

Of MOOCs and My Students: Matching Pedagogy to Learning Needs

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Perhaps it's a sign of the times that on a Monday morning in Washington, a gathering of private school leaders at the U.S. Department of Education starts with an overtly odd topic with an even stranger name: MOOCs. MOOCs! A word on the lips of college presidents everywhere, a battle cry of university reformers, a lip-smacking account-fattening concept among techpreneurs who run companies with equally unfamiliar names like edX, Coursera and Udacity.

What the heck is a [MOOC](#)? And why should you care? And why do some of us think of nothing so much as Tom Sawyer's [fence-painting](#) enterprise when we contemplate the trend toward MOOCs, with major universities paying tech companies extraordinary sums of money for the privilege of delivering a few courses to tens of thousands of students with dubious results but a great deal of media hype?

Mark Twain's wisdom rings in my ears: "...in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain.." (*Tom Sawyer*, Part I, Chapter 2)

So let's talk about higher education and MOOCs.

One of the great glories and historic strengths of American higher education is our broad diversity of institutional types, missions, curricula and programs. Born of necessity in many cases, the nation's women's colleges, historically black colleges, Catholic colleges, Tribal and Hispanic-serving institutions all arose in response to enrollment barriers. At the same time, teachers colleges, art institutes, land grant colleges, small havens of the liberal arts, large research universities, pragmatic community colleges, tech giants and state systems arose in response to specific educational needs and geographical demands.

Today we run the risk of losing the distinctive diversity of American higher education in the rush to homogenize, measure, [rate and rank](#), to reduce all of learning to some quick data points, a [scorecard](#), the [sum of all salaries](#) as if money is the right way to measure learning. This is what's going on with higher education right now, with the idea of "disruption" being more appealing to some than any thoughtful consideration of what needs change or what actually might be effective even now. MOOCs represent disruption, hence, to some of the leading critics of higher education including [President Obama](#) and [Secretary Duncan](#), MOOCs must be good since reformers love disruption.

Disrupt, displace, dislocate, take over. The “habit of philosophizing” identified by Newman as the whole [Idea of the University](#) bows to the utilitarian outcome --- did you get a job in your major field? How much money are you earning? Is what you earn equal to the cost of your college degree? ---- as the only really useful --- really measurable --- result of higher learning.

Philosophizing, be damned! Public service at low income work, fuggedaboutit! If you aren't making a lot of money in a job related to a well-paying major, your college must have ripped you off. That's the message being put out there by everyone from the President to the headline writers of various media outlets.

Is there anything useful about all of the rhetoric of disruption? Certainly, ideas about change are always useful, and if we are true to our very beings as learning institutions, we must be constantly re-inventing ourselves, questioning our efficacy and experimenting with new forms of academic delivery. In this sense, MOOCs (massive open online courses) may well have their place in the large menu of higher education options. As someone who leads a special mission institution and prizes the diversity of our higher education landscape, I can certainly say, sure, bring on the MOOCs! Some students may well learn a great deal through an online learning experience connecting tens of thousands of other students around the world. Good for them! In the right context, the MOOC is a perfectly fine concept, particularly for students who already know how to learn, self-directed learners who are on a quest for specific kinds of knowledge and intellectual engagement. I might even like it for my own continuing education!

However, despite the lemming-like rush of some elite institutions to embrace MOOCs as evidence of their willingness to foment disruption --- the more cynical among us might say it's evidence that they don't want to be left behind should anyone figure out how to monetize this thing --- MOOCs are largely untested, unanalyzed and, to date, not producing any results that seem worth the hype.

One of the great ironies of this movement is that while MOOCs are hailed as THE change we all are supposed to desire, in fact, the MOOC method is largely rooted in the most outmoded of all pedagogies, the lecture. Yes, some MOOCs also have student interaction via social networking, but the initial framework is still lecture. MOOCs assume that most learning is all about the sage on the stage --- or screen --- decanting the mysteries of knowledge to the passive vessels now unseen in cyberspace. (And, by the way, we've had “great lectures” on tape and CD for years, and they have hardly supplanted actual teaching.)

