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The Mega University

In the past few years, higher education has been going through a rapid shift towards the idea of massive open online courses, or MOOCs. Just over two years ago the idea of a MOOC was little known, but since the introduction of Sebastian Thrun's wildly successful Artificial Intelligence MOOC which attracted over one hundred and fifty thousand students, higher education has been in a state of excitement that some are calling "MOOC mania."¹ MOOCs offer easy access to information conveyed by some of the world's greatest academics, from many of the world's elite institutions, to wherever is most convenient for you. To address concerns of community and state colleges being over-enrolled and underfunded, MOOCs provide a quick fix: easily accessible, free, and high quality education. Sounds like a sure thing. But before you take out a second mortgage and invest, perhaps you should know that there are a multitude of unanswered questions that will be the deciding factors in the future of MOOCs, and there are many flaws in online education itself. Some believe that MOOCs will be the downfall of academia, while others find that MOOC platforms have allowed, and will continue to allow, education to be reinvented and reinvigorated while providing high quality education to those who need it most. Harvard and MIT have created a MOOC startup known as edX that hundreds of universities are clamoring to be a part of, yet Amherst college, after being invited to take part in the startup, has voted against the MOOC platform.

Educators, journalists, writers, and academics have written extensively on the subject and some believe MOOCs are going to save higher education. In his article, "Laptop U," Nathan

¹ Mangan, Katherine. "MOOC Mania." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 59.6 (2012): B4-B5. Academic Search Complete. Web. 30 May 2013.

Heller examines the implications of MOOCs, and how—or if—they fit into higher education. The article is a lengthy discussion examining MOOCs from almost every conceivable angle. Heller looks at the MOOC start up, edX, and discusses its merits with a professor currently teaching one of their MOOCs. Heller also examines other MOOC startups such as Coursera and Udacity while comparing online education to the in-class experience, and whether MOOCs can really offer what they aim to. Heller comes to a fitting conclusion about MOOCs: it seems MOOCs will have some real utility in the near future in higher education; they may alleviate over-enrollment and provide different avenues for learning, but an online course cannot offer, to any extent, what one gains in a real classroom. MOOCs have the potential to harm academia; and a point I would like to add is that MOOCs do not have a place in four-year institutions.

The idea of online education has been around for a while, and some for-profit universities like the University of Phoenix offer many courses online for credit; however, they are not open to the public. The idea of online courses open to anyone is extremely new, and it has taken off like wildfire. In late 2011 Sebastian Thrun's wildly successful MOOC led him to create the MOOC producing startup, Udacity. Since then there has been an emergence of MOOC startups such as Coursera, which is currently the largest producer of MOOCs with over three hundred available courses, and edX, a MOOC startup created by Harvard in collaboration with MIT, that have all brought into question what the future of higher education will look like.

Community colleges have always existed as stepping stones to four year universities, but currently graduation rates are startlingly low. About 12% of students enrolled in community colleges eventually move on to four-year institutions whereas 81% of new community college

students claim they would like to.² One of the main issues pressing upon community colleges is that the institutions are overenrolled and students are stuck waiting an extra semester, sometimes several semesters or quarters, in order to take a simple introductory course. On top of that, the general demographic has been changing rather dramatically. The percent of community college students from the lowest economic quartile has increased 7% from 1982 to 2006 and the percent of community college students from the top economic quartile decreased 8%.³ This shows that the socioeconomic demographic of community college students is shifting further down from the middle class towards families who cannot afford a four year university education. Furthermore, community colleges spend substantially less per student than other universities, and even less so than a majority of K-12 schools.⁴ MOOCs could serve as a solution to the socioeconomic and over-enrollment problems in some colleges because MOOCs are substantially cheaper than faculty. Many of these students are also commuters who may have jobs as well as a family; being able to have the convenience of a MOOC would be incredibly beneficial to students like this.

But do MOOCs really provide the same high quality education as a university, and if so do they even have a place outside of community colleges? Some believe they do. Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, created a humanities MOOC called “The Modern and the Post Modern,” and in the end he was pleasantly surprised by the outcome. It seems that the most interesting and effective aspect of teaching a MOOC was the diverse range of students it brought together: “My MOOC, which is nearly over, has impressed upon me aspects of

² Lionhardt, David. "Though Enrolling More Poor Students, 2-Year Colleges Get Less of Federal Pie." *New York Times*. N.p., 22 May 2013. Web. 28 May 2013.

³ Lionhardt, David. "Though Enrolling More Poor Students, 2-Year Colleges Get Less of Federal Pie." *New York Times*. N.p., 22 May 2013. Web. 28 May 2013.

⁴ *Ibid.*

difference and inclusion I don't often encounter on campus,"⁵ writes Professor Roth. Though Roth's MOOC may have brought together a diverse group of students, it is unclear how the rest of the class went. The immense size of MOOCs renders it impossible for the institution providing instruction to grade papers. Instead, papers are graded by peers, and many students report that they detest this grading system. The class may have been successful, but it still lacked the personal connections made in group discussions as well as personalized feedback on papers by experts in the field.

How will students receive effective feedback on written assignments if some of those essays are graded by marginal students who may not understand the complex nuanced writing that higher performing students produce? Some humanities courses avoid writing all together and opt for multiple choice quizzes coupled with discussion forums and annotated readings. In Heller's article he notes what one Harvard professor thinks of multiple choice quizzes in the place of writing: "multiple-choice questions are almost as good as essays, Nagy said, because they spot-check participants' deeper comprehension of the text."⁶ This sounds effective, but it's not practical. Answering multiple choice questions and having a deep understanding of the text does not show that one can apply the ideas in the text in a different context. The language of academia, research, and really any type of study, is in writing. There is no point in having an extensive knowledge of Greek Mythology unless you can connect it to others' ideas and the modern world through writing or speaking. Though the multiple choice quizzes may test a student's comprehension of the reading, it in no way asks the student to connect it to some other idea, philosophy, or experience. It just asks if you get it. The future professors of this generation

⁵ Roth, Michael S. "My Modern Experience Teaching A MOOC." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 59.34 (2013): B18-B21. Academic Search Complete. Web. 28 May 2013.

