

Picciano, A.G. (February 2014). MOOCs: The hype, the backlash, and the future!  
*University Outlook*, 1(4). <http://universityoutlook.uberflip.com/i/260407/2>

This is a reprint of an article I wrote that was published in February 2014 by University Outlook.

## **MOOCs: The hype, the backlash, and the future!**

MOOCs captured the imagination of higher education when they came on the scene five years ago but now have been the focus of a good deal of publicity questioning their viability. Sebastian Thrun, the founder of Udacity, opened up the flood gates for criticism in an interview with *Fast Company*, where he was quoted as saying that he was throwing in the towel and that “we [Udacity] have a lousy product.” (Chafkin, 2013) While the popular media have followed Thrun’s proclamation with “I told you so” articles, it is too early to predict that the end is near for MOOCs (Kolowich, November 27, 2103). The purpose of this article is to review the rise and fall of MOOC technology and to speculate on its future.

### **Over-Hyped!**

Our society has evolved so that media is used to influence our activity like never before. Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” is well understood and in play. Mass media technologies such as television, the Internet, and social networks have added significantly to this trend. History tells us that technology solutions and products have frequently been hyped by companies and their investors. At its extreme, the term “vaporware” coined in the 1980s was applied to technology products that were all hype and really did not exist or at least did not exist in the form advertised. Products like the Apple Liza, Windows Vista Operating System, Microsoft Zune, and Linden Labs Second Life, are examples of technologies that never lived up to their promotion. Unfortunately, MOOCs have been overhyped by the media as the new “thing” that was going to transform education. The hype may have reached its zenith when *New York Times* columnist, Tom Friedman, wrote about MOOCs as the “revolution” that has hit American higher education. (Friedman, 2013) It would have been impossible for MOOC providers to live up to the hype and they are now taking a serious fall and coming down to reality.

### **MOOCs Are Part of an Evolution- Not a Revolution!**

MOOCs are a part of the online learning evolution that has been going on for decades. The concept of digital learning predates the Internet and the World Wide Web. Instructional software packages designed to be used on large mainframe computers and distributed via digital communications technology have been in existence since the 1960s. Computer-assisted instructional programs (CAI) using software such as PLATO developed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, were developed and delivered over closed or private networks. In the 1980s, Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff at the New Jersey Institute of Technology started experimenting with virtual learning that went beyond programmed instruction and allowed for interactivity among students and faculty. These virtual systems planted the seeds for one of the most significant developments in delivering instruction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century into what many referred to initially as the asynchronous learning network (ALN) and later as online learning. Ralph Gomory, President of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, promoted the ALN concept in the early 1990s by establishing the *Learning Outside the Classroom* and later the *Anytime, Anyplace Learning Program* from which the first grants were awarded in 1992. His vision was that students could learn in their homes, places of business, or just about anywhere they could

connect to a digital network. The arrival of the ubiquitous Internet greatly accelerated interest in online learning and allowed it to proliferate throughout education. By the time MOOCs came on the scene, online learning was being offered by a majority of American colleges and universities with millions of students enrolling in courses every year. (Allen & Seaman, 2013) A significant amount of research has been published on the pedagogical practice we call online learning and its progeny, blended learning. (U.S. DOE, 2010) Dozens of journals, professional organizations, and conferences attracting tens of thousands of participants emerged well before the MOOC phenomenon. A legitimate question is why did MOOCs attract so much attention.

### **Scale, Funding and New Players**

The major interest in MOOC technology was not its pedagogical benefits but its scale. Without a doubt, courses that were enrolling hundreds of thousands of students attracted deserved attention. In addition, some big name institutions such as Stanford University, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology became associated with the MOOC phenomenon. MOOCs were glamorized by their founders at Udacity, Coursera, and edX as the technological revolutions that would indeed change higher education. As a result, the media bought into their hype and went on a frenzy. Significant investments of capital were made mostly by private investors and venture philanthropies into MOOC companies. These investors likewise fueled the hype of MOOC technology. Lastly, education policymakers and university trustees took notice and thought they found a solution to their education funding woes and pushed for major new MOOC initiatives in places such as San Jose State University and the University of Virginia. And then came the backlash!

