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Beware of MOOCs

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Beware of MOOCs

In an era marked by sky high tuition, a widening gap in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) skills and prevailing socioeconomic disparities in the traditional education system, massive open online courses (MOOCs) seem like a promising solution to education's woes. They're free, anyone with an internet connection can enroll and they can reach hundreds of thousands of students at the same time from all over the world.

While only a scant percentage of those who enroll in a MOOC actually complete a course and no model exists to continually improve or sustain the concept, MOOCs have garnished an overwhelmingly favorable reception.

Not everyone is on the MOOC bandwagon. Gerry Canavan, an assistant professor in the English department at Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI, shared his concerns about this new wave of e-learning with *ASQ Higher Education Brief*. Not only are MOOCs an ineffective medium for instruction and learning, he says they hold the potential to shatter academia.

Education Brief: Tell me about yourself.

I'm Gerry Canavan, an assistant professor in the English department at Marquette University, teaching 20th and 21st century literature. My primary area of research is science fiction literature and film, and the genre's relationship to the politics and culture of the late 20th century especially with respect to global capitalism and the environment. Of course, I'm also interested in critical theory more generally. I received my doctorate in literature from Duke University last May. While at Duke, I was a Humanities, Arts, Science and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC) scholar for three years, participating in collaborative, cross-institutional work in the digital humanities.

Education Brief: Have you taught a MOOC? If not, would you?

I have not, and have no particular interest in doing so based on what I've seen so far.

Education Brief: What do you think are the biggest challenges of the MOOC format?

From a pedagogical standpoint, they seem like a total nightmare. My experience in the classroom and the current research in education theory both suggest that this kind of unidirectional lecturing style will be extremely ineffective in teaching students, much less help them to become smarter readers and better writers. The staggeringly low retention rate of MOOCs, and the rather spectacular difficulties that several high-profile MOOCs have had in managing class discussion, further back this intuition up.

Education Brief: What worries you about MOOCs?

MOOCs hyper-accelerate a long-term trend toward adjunctification and labor devaluation in the university. I find it's a labor model in search of a pedagogy. The real interest is in how can we de-skill and de-professionalize academia even further, transforming tenure lines into low-wage work, and "managing content" in MOOCs for tens of thousands of students at a time. I am amazed that so many professors are so eager to experiment with a pedagogical model that is not only ineffective, but which actively seeks to obsolesce them and the work they do.

I also do not understand—and no one has yet explained to me—how these MOOCs are to be continually updated over the coming decades. If this is indeed the new model of education, who will make the new MOOCs reflect new knowledge in ten, twenty, thirty years? Who is going to moderate the discussion forums, grade the tests and answer questions from the students? In what capacity and under what contract terms will these MOOC-updaters and MOOC-runners be employed? By whom? Where will they have received their training, and how will that training be paid for? What is the labor model for the MOOC—not this quarter, but this decade, this century?

This is why I've said that MOOCs are how you'd structure higher education if you believed there was no future. No attention is paid to how the university system is supposed to reproduce itself for a new generation of scholars and learners under the new MOOC regime.

Jonathan Rees (a professor of history at Colorado State University—Pueblo) got to the heart of this in a set of recent posts in his blog [More or Less Bunk](#) about the use of peer grading in the MOOC.

Rees said:

“Education startups like Coursera are experimenting with peer grading not because it is the best way for students to learn history or English, but because it is the only way that the MOOC machine can ever run itself in a humanities course. If MOOCs incurred high labor costs the same way that colleges do, those startups would never be able to extract a profit from those classes.”

To me, this seems to be not only self-evidently true, but a pretty effective single-sentence critique of MOOCs. Every aspect of the development of those courses is being skimmed off labor and resources that MOOC developers don't have to pay for and don't have any capacity to reproduce once they've finished looting the contemporary academy. They're only able to extract a profit because they're parasitic on the larger university system, and they only seem like a good idea to anyone because economic actors in neoliberalism are only expected to think about the next earning report, not about how things will function once the parasite has killed the host.

Most of the people involved in the so-called MOOC revolution recognize, at some level or another, that this part of the fantasy is fundamentally self-defeating. We all know how out of date our textbooks were growing up; we can't possibly imagine that people are going to be watching MOOCs from current superstar faculty in twenty years when even our software and smartphones don't last eighteen months. So the MOOC can't *really* transform the university, or there'd be nothing to skim from for more profit. There's just an inescapable paradox here.

