

ISSN 1883-7409 (print)

ISSN 1884-0184 (on-line)



*Outside the Box:
A Multi-Lingual
Forum*

Volume 10, Issue 1

Winter, 2020

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The OTB Forum: A Multi-Lingual Forum

Volume 10, Issue 1

December 1, 2020

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www.otbforum.net

ISSN 1883-7409 (print)

ISSN 1884-0184 (on-line)



MOOCs: A Failed Revolution?

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Abstract: *In 2012, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) were hailed as the educational revolution that would mean the true democratization and accessibility of post-secondary education for all. People spoke of MOOCs replacing the traditional brick-and-mortar universities. Yet, there were problems. The course completion rates were low, and users complained of the lack of active human interaction in the courses. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the tide seems to have turned, and the MOOCs are regaining their spotlight. The author argues that MOOCs were not a failed educational revolution, but that a hybrid of online and face-to-face education may have a place in the future of higher education.*

Keywords: MOOCs, online education, Khan Academy, qualifications, University of the People, learning is social

How many of us will still be employed in a decade or two? Or perhaps less? As we eagerly anticipate the age of self-driving cars and the use of virtual reality in our everyday lives, we temporarily forget what this could mean for our working population—a massive loss of jobs. College graduates may find their education useless, because the computers have automated the job sector they would have gone into otherwise.

Students often choose their majors and invest in a four-year college education to secure themselves a reliable income upon graduation. They could have entered the workforce after graduating from high school, but many of us still believe that a college degree will lead us to a better job with a better pay. Otherwise, who would be willing to take out loans to pay for an education if it does not guarantee us a job that enable us to pay back the loans and make a living? Yet, we know that many college graduates are either unemployed or underemployed (Cappelli, 2015) and they are looking for ways to improve their lives. It is with this background that the field of online learning exploded, and the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other means of learning online sprang up.

At the time of this writing, the outbreak of Covid-19 has dramatically changed people's lives. The full impact of the pandemic is still unknown. Many universities' classes have been forced to go online. Students are reconsidering their college edu-

cation, because for many, paying full tuition for zoom classes was not what they had in mind (Colyar et al., 2000). It is with these changes that we are now seeing a renewed interest in online education and MOOCs. *The New York Times* reported that “[m]illions of adults have signed up for online classes in the last two months” and that it “could signal a renaissance for big online learning networks that had struggled for years” (Deming, 2020). While there are those who argue that online-education should not replace in-person education (Deming, 2004), the pandemic is, for better or worse, changing the university education as we know it. In this paper, I discuss the implications that MOOCs have in our education and where they could lead us to in the future. I then conclude by suggesting that while MOOCs may not completely replace higher education, blended learning can expand the potential of what MOOCs can offer and improve lives of those seeking a better career.

The Year of the MOOCs

2012 was “the year of the MOOCs”, as declared by *The New York Times*. MOOCs can be found on learning platforms such as Edx (established by Harvard and MIT), Coursera (established by two professors from Stanford University), Udacity (started by a former professor from Stanford University), and Futurelearn (established by the Open University in the U.K.), all founded in the same year, 2012. Initially, there was hope and expectation that MOOCs would signify a revolution in education (Friedman, 2013). People from lower social economic status

Momokawa, S. (2020). MOOCs: A failed revolution? *OTB Forum*, 10(1), 17-22.

would have access to education, and with that a way out of poverty and a better future. L. Rafael Reif, the current president of M.I.T., pronounced that the concept of a degree would no longer be associated with “bricks and mortar” but would be “a new world unfolding” (Friedman, 2013). People seeking a university degree would be able to pick and choose their courses from professors teaching in the best schools. They could put together their own portfolio that would amount to a degree from one university. This will all be at a lower cost than the cost of pursuing a degree on-campus, because they can all be done online. Students will no longer have to shoulder a loan they may never be able to repay, or their parents sacrificing their retirement savings for their children. It seemed as though the doors were opening for those who in the past could not have imagined receiving a higher education. In 1961, President Kennedy issued the affirmative action (“A Brief History of Affirmative Action,” n.d.), and now MOOCs seemed like the next step toward equal educational opportunity for all, not just racially, but financially.