### **Faculty, Public Higher Education, and Experts Weighed In!**

As the MOOC phenomenon took off, a closer examination at the pedagogy of this technology was made by faculty and instructional technologists many of whom were experienced online learning developers in public institutions in Maryland, New York, Illinois and Massachusetts. The high student dropout rates of 90 percent in MOOC courses could not be easily explained away. The CAI style of many early MOOCs based on glorified “read, watch, listen and repeat” course materials were questioned by experienced online learning developers who relied more on socially constructed pedagogical approaches that emphasized extensive interaction among students and faculty. The high-profile MOOC initiative at California’s San Jose State University and a preliminary evaluation showing relatively poor results of its materials also gave much pause to the MOOC movement (Collins, 2013). Lastly, but perhaps most significant, was a rejection by educational leaders and faculty of the notion that colleges would jump at the chance to use course materials developed by the faculty at Ivy-League and other highly selective universities. To the contrary, faculty and administrators saw this as elitism and arrogance on the part of the MOOC providers. At a meeting of MOOC developers sponsored by M.I.T. and Harvard University, Bill Bowen, former president of Princeton University, reminded the audience that they occupied a privileged position:

“that they occupied "really rarefied air" in deciding how they might want to use online education. But professors who are serious about reaching the masses online, he said, will have to think about innovation and design with a broader, more diverse audience in mind..."I would humbly suggest that the kinds of assessment and standards and all the rest that I'm sure are appropriate at MIT and Harvard and so forth," Mr. Bowen said, "have very little relevance for the large parts of American higher education, particularly in the state systems, that are under genuine siege." (Kolowich, March 4, 2013)

Faculty at San Jose State University who were asked to pilot an edX MOOC entitled, *JusticeX*, in an open-letter to Professor Michael Sandel, the professor at Harvard University who had developed the course, stated that it undermines their university and that:

“Professors who care about public education should not produce products that will replace professors, dismantle departments, and provide a diminished education for students in public universities.” (Open Letter from the Philosophy Department at San Jose State University, April 29, 2013)

The “elitism” label resounded among many educators and has been used by critics to depict MOOCs as the technology for the masses while the colleges of the privileged will continue to be taught in modest-sized classes led by faculty.

### **The Future**

Speculating about the future is always a risk, however, it is desirable for trying to understand what MOOCs can contribute for the betterment of education. Without a doubt, MOOCs have presented possibilities of scale that need to be evaluated and considered by faculty, administrators, and policymakers. MOOC providers also have capital and resources that can be put to good use if invested wisely. Some thoughts.

First, the founders of MOOC companies and their investors need to tone down their own hype and stop trying to sell their products as if they will resolve all of education’s problems. For example, should the MOOC approach really be designed for students who have remediation and other learning needs and who lack the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Daphne Kollner, founder of Coursera, recently commented at the Sloan Consortium Annual Conference that such students would probably better be served by face-to-face instruction. (Kollner, November 2013)

Second, with the substantial financial resources at their disposal, MOOC companies should develop more pedagogically sound course materials that can be used in blended online formats rather than fully online formats. In fact the future of MOOCs, might indeed lie with blended learning that allows for the meaningful involvement of faculty. To do so, they may have to even jettison the MOOC brand because their final products may not be massive in terms of hundreds of thousands of student enrollments and may not be open or free. Rather than course providers and developers, they might rebrand themselves more as providers of high-quality content giving faculty the option as to how to best use their materials.

Third, as private enterprises, MOOC developers need to figure out a way to return their investments and make a profit. The past fifty years of instructional software providers are littered with hundreds of companies that have went bankrupt. As some point, the initial capital will run out and these companies need to generate revenue. It is likely that some will succeed but some will not. This is a major conundrum for MOOC developers that distinguishes them from faculty and instructional design competitors at colleges who develop their own online courses and materials on modest budgets primarily for pedagogical reasons and not with the intent to turn a profit. It might be that MOOC providers can concentrate on developing and providing courseware targeted for certain disciplines and subject matter that can benefit from enriched content. It might be that they can concentrate on specific student populations such as the adult and continuing education market. It might be that MOOCs can be used as recruitment tools for students in colleges or for employees in private industry especially those interested in serving and working with global populations.

There are a number of possibilities but the MOOC developers know best their resources and should study their markets carefully to determine where they can provide a valuable service or product. If they nurture these markets and deliver the best products they can, they will secure their future.

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