MOOCs and the Quality Question

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By Ronald Legon

Overnight, MOOCs -- with free tuition for all, attracting unprecedented enrollments reaching into the hundreds of thousands, and the involvement of world-class faculty -- have captured the imagination of the press, public and even legislators looking for ways to expand the availability of higher education at minimal cost.

But thus far little attention has been paid to the quality of MOOCs. Quality in online learning can be defined in many ways: quality of content, quality of design, quality of instructional delivery, and, ultimately, quality of outcomes. On the face of it, the organizing principles of MOOCs are at odds with widely observed best practices in online education, including those advocated by my organization, the Quality Matters Program. Many of the first MOOCs are providing quality of content, but are far behind the curve in providing quality of design, accountable instructional delivery, or sufficient resources to help the vast majority of students achieve a course's intended learning outcomes.

Previous nontraditional forms of education have been greeted by widespread skepticism and required to prove themselves, over an extended period of time, as worthy alternatives to traditional classroom education.

In contrast, the early MOOCs appear to have been given a free ride. With Stanford and Harvard professors leading the way, the assumption seems to be that those at the top of the educational pyramid would not only deliver the best content, but also know best how to teach more effectively online than do faculty and staff at lesser institutions.

This assumed connection between content expertise and a mature grasp of the challenges of online teaching, however, has not been demonstrated in MOOCs.

The first wave of MOOCs (MOOC 1.0) were designed by faculty from elite institutions that, ironically, had largely ignored online learning as an acceptable approach for their own students. They chose to model their MOOCs on successful lecture courses rather than consult the hard-won knowledge of effective strategies for delivering courses in this

new medium, as developed at hundreds of two- and four-year colleges and universities over the past 20 years.

The result is a format that may be effective for the bright self-starter, who can work independently and is focused on his or her own educational goals. On the other hand, the format is strikingly unsuited for encouraging and sustaining the average or challenged student, who requires the instructor to establish clear, measurable objectives, engage students individually and with their peers, monitor progress and hold students to deadlines and performance benchmarks, provide regular feedback on their work, and encourage their efforts on an almost daily basis.

MOOC 1.0 incorporates many features of established credit-based online courses, but differs in a number of critical ways. Students must register to gain access, but while the absence of standards for admission or prerequisite knowledge requirements generates massive enrollment, it also results in a mix of students, from the highly qualified to those without the basic knowledge or skills to move past the opening lessons of the course. There is a set schedule, start and end dates, and due dates for assignments, but no attempt to require students to observe this calendar. While MOOCs offer an array of exercises and activities, often quite well-designed, the exercises are usually machine-graded or self-assessed, devoid of contact with or feedback from an instructor. Some MOOCs have student discussion boards, but they are not monitored or guided by qualified instructors, and the task of keeping discussions relevant and shared information accurate is crowdsourced by the students themselves.

Since they do not carry academic credit and are not selective, MOOC 1.0 courses take no responsibility for learning results. While acknowledging that these courses lack the full apparatus of credit courses, their sponsors try to have the best of both worlds by inviting other colleges, universities, and organizations to supplement MOOCs and award academic credit by whatever means they choose. But without fully integrating the monitoring, engagement, and evaluation of students with content delivery, even the best intended retrofitting of MOOCs to approximate college courses is too little, too late for the mainstream student.

The deficiencies in the first generation of MOOCs would not matter so much if the courses were intended to fill a sink-or-swim niche in higher education, where it might be acceptable that only a small fraction of enrolled students (commonly 10 percent or less) finish and earn certificates of completion. What makes the lack of a structure to support the typical college student (regardless of age) alarming is the claim made by some advocates (and increasingly embraced by legislators in some states as a policy solution) that MOOCs can replace college-based credit courses, expanding access to higher education and dramatically reducing its costs.

Early responses to MOOC 1.0 within the academic community have been ambivalent. Leaving aside the threat of their students being lured away by the siren call of MOOCs, what are most institutions and faculty to make of free courses that are not accepted for credit at the home institution of the star faculty teaching them, courses without prerequisites or any form of screening to assure that students possess requisite prior

knowledge, lack of accessible instructors, measurable objectives, or grades, and with completion rates averaging around 10 percent? What credit course, program, or academic institution would be allowed to survive with that kind of student completion rate?

Nevertheless, in the past year, many traditional institutions have committed to building MOOCs of their own, or developing ways of enticing MOOC takers into their own online programs by offering to validate and award credit for MOOC credentials.

This response is not based on the track record of MOOC 1.0 beyond its proven ability to attract large numbers of students, most of whom never complete. Many institutions wish to be part of the conversation on an educational phenomenon that has attracted so much attention and may have as yet incalculable consequences for higher education. They also see new opportunities to attract investment in their distance learning efforts by state and private funders. Whatever the motivation, however, their involvement is bound to change the very nature of MOOCs.

Enter MOOC 2.0

As the complex and contradictory reactions to first-generation MOOCs within academia play out, we are seeing the emergence of a second generation of MOOCs. Investments are being made by leading foundations, state agencies, and institutions themselves to build MOOC 2.0 courses that focus on the typical student, integrate more effectively with established distance and on-ground programs, and lead to trustworthy credentials.

These courses, sponsored in most cases by institutions with track records in effective distance education, will experiment with some enrollment restrictions, reachable instructors and facilitators, clarity about fees for enhanced services and evaluation, and more tangible guarantees of credit or recognition for those students who successfully complete.

Thus, the potential exists that MOOC 2.0 will evolve to incorporate many of the best practices of distance learning. The best MOOC 2.0 courses may turn out to be "hybrids" that combine the characteristics of quality online courses with a lower threshold for risk-free exploration, enabling them to reach more online learners and stimulate them to further their education. We should encourage and welcome this trend.

As the MOOC concept evolves, it is becoming more difficult to define a MOOC or distinguish among a growing jumble of similar acronyms that emphasize different characteristics. MOOC 1.0 may survive as originally conceived – massive and open – as a means of sharing and exchanging cutting-edge knowledge with the best and brightest students.

But the millions of more typical students, who need guidance, encouragement, and frequent feedback to achieve their academic and career goals, will still rely on the infrastructure, services, and resources of academic institutions to succeed. These are the institutions that do now and will continue in the future to educate massive numbers of students. MOOC 2.0 has the potential to add a useful tool to their kits.

The promise of MOOC 2.0 is that by adopting proven strategies that promote success for the average or challenged student, MOOCs may give a boost to the already productive distance education movement by attracting more students and providing a low threshold means of entering online study.

The paradox is that the next generation of MOOCs may no longer possess the features that initially attracted the attention of the public and the media.

Bio

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