Criticisms Regarding MOOCs

However, criticisms gradually began to appear that challenged the notion of the MOOCs changing the course of higher education. Understandably, among the criticisms were voices from university professors, who feared that their jobs may be replaced entirely by online lectures, delivered by the ivy league professors. One professor voiced his concern of becoming a “second-class citizen” or “teaching assistants” if the universities were to use such lectures as part of their curriculum (Lewin, 2013). Another described it as a “Walmart of higher education” to point out the MOOCs “standardless standardization” that transforms it into a global, monocultural product (Deneen, 2013). Critics of the MOOCs pointed out that not only professors would suffer, but also students. They may have access to the lectures given by famous professors (i.e., Harvard professor Michael Sandel and his classes on justice, to name just one), but this does not mean that they would receive the same level of education as the actual students at Harvard, who would be able to interact with and question their professors in person. On the other hand, is it also not true that for students attending a lecture with over a hundred students will not be able to interact much with their professors in any case? Instead, could MOOCs not create a strong incentive to university professors to improve their lectures, so that they will not be ousted by their “online competitor[s]” (Friedman, 2013)? Gone could be the time when professors de-

liver their lectures from notes written years ago.

Learning is Social

Before accepting the proposition that higher education no longer needs the “bricks and mortars”, but can instead take place all online, we should reconsider what the process of learning comprises. Leonard J. Waks wrote that “learning is social” (2016). There may be students who feel comfortable learning alone in front of their computer screens. Yet students could become discouraged by the sterile lectures presented in online lectures, devoid of any physical human contact or a personal acknowledgment from the professor (Konnikova, 2014). Some students may feel that they learn best through discussions, but there are students who decide to quit a course because they thought that such discussions never work out online (Peterson, 2013). Humans are social animals. We naturally seek out social interaction (Blum, 2013). Part of the reason why MOOCs have a large dropout rate may be due to their lack of physical campuses, where such interactions can take place (Blum, 2013). Another social element lacking in online learning are the face-to-face communications with the professors. Zemsky (2014) argued that professors in colleges are there to serve as students’ mentors. That is, students in their first two years of university complete their general education courses, which would help them to prepare for their chosen majors. Ideally, professors should be available during this time, when the students need guidance.

Another issue is that in this digital age, people have become used to googling to obtain immediate answers to their questions. However, the process of thinking does not follow a straight-forward path. Through discussions with peers, posing questions to teachers, and seeing how a teacher may struggle to find an answer, these are the necessary steps for thinking (Turkle, 2016). In particular, there are moments that a student may discover thoughts she did not know she had, but when taking the risk to speak up in front of her classmates, her thoughts come tumbling out, seemingly out of nowhere (Turkle, 2016). These are the moments that are, with the current MOOCs, difficult to replicate. In a physical classroom, speaking in front of others is a risk, because there is no anonymity. Being identified as a certain individual means taking responsibility for the thoughts one shares with the rest of the classmates. MOOCs may have online discussions boards to simulate a real classroom, but they take place in the safety of anonymity, behind computer screens. Although the term “anonymity” may have negative connotations, positive effects of anonymity should

not be neglected. For example, young people in their teenage years could discover a new side to themselves by joining discussion groups online, such as gay/lesbian newsgroups (Christopherson, 2006). They may be reluctant to join face-to-face group discussions, but the privacy of online anonymous groups could help them overcome their hesitation. There is also the equalization hypothesis, which proposes that factors potentially leading to discrimination, such as race, gender, and age, remain hidden from other users online, affording more equality and increased power for socially disadvantaged and minority groups (Christopherson, 2006). For the above reasons, anonymity in online education could be beneficial, depending on how it is used.

