The Future of Education: Technology, Experimentation, and Virtual Worlds

The nature of education is changing. If you are a future college student, depending on who you are and how you learn, this could be good or bad. There are advantages and disadvantages to each model: there's the traditional liberal arts, small conference-style classroom model; traditional, online education; and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses)—which are essentially tuition-less, no-strings-attached classes taught online. A recent *New York Times* article concludes that MOOCs, initially believed to have the potential to provide accessible classes to thousands of students who otherwise lack access to college-level education, in reality appeal more often to college-educated professionals interested in personal development and continuing education.

MOOC Variations

There are exceptions. Arizona State University, for example—long a pioneer in the online education market—has decided to offer the first three courses in their Global Freshman Academy to the public in the form of MOOCs. Students are able to enroll in and complete courses for a greatly reduced fee without having to apply for admission beforehand, allowing them the option to convert and pay for course credit after seeing how they do. By allowing for a trial enrollment status, students also become more familiar with the nature of an introductory college course rather than being required to apply, qualify for acceptance, and enroll before potentially realizing college is not for them, or that they are at the wrong institution for their personal needs.

As this letter to *Inside Higher Ed* points out, evaluation, teaching, and assessment for a MOOC course usually look quite a bit different than that of a typical online class. One reason has to do with the number of students taking the class; as a result, much of the grading for a MOOC is automated. Also, notably, the elements of conversation and community are typically absent from MOOCs because the platform is more of a presentation than an interactive course, in the traditional sense. It will be interesting to see how ASU manages to help students enrolled in the Global Freshman Academy feel connected to the instructors and each other, as that sense of community is often integral to the first year college experience.

One difficulty with MOOCs is students' relative anonymity in relation to their instructor and classmates. Much of the data we know about MOOC users points to middle-class, urban professionals. However, according to a study conducted from the fall of 2012 to summer of 2014, there were significant benefits realized by students in developing countries: "In developing countries, those with lower levels of socioeconomic status and education are significantly *more* likely to report tangible career benefits." This finding runs contrary to the idea that the only groups benefitting from MOOCs are those of relatively prominent socio-economic status.

'Traditional' Online Education

Expanding our purview from MOOCs to online education in general, a recent survey conducted in the spring of 2015 found a vast majority of online college students are women: at the undergraduate level, an average of 70 percent were female; whereas at the graduate level, 72 percent of students were female. Moreover, at the ten schools with the highest percentage of female students, the average hovered between 92 and 94 percent. Experts commenting on the study speculated that there are several possible reasons, including the types of jobs being pursued—for example, social services, health professions, and education—as well as the need to juggle school with work and family commitments.

While much of the market for 'traditional' online education appeals to a female majority, the market for immersive and virtual reality spaces and wearable technology is projected to be fairly widespread. According to Emory Craig, Director of eLearning and Instructional Technology at the College of New Rochelle, "the worth of the wearables industry will explode by 2020, weighing in at a predicted $150 billion." There's great potential for immersive and virtual reality technology to be

implemented into the educational process—such as use of virtual student teaching programs, as studied by music faculty at Rutgers University—because virtual worlds have the ability to present educational material in an inherently interactive manner. Since interactive learning is active rather than passive, it provides a powerful alternative to lectures and slides.

However, on the other hand, not all traditional forms of instruction are passive. For example, the conference style discussion format employs the Socratic method of teaching, using open-ended questions and answers. This type of discussion is anything but passive. However, it does not force the learner to move through physical space in order to progress forward through subject matter. One could easily argue that MOOCs are the most passive form of all, since there are no virtual chatrooms, no engagement with other members of the class (with the exception of end-of-term peer grading, which still isn't real-time interaction). But there are a few distinct advantages of online programs, including increased opportunities for ordinarily quiet students to participate in class discussions—since all eyes aren't on them, they're theoretically more free to participate without feeling as watched or potentially judged.

Innovational Models in Education

All this educational innovation opens the door to for-profit experiments like The Minerva Project, which is unabashedly built to make money. It's also unique in that it implements the best educational learning pedagogy into its teaching techniques. The Minerva Project eschews traditional ivy-covered brownstones for an online platform that allows students from all over the world to interact in a sort of Brady Bunch-style onscreen display of the virtual conference, online. This approach, though, values efficient pedagogy over the culture of traditional colleges and universities, where faculty uphold an ancient tradition of scholarship and library-based study.

This tradition shouldn't be so easily discounted in favor of flashy technological developments. However, there are some aspects of MOOCs and more traditional online courses that do deserve credit for essentially leveling the playing field and making education accessible to students who wouldn't ordinarily have access. The typical college student doesn't fit the same profile as he or she did just fifty years ago; for example, many prospective students are single parents or adults trying to maintain a full-time job in order to pay for school. Because of its democratizing influence, online education shouldn't simply be dismissed as the latest educational fad.

The self-paced, individualized nature of MOOCs, however, should give us pause and lead us to ask questions about the nature of the ideal educational model. What characteristics of classroom learning do we consider essential to a quality liberal arts education? Should online college-level programs ideally resemble a digital replica of a real-time classroom, or should they create their own unique space? Is this online instructional space optimized when combined with face-to-face interaction? In fact, a 2009 study suggested that an educational model that is a blend of online and in-person instruction is ideal.

However, perhaps—as Dan Butin suggests in a recent *Inside Higher Ed* article—technology is merely a tool and that "it is our goals in higher education, and not technology, which must drive our vision of the future." In other words, the building blocks of a high quality education still consist of thorough discussion, solid engagement with the subject material, and a real grappling with ideas that takes place via analysis, synthesis, and application. For example, via the writing of a research report or critical term paper which—whether in person or online—requires a substantial amount of time and attention to the subject matter. Time, engagement, and quality instruction are some of the most important components. For those factors, there are no shortcuts.

Vocabulary list
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