What's different about a lecture hall of 300 or an online course of 300,000? At least in the lecture hall the attentive lecturer might occasionally hear the snoring from the back row.

MOOCs enshrine the somewhat annoying idea that one professor from a highly elite university opining about Socrates or Shakespeare or system design is more compelling, indeed, more important as a teacher by virtue of the institutional pedigree than the thousands of faculty members who teach the same subjects quite effectively --- maybe even more effectively --- on a smaller scale, in blissful obscurity, famous only to the students who love them almost obsessively.

But true higher learning is about so much more than a rote knowledge transaction from teacher to student. Real collegiate teaching must engage the student deeply in quantitative analysis, critical reasoning, real time experimentation, sophisticated oral and written expression, progressive research and serious innovation. The best of higher learning often occurs well beyond the conventions of the classroom. The MOOC, for all of its apparent newness, is simply a classroom on a grand scale, and a very crowded classroom at that.

Some universities have an unhealthy obsession with competitive status. This obsession with who's beating whom today ranges from faculty talent raids, to fretting about Nobel Prize winners, to scandalous levels of spending on amenities that are not central to learning, to incredibly stupid acts of self-sabotage on the *U.S. News* "best colleges" survey. The opaque hand of Moody's drives tuition prices and selectivity ever higher while putting great pressure on universities to develop new sources of revenue to offset perceived weaknesses in market demand trends. Getting the coveted call from edX to join in MOOC Madness is a surefire way to prove to Moody's that the university is ahead of the curve, on the cutting edge of innovation and thinking hard about changes in future enrollments.

Make no mistake about it, in spite of the overt egalitarianism of a course that enrolls hundreds of thousands of students, the actual impulse for MOOCs right now is classic institutional elitism among a few very wealthy, very prestigious institutions to win the favor of Silicon Valley's wealthy techpreneurs. And the revenue demand rolls right behind the competitive impulse – while MOOCs may be "free" right now, monetization of the concept is inevitable, the only question being how the money will flow and who will make the most.

Acknowledging the vitality of innovation and the inevitability of change in higher education's pedagogy, we must also insist that eyeball-to-eyeball teaching and learning still has an essential place in the age of MOOCs. Mission must come before method. Every institution cannot be Stanford, nor should we want to be --- though the money would be nice! The problem we face, however, is that the new paradigms put forth by a few elite institutions and philanthropists are fast becoming the accepted ideal for the future without much participation by those of us with different missions, different voices, dramatically different student bodies from those who inhabit the hillsides of Palo Alto.

I have heard philanthropists and major investors in change modalities that MOOCs are an important way to keep college affordable by reducing the cost of faculty members and classrooms. They say that collegiate education for the poor of this land is so expensive, in terms of scholarship support and remediation and general education, that we might consider massive online learning as an economically efficient alternative to "live" instruction, especially for the gateway courses. Efficient for whom? So, marginal students get marginal products --- college "lite" --- because they are not worthy of the more expensive personalized instruction that wealthier students have had since pre-school?

The latest [NCES Projections of Education Statistics to 2021](#) tells us that in the next ten years, the population of Hispanic students in higher education will increase by 42 percent, African American students by 25 percent, and Asian students by 20 percent, while White students will increase by only 4 percent. This burgeoning group of new populations is not only different by

race, but also by academic preparation, socio-economic context, language and cultural experiences. But make no mistake about it, these students want exactly the same things that prior generations had the privilege of experiencing, the whole college package.

At my university, [Trinity in Washington](#), we know a little bit about change, disruption, [paradigm shifts](#), access and needing to figure out how to serve new populations. Trinity today serve a population that is, in many ways, a harbinger of the future. Our students now are more than 90% African American and Latina; they are from families who have lived on the margins, strivers who know that education is the gateway to great personal and familial success. Our median family income is just \$25,000. Our students want to change history, to ensure that their children will have what they did not have growing up. They are not very different from my own parents, and the parents of many baby boomers, who, themselves, did not go to college but who wanted great success for their children. We share this profound sense of generational ambition and the desire for positive social change across barriers of time and class and race and ethnicity.