Khan Academy

An American educational psychologist, Benjamin Bloom (1984), found that when students received one-to-one tutoring, their performance were two standard deviations higher than the performance of students in a class with thirty students receiving instruction from a single teacher. Yet, the reality is that most students learning under the public education system will not receive one-to-one tutoring. That is, until Salman Khan appeared in the field of online education. In describing how Khan Academy could change the way a student learns, Khan (2015) argued that an architect building a house would not settle for a score of a 80 out of a 100 in constructing its foundations, and continue to build the first floor with a score of 75 out of a 100, because by the time it is built, the house could collapse under its own weight. Therefore, an architect will always settle for no less than a 100. Mathematics is similar to building a house because one cannot understand multiplication and division before completely mastering addition and subtraction. This step-by-step learning process is incompatible with the current school teaching that teaches students new material, tests them on it, and progresses to another set of new material without all students achieving a full mark on the test. Online videos give the students the tools necessary to stop the video, go back, and watch the lecture as many times as is necessary for their complete comprehension (Khan, 2015). In a physical classroom, a teacher handling a class of students cannot individualize the lesson to accommodate each students' needs and pace, but online videos make this possible. Provided that a learner has sufficient motivation to do so, the online videos could be a way to ensure a perfect score for every test. Yet, this does not mean that students would not benefit from a face-to-face interaction. Turkle pointed out

that even when students are learning technical subjects such as mathematics, their performance improves when online classes are combined with face-to-face interactions (2016).

Hence "learning is social" (Waks, 2015), and it is this component that MOOCs have struggled with since 2012. For some learners, a community of online learners may be sufficient (Green, 2012). There are many courses available online, and as with any class in any given university, there will be both engaging courses and monotonous ones. MOOCs have been criticized for their low retention rate, but the cofounder of Coursera, Daphne Koller, has counterargued that nobody reads *The New York Times* "from cover to cover" and pronounces it a failure, and the same goes for MOOCs (Rich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019). However, it may be that learners who still have not formed their own learning styles could use guidance that only a physically existing university can provide. Here again, we see that professors play an important role in students' lives. For example, research conducted by Boser, Wilhelm, and Hanna (2014) showed that "10th grade students who had teachers with higher expectation were more than three times more likely to graduate from college than students who had teachers with lower expectations", showing that teacher expectations significantly influenced the outcomes of students' performances in the long run. It may be that one of the reasons why students are not completing their courses on MOOCs is due to the absence of professors who could otherwise motivate their students to complete the courses by conveying their expectations for their students.

Qualifications

Another issue confronting MOOCs is their qualifications. Over the years, each MOOC platform has made changes in an effort to make their courses more attractive for their learners and their prospective employers. For example, EdX started offering Micromasters in 2016 as a way for learners to gain credits toward a master's degree. Micromasters is considered to be a bridge program between a bachelor's and a master's degree. There are also a full master's degree programs on EdX from universities such as Georgia Tech, The University of Queensland, and Indiana University. Coursera too offers similar programs and one bachelor's degree (in computer science) from University of London. Aside from the convenience of being able to continue work while pursuing a master's degree is its tuition cost ("Edx"). Coursera advertises on its webpage that an online master's program costs

\$52,000, whereas its equivalent online program costs \$22,000 ("Online Master's & Bachelor's Degrees From Top Universities", n.d.). This could mean that for those still paying back their loan(s) from undergraduate studies, an online program may be their only option. Also, these online programs do not require students to finish their master's program within two or three years, as would usually be the case in on-campus programs. They would be able to stretch out their degree over multiple years. They could continue to work part-time, full-time, and even raise a child (Nugent, 2018). However, it is not yet clear how prospective employers view these degrees gained online, as opposed to degrees attained in on-campus programs. For example, according to the latest survey conducted by the Graduate Management Admissions Council (GMAC), "only 6% of the employers contacted said they viewed MOOCs as an alternative to business school" (Carnwath, 2019). On the other hand, both Salman Khan and Sebastian Thrun (the founder of Udacity) said in an interview that they would hire people and have already done so based on their performance on their MOOC platforms (Walters, 2016). However, the field may be different for those who are already working in the job market. In a poll conducted by FutureLearn, nearly 450 out of 600 employers said that completed online courses could be used to decide an employee's promotion (Carnwath, 2019). The overall impression is that whether a course/degree completed on MOOC will qualify or not is still very much a case-by-case situation.