The answer to this objection, as best as I can tell, seems to be a claim that elite colleges and elite professors will always exist and will produce teachers who can do this necessary work into the future. But this itself is revealing — against a rhetoric of radically democratizing MOOCs that expand access for all, we find instead a reality of intensifying class divisions in higher education, making the current divide between educational cohorts both formal and

permanent while at the same time returning to us the worst aspects of the academy's past as a luxury only for the rich. Creating a two-tier system of education in which elite students have the traditional university and underprivileged students have MOOCs strikes me as not only reprehensible, but deeply short-sighted.

Education Brief: What are the benefits of MOOCs?

MOOCs are a very effective way to skim profit off of public goods and funnel money to private corporations. I can see why the people involved with those types of businesses would be very eager to experiment with this format; however, I don't see much benefit to the university or current TT and NTT faculty in participating, and the students certainly don't benefit from this shift.

Education Brief: Do you think MOOCs have a place in higher education?

I can imagine that they would have very limited uses in very particular academic situations, but I feel they could never be an effective substitute for traditional face-to-face (or screen-to-screen) instruction, particularly in the humanities. What we do in the university classroom isn't reducible to "content delivery" or the raw, one-way transmission of "facts." I also think they're destructive of academia more generally in the way they tend to push out faculty in favor of low-wage, low-skill "content managers."

Education Brief: What impact do you think MOOCs will have on higher education and its delivery?

My sense is that they will be a very short-lived fad. If they persist and expand into new so-called flexible online degrees built on MOOCs, however, my expectation is that they will drive down wages in the academy even further and contribute to the elimination of tenure lines, as well as the closing of state university campuses serving non-elite populations. These populations will be shuttled into MOOCs and online degrees instead—which is a shame, as research already shows this style of learning is least effective for those who are underprepared and marginally prepared for college.

Education Brief: How much learning is going on in MOOCs? What's the standard for measuring learning? Do you think it is sufficient?

I am not an expert in this arena, but I personally have not been impressed with the reports coming out of MOOCs thus far.

Education Brief: Do the same guidelines and standards for traditional university courses apply to MOOCs?

The reports of professors who are using this format—even those who are quite in support of the MOOC as a form—suggest that the MOOC requires significantly diminished expectations for what a class can achieve as well as what sorts of discussions and responses will be produced by students.

Education Brief: What are the limits of online learning and MOOCs?

It seems to me the limit point has to do with genuine, in-depth interaction with a teacher. I know many people who teach online and these people devote (as I do in the traditional classroom) significant amounts of energy to one-on-one feedback and interaction, responding directly to the students as individuals. But this kind of investment in individual students as individuals can't be scaled up, and underpaid teaching assistants and volunteer alumni discussion leaders ([as Harvard just announced](#)) simply can't replace it to any meaningful degree.

Education Brief: According to a [Rutgers University committee](#), only a very small percentage of those who enroll in a MOOC actually complete a course. Only 20% of students completed Stanford's initial artificial intelligence course. Less than 5% of students passed Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) circuits and electronics MOOC. What do you think these results mean or point to?

I think it draws for us pretty clearly the limitations of this format for genuine learning. It points to the dangers of attempting to replace introductory and remedial courses—especially for disadvantaged populations—with videotaped lectures.

Education Brief: Do you think MOOCs promote collaboration and interaction in learning or do MOOCs hinder it?

I'm sure some MOOCs do promote collaboration and interaction and some don't. In general, it seems to promote a one-way model of education that is anti-collaborative and anti-

interactive; learning from a recorded lecture is necessarily and inescapably more passive than interacting directly with one's professor.

Education Brief: MOOCs seem to be received favorably by instructors/professors—why?

Everybody I know who works in higher education is viewing them with extreme skepticism, precisely because they see it as an attempt to take the social goods produced on behalf of the university's mission over decades and turn them into private profits.

A limited number of so-called "superstar" professors seem quite eager about the possibility of reaching huge numbers of people, but the prevailing winds are definitely blowing in the other direction, from my perspective.