At Trinity, we are intensely focused on student success, and we well know the challenges of keeping students on track to completion, students who have virtually no experience with academic discipline, good study habits, complex reading and analysis skills, collegiate vocabulary, statistical analysis, technology applications beyond facebooking on phones. Our students are intellectually capable but, quite often, socially constrained by conditions that distract them from academic responsibilities, whether family challenges or financial hardship or homelessness or health problems or simply a lack of social structure that is essential for collegiate study.

We have learned that there are no substitutes for direct and continuous engagement with students who have so many risk factors. My students would hardly succeed if their first encounter with college is through a massive online course where the teacher cannot see them, would not know their names, would never really engage a discussion about learning. The first and still most important factor for student success at Trinity is that we call each student by her name, and we know her when we see her.

At Trinity we know that showing up for class is the first step toward college success --- attendance and alertness in class are essential, and our faculty have come to realize how important these non-academic cues are in the learning process. Faculty have to see their students to know if they are paying attention.

Working directly with students, showing students how to be successful in subjects that they never mastered previously is essential to build confidence. For many of our students, the first year math workshops might be the first time in their lives that they discovered that they can actually do equations, or an encounter at the Writing Center shows them how to tap into long dormant creative instincts. Because we're particularly about empowering women – there's that mission thing again! --- we build self-confident learners by helping students understand that they don't have to be afraid about showing their smarts.

Far from encouraging dependency, which is a question I have received, our student-centered methods help students learn to be independent thinkers by liberating them from their own self-defeating stereotypes about their abilities and potential. When you grow up being told time and again that you will never amount to anything, that college is too expensive, that your fate is to be “another statistic” of teen pregnancy or welfare or street violence, you need the leverage of great teachers and administrators to help break through all of the emotional, social and economic barriers to your success.

Paying attention to each and every student is a habit that transcends the classroom experience. We know from all of our analysis that at-risk students progress through college in different ways from traditional students, and that stopping out does not mean dropping out entirely. We follow the “swirl” of students from full-time to stop-out to returning as part-time with credits from elsewhere ---- the issues are not about any deficiencies in school, but challenges in life, and we try to help them stay on track.

Does my skepticism about MOOCs mean that my students never experience the significant power of robust academic technology? Not at all. Being wary of MOOCs does not mean being hostile to or agnostic about technology. We use a great deal of technology in academic life at Trinity, from the course management system Moodle, to offering hybrid courses for many of our professional majors, to some fully online courses in our graduate programs and online tutorial packages in foundation subjects. We love our tech tools and we use them to great advantage.

Amid so much discussion of the cost, structure and outcomes of higher education today, we need to be responsive to expectations for change and thoughtful about the kind of change that will truly produce improvements in learning, innovation and discovery. Too many of the proposals currently in vogue reveal a degraded view of what higher learning must be --- not simply absorption and regurgitation of content, but in fact, a progressive dialogue in which both teacher and student discover knowledge, analyze and debate the discovery, and in the best moments, create entirely new forms of knowledge or new dimensions of understanding old problems.

By the way, every survey of employers demonstrates that these good old-fashioned liberal arts foundation skill sets are what they desire --- the ability to write and speak well, to analyze material, to develop creative solutions, to work in teams, to engage in statistical analysis, to be trustworthy and manifest strong personal ethics. Good old-fashioned classrooms and campuses still exalt that kind of learning most effectively.

MOOCs may be useful tools for content delivery for some kinds of students, probably those who are already well-educated and eager to expand some of their knowledge base into new fields. But for the mainstream work of higher education, the development of the intellectual capacity to analyze and synthesize knowledge, to express significant critical views, to hypothesize and develop proofs for new dimensions of knowledge, massive online courses will have little utility because they are alienated from the real dialogue of teaching, learning and discovery.