Academic inflation, or credentialism is a problem. Both terms are used to describe the circumstance in which ever more degrees become necessary for fulfilling potential job requirements. Due to this inflation, the number of degree holders, from high school to PhD, has increased over the past decades (Cappelli, 2015). In this age of gig economy, the number of permanent jobs with benefits has decreased, and companies are looking to hire workers who already come armed with professional skills who can complete the job and then leave. These are the workers who are easily replaceable. Even with or without a degree, it is skills that companies now seek. However, if everyone has a college degree, one's alma mater becomes the only differentiating factor. The job filter is nowadays not whether they have a degree or not, but whether it comes from a "low-admission-rate university" that characterize the Ivy League schools. As a result, the competition for admission to such universities is extremely high, not to mention its staggering costs (Waks, 2016).

University of the People

One possible solution that would allow economically-disadvantaged students to obtain necessary credentials is through online universities. An excellent example is the University of the People (UoPeople). It was founded in 2009 by the entrepreneur, Shai Reshef, and it hails itself as "the world's first non-profit, tuition-free, accredited, online, American university" ("University of the People Accredited Online American University", n.d.) As of August 2019, UoPeople offers an MBA, a bachelor's, and an associate degree in business administration, a bachelor's and an associate degree in computer science and health science, and a master's in education. (An associate degree is a two-year program that gives the students a chance to start working in the field they are interested in in a shorter amount of time. If they later decide to pursue a bachelor's degree, the credits they gained in their Associate degree can count towards it.) UoPeople is open to anyone around the world, and the total cost for an associate degree is \$2,060, a bachelor's degree \$4,060, MBA \$2,460, and a M.Ed. \$2,660. They also offer scholarships to those who are in need to ensure that access to higher education is open to everyone, regardless of their economic status ("University of the People Accredited Online American University", n.d.).

Conclusion

In this fast-changing age, there is no single path that guarantees anyone a position with a steady income and reliable social benefits. MOOCs, online degree programs, and online universities have emerged in the past decade. They have widened our choices for how to attain education and to build our own individual portfolios. Teachers too have the option of incorporating MOOCs into their curriculum and using them as a way to flip their classrooms. These are new options that could open doors for those who previously had no means to do so. These are also options that make us reconsider what place a university has in our society and what effective teaching is. MOOCs have not replaced higher education, but their presence in the education sector has led to an increase in the number of online degree programs, and to learner's autonomy. Yet a complete lack of face-to-face interaction does not seem to be the ideal learning environment.

The outbreak of covid-19 has undoubtedly changed the educational scene. Universities have been forced to switch to online classes, yet many are keen to reopen their campuses this fall for in-person classes, because they do not want to lose their stu-

dents at the risk of a huge financial loss (Nocera, 2020). However, it may be that the future outlook of the field of education will be a hybrid of online and in-person classes. An entrepreneur and a business professor, Scott Galloway, proposed that in the future, ivy league universities will pair up with the big IT companies (i.e., Google, Microsoft, Apple) to expand their educational platform (Walsh, 2020).

MOOCs may not have been the revolution they were initially hailed to be, but it would be too early to declare them a failed revolution. With the pandemic, even passionate advocates of in-person classes would have to admit that some form of education would be better than having no education. For the future though, I believe that it would be the taking advantage of both worlds, online and in-person, and giving students the experience of blended learning that will deepen their thinking process and give depth to their education that could aid them in their future careers.

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Appendix

Links to the various MOOC platforms:

edX: <https://www.edx.org/>

Coursera: <https://www.coursera.org/>

FutureLearn: <https://www.futurelearn.com/>

Khan Academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/>

University of the People Accredited Online American University: <https://www.uopeople.edu/>