know them since 2012. However, when used properly, my view is that a MOOC is really a challenge to *publishers* rather than teachers. A MOOC is better thought of as a multi-modal text book. Like text books, a certain percentage of the population who uses them can learn from them. But most learners need far more than a text book, more than prepackaged videos, or machine graded multiple choice questions. Publishers like Pearson are getting into the MOOC sphere for a reason.⁷ Despite their purported openness, MOOCs fail anyone who cannot learn in that fashion. In terms of their technology, MOOCs are doing nothing more

¹ Steven Leckart, "The Stanford Education Experiment Could Change Higher Learning Forever," *Wired*, March 20, 2012, http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2012/03/ff_aiclass/3/.

² Audrey Watters, "Ed-Tech #Edinnovation," *Hack Education*, May 4, 2013, <http://hackeducation.com/2013/05/04/ed-tech-argo-f-k-yourself/>.

³ Roseanne Runte, "Education on the computer model: faster, more efficient, customized," *Globe and Mail*, June 4, 2013.

⁴ Steve Kolowich, "San Jose State U. Puts MOOC Project with Udacity on Hold," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 19, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/San-Jose-State-U-Puts-MOOC/140459/> They didn't have access to computers or the internet, for one thing.

⁵ Ry Rivard, "No Right Answers," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 5, 2013, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/05/one-mooc-professor-wont-let-students-know-right-answers>.

⁶ Steve Kolowich, "A University's Offer of Credit for a MOOC Gets No Takers," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept 27, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Universities-Offer-of-Credit/140131/>.

⁷ A. Watters, "Top Ed-Tech Trends of 2012: MOOCs," *Hack Education*, December 3, 2012, <http://hackeducation.com/2012/12/03/top-ed-tech-trends-of-2012-moocs/>.

innovative than what for-profit online organizations like the University of Phoenix or Grand Canyon University (where I once worked) have been doing for years.

The pedagogical shortcomings of having massive numbers of students being 'taught' by a talking head in a youtube video, coupled with multiple choice questions and unmoderated discussion forums, with un-assessed coursework⁸ do not need belabouring, especially for anyone who has spent any time in a classroom. The rejection by San Jose State's Philosophy Department of a Harvard MOOC meant to teach social justice, circulated in an open letter this past spring, was an eloquent repudiation of not just the 'teaching' done with MOOCs, but also their philosophical underpinnings. In an ironic twist, for a course meant to be about social justice, the authors of the letter wrote,

"[...]We fear that two classes of universities will be created: one, well-funded colleges and universities in which privileged students get their own real professor; the other, financially stressed private and public universities in which students watch a bunch of videotaped lectures and interact, if indeed any interaction is available on their home campuses, with a professor that this model of education has turned into a glorified teaching assistant."

As Jonathan Rees, a history professor at Colorado State and a trenchant critic of MOOCs has pointed out, even their most ardent supporters have started to try to dampen the hype in the light of the backlash, referring to the Gartner Hype Cycle.⁹ He goes on to say,

"When administrations have given faculty members the freedom to innovate and teach how they see fit, great things have happened. Where that hasn't happened, David Noble's digital diploma mills¹⁰ persist. What separates that first scenario from the second scenario is power."

Power. This is why we, as a discipline, have to engage with what is happening in the online education world. My own students often say to me, 'I got into history so I wouldn't have to deal with computers!'; but that is to abdicate responsibility to the digital media companies, to computer science departments, to administrators casting about for a solution.

⁸ To say nothing about cheating.

⁹ Jonathan Rees, "The MOOC hype cycle is older than you think," *More or Less Bunk*, September 19, 2013, <http://moreorlessbunk.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/the-mooc-hype-cycle-is-older-than-you-think/>.

¹⁰ David Noble, *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

¹¹ Bernard Fryshman, "Books are MOOCs, Too," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 2, 2013, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/08/02/let-us-count-ways-books-and-moocs-are-alike-essay>.

¹² Börner, Katy, David Polley, *Scott Weingart Information Visualization MOOC*, Indiana University, <http://ivmooc.cns.iu.edu/>.

¹³ Scott Weingart, "On MOOCs," *The Scottbot Irregular*, <http://www.scottbot.net/HIAL/?p=35306>.

¹⁴ Shawn Graham, Ian Milligan, and Scott Weingart, *The Historian's Macroscope*, <http://themascope.org>.

But it's a solution to the wrong problem. Access to education, the efficient allotting of dollars to allow whatever it is we do in teaching to happen, are serious issues, but they are not the problems that MOOCs are best suited to solve. The correct problem for which a MOOC might be an answer, is, 'how can we get people to engage with our scholarly academic output?' More prosaically, how do we get people to read what we write? The correct venue for the MOOC-like platform (and clearly a new acronym will be needed), is to rethink what the *book* could be.¹¹

My collaborator, Scott Weingart, is a PhD student of the history of science who with Katy Börner, and David Polley, have used open source tools from Google to cobble together their own independent platform to offer a free course on information visualization.¹² Weingart's view on MOOCs, after having designed, built, and run one, is,

"[...]if designed and utilized correctly, MOOCs can lead to classroom augmentations and in fact can be designed in a way that they can no more be used to replace classrooms than massively-distributed textbooks can.... In short, we offer the MOOC as a free and open textbook, not as a classroom replacement. Within the classroom, we use it as a tool for augmenting instruction. For those who choose to do assignments, and perform well on them with their student teams, we acknowledge their good work with a badge rather than a university credit. The fear that MOOCs will necessarily automate teachers away is no more well-founded than the idea that textbooks-and-standardized-tests would; further, if administrators choose to use MOOCs for this purpose, they are no more justified in doing this than they would be justified in replacing teachers with textbooks."¹³

Whatever else MOOCs might do, they have put online learning firmly on administrators' agendas, with their promise of develop once, launch, and forget (the learning will take care of itself, and look at us, we have a MOOC!) But we as a discipline need to be articulating clearly what MOOCs can and cannot do, and how they might fit in a broader ecosystem, as Weingart has done. What if the publishing branches of our scholarly societies published online versions of our books and papers that featured videos of the authors talking about the ideas in each chapter, each section? What if the discussion forums could be places where different classes using the book – and the wider public – could come together to discuss these ideas? What if your book could reach thousands of people who were engaged in conversation with not just each other, but also with you? What if we took seriously the ideals of a cMOOC, and used that to turn our discipline inside-out? Scott Weingart, Ian Milligan, and I are engaged in just that kind of experiment as we *write* our book on an open platform, allowing our readers to engage with us at the level of the individual paragraph.¹⁴ As experiments go, this one might not work out the way we have planned, but the techno-solutionists are right about one thing: digital media are disrupting the way we have done things in the past. We need to get in front of that disruption to guide it to where it might do the most good, rather than harm. It's too important to leave to administration and venture capitalists.