⁶ Heller, Nathan. "Laptop U." *The New Yorker* 20 May 2013: 80-91. Print.

will obviously go through college, and if their exercise of the field initially consists of multiple choice quizzes, they are going to miss out on an essential experience that shapes one's mind, and teaches one to communicate with others at a greater level. They will have to learn these skills somehow.

Additionally, there are other consequences related to both education and academia that must be examined. There is the risk of a few professors centralizing education and pushing others to the side. Heller mentions in his article a public letter of protest written by San José State University's philosophy department to Michael J. Sandel, whose already world famous course *Justice*, now renamed *JusticeX*, would undermine his fellow professors at San José State. Some felt that the Professor would be viewed by students as ““a glorified teaching assistant.””⁷ Not only does the course undermine the professor, but they believe it diminishes the quality of education to quite an extent, ““We regard such courses as a serious compromise of quality of education and, ironically for a social justice course, a case of social injustice.””⁸ The letter also expressed concerns about students taking the same humanities courses throughout the country. Academia works by examining topics from a multitude of perspectives and ideals, and the letter sums up this point well, ““Universities tend not to hire their own graduates for a reason. They seek different influences. Diversity in schools of thought and plurality of points of view are at the heart of liberal education.””⁹ Though not stated explicitly, the point being made here is that MOOCs will rid education of these different influences. With students being taught humanities by one person, and hearing that person's opinion only, their biases may be carried over to the

⁷ Heller, Nathan. "Laptop U." *The New Yorker* 20 May 2013: 80-91. Print.

⁸ "An Open Letter to Professor Michael Sandel from the Philosophy Department at San José State University." Letter to Michael J. Sandel. *Chronicle of Higher Education*: 29 Apr. 2013. MS. N.p.

⁹ *Ibid.*

next generation of academics whose views are all somewhat biased to one side or another. Part of the University's job is to examine different points of view, and create new ideas; it is a collaborative process that includes faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students, and is unique to all campuses. MOOCs will separate students from this process, excluding them from in class participation and interaction, and hindering their experiences in writing about and expressing new ideas.

Or what about the unexpected revelation or inspiration when discussing ideas among peers, the effect of a professor completely changing your perspective, or the sudden and fascinating tangents a professor may go on in response to an insightful question? All of these experiences contribute to a students' development of an intrinsic drive to learn. It is those inspired students who will become future academics, and how can we stifle this? I remember being inspired by my first-year calculus professor. His lecture style was everything you'd expect in the typical caricatured great professor. He was eccentric, loud, shocking, and most of all he had that indescribable skill to blow your mind. He took calculus—a traditionally dull subject for many students—and elicited fascinating discussion about how something like the instantaneous rate of change is actually so much more out of this world and unbelievable than the dry technical definition in the textbook would lead you to believe. And while he was teaching the class, he and a co-worker were preparing to turn it into an online course made for the University of California system to use as the standard introductory calculus class, so he personally recorded the lectures in preparation for creating the course. It seems promising to have a great professor like Anthony Tromba creating a course that everybody gets to enjoy, but I recall many moments when he would show us a seemingly concrete and logical proof, only to correct it with something like the following, "That proof means nothing! The book says it's absolute, but really it's just hand

waving, which is akin to, well, bullshit! I forgot these are being recorded, can't say that next year." For how can one replicate the value of asking an insightful question and having it explored by an expert in the field in real time, when one is exploring a new topic?

Some MOOCs have attempted to recreate the college experience by utilizing Google hangouts, chat rooms, discussion forums, or a combination. But it is undeniable that there is something lost by using a webcam to have a discussion. Sitting in a room with students, one can gauge how people are responding, allow for quick interjection, and connect with people on a deeper level. Though webcams do allow for some sort of human interaction, it in no way recreates an in-person discussion with several people. What is additionally missing is the guidance of an experienced and knowledgeable graduate student or professor, and the students also lack detailed feedback on written work: a major part of the live educational experience. When papers are being graded by one person throughout a period of time, students can gain a better understanding of how their work has evolved over the time spent in the course. MOOCs may be able to convey information and ideas, but they hinder one's experience discovering their own opinions, ideas, and unique writing voice.

There is still a lot of ambiguity in the future of MOOCs and how they will be employed, and the consequences of MOOCs on education are yet to be determined. MOOCs do clearly have a place for students who have no access to higher education, as well as in the lives of community college students looking to complete general education requirements who cannot get into classes—though this is still quite problematic. Much is being asked of MOOCs. Maybe they are not the future of education, but within the next few decades the face of education will become radically different. It is important to offer those who seek education the opportunities to pursue it, but even more important is upholding the current quality of collegiate education. The

university exists as a space where ideas are created and explored among peers and faculty, and the implications of these ideas are connected to the world at large. The fruits of the labor of the university will be the education it provides its students, and the power these students take with them into the world or their field of study. In order to maintain the job of the university, a strong academy must be present. So what's going to happen to smaller professors in a world where only a few professors reach students? Are smaller fields of academia going to be neglected and disappear? What about the effect of a lack of effective writing development for our future academics? The cost of MOOCs should not include academia, and by extension our human quest to expand our understanding of the world.

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