



APPLYING THE MOOC POTENTIAL

How MOOCs are reshaping higher ed
and its involvement in communities

By Tasha Cerny, Staff Writer

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are everywhere these days, and if you don't have your eye on them, you should. The online education phenomenon continues to grow as more and more universities create and host their own courses and encourage eager and interested learners to enroll in classes through MOOC providers such as Coursera, edX, Udacity and Udemy.

Despite their clear popularity – many courses get initial enrollment numbers in the multiple thousands – MOOCs still have many kinks to unravel before they become truly feasible or useful to higher education on the whole. For one thing, creating an open online course to facilitate learning through an institution is incredibly expensive, and with the relatively low price or free offering to students, the financial return simply is not there yet, particularly for smaller institutions and those in the for-profit sector. However, this is not stopping providers from offering hundreds, if not thousands, of MOOCs every year to millions of eager learners worldwide.

MOOCs remain a work in progress. Although they present countless opportunities for education to international students and those who may not otherwise have the financial means to expand their educational pursuits, using MOOCs in both a financially practical and an educationally productive way has been the challenge for most, including career colleges. And though MOOCs keep growing, changing and adapting as quickly as they appeared a few years ago, it may still be a while before anyone outside of the select few – such as Harvard, MIT and Stanford – figure out exactly what to do with them.

Yet with all these challenges, MOOCs seem to be uncovering a great educational opportunity not only for students but also for communities and possibly schools. Take, for example, the Ohio-based not-for-profit The Learning Café, a small community-based group that provides an encouraging, supportive environment for the advancement of learning. The Learning Café took to hosting group sessions for a specific MOOC, and though it had only a small number of students enrolled, it had a surprisingly successful completion rate.

Even though The Learning Café is not affiliated with an institution of higher education, imagine the doors a similar setup could open to communities for career colleges. MOOCs, although perhaps unfeasible in replacing the educational model already in place for career colleges, are unintimidating opportunities to entice the educational desires of the community. Simply offering a scheduled time and space for community members to engage in a mutually enrolled MOOC could be enough to incorporate an institution into the community, familiarize community members, and even inspire potential students to take the leap into pursuing an education and a career.

Although many schools work to find ways of adjusting MOOCs to better enhance and assist the classroom experience, rather than completely replace it, perhaps MOOCs can provide some assistance in engaging the community here, too. Dr. Wallace Pond of EduK Group Inc. and Dr. James Hutton of Keiser University have served as panelists on the topic of MOOCs. They believe the various incarnations of MOOCs are growing throughout higher education and could be useful to career colleges for community engagement.

For starters, a potential door opener for engaging more of the community is the low cost of MOOCs to the public (free in most cases).

“Career colleges could hypothetically use the MOOC model to engage the community more by becoming aggregators of MOOC credit,” Pond said. “They could translate MOOCs into the credit of their degree programs and thus shorten the time and expense of college completion.”



A less costly and shorter degree program could open up a larger customer base by making education accessible to students who may not otherwise have had the time or financial ability to pay for such a degree program. And in an economy where tuition rates seem to be climbing in every sector of higher education, reducing costs wherever available could be a mutually beneficial outcome.

So how would translated MOOCs work? Pond has some ideas about that as well.

“If the [career college] sector chose to become involved in MOOCs, they could pick a handful of gateway courses, MOOCs that could cover the general education courses that many different degree programs require,” he said.

“Career colleges could hypothetically use the MOOC model to engage the community more by becoming aggregators of MOOC credit. They could translate MOOCs into the credit of their degree programs and thus shorten the time and expense of college completion.”

— Dr. Wallace Pond, EduK Group Inc.

These MOOCs could then be made available to the sector as a whole for the use of not only other career colleges across the country but also any institution wishing to use them. Nevertheless, besides the cost of implementing such courses (a financial burden that might be slightly relieved by sharing the cost with other institutions), one obvious drawback exists, according to Pond.

“A real challenge with MOOCs right now is that there isn’t a model for effectively evaluating the academic work of such a large number of enrolled students,” he said.

Hutton agrees on the issue of MOOC credit.

“MOOCs have the potential to be great classroom enhancements, great for helping students learn, but until students can get official credit for the MOOCs they take, they can’t benefit,” Hutton said. “They want jobs as quick and cheap as possible, and a MOOC without credit leaves the students with nothing to prove their qualifications.”

Hutton added that perhaps with the right type of marketing and a good partnership with willing backers in the community such as local businesses and employers, MOOCs could benefit both students and the community.

“The typical small career college doesn’t have the time and resources to partner with bigger employers and develop our own MOOCs,” Hutton said. “But working together on something like that would be a good start to engaging the community and our students through MOOCs.”

And perhaps if there were a feasible choice of MOOCs already out there, using The Learning Café model might be more practical in that type of situation. “Business courses through MOOCs could be beneficial to students and lend themselves more to career colleges, too,” said Hutton.

Either way, for now, MOOCs seem to be here to stay. Meanwhile, they are changing the way we think about higher education. Adapting with them seems to be the only answer, and using them as tools for community service and engagement might just be the place to start. As Hutton said, “The one thing I can guarantee is that it will be different in three years. MOOCs are an explosion of growth that we can’t ignore. It just comes down to whether you have the resources to pay attention now.”

You can learn more about The Learning Café here: SPR.K12.OH.US/LearningCafe.cfm, or read about their success with MOOCs here: Blog.Coursera.Org/Post/45931984951/My-Coursera-Experience-Empowering-Local-Communities.



Tasha Cemy is a freelance writer. She is a former Marketing and Communications Intern at PlattForm and has been working closely with Career College Central. She is a senior studying English literature and creative writing at the University of Kansas. She can be reached at tlcemy@ku.edu.