

MOOCs on the March

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Mohammed Gad-el-Hak makes a compelling point when he argues that “learning is a social process.” Presumably social beings require interaction, human exchange to flourish.

This point applies to the Internet as well as the classroom. Moreover, MOOCs (massive open online courses) are a corrective for a system that has ossified behind a shield of social exchange. In far too many cases, a degree is little more than “seat time” in the accumulation of credits. A degree is not predicated on demonstrated competencies, and as Richard Arum has pointed out in *Academically Adrift*, 36 percent of the student population shows no discernible change in cognitive skill after four years in the academy.¹

The idea that a classroom is a place where social interaction encourages learning is one of those clichés that has gained traction, but not reliability. At the moment, most colleges contend they are encouraging “critical thinking,” yet another cliché. If students have few required courses and can design a curriculum of their own liking, the pursuit of critical thinking is actually the exchange of ignorant opinion.

For example, if asked the question “What should we do if fossil fuels are unavailable?” the typical student, without an understanding of supply and

¹Richard Arum, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

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demand and pricing or the law of energy conservation or the history of environmental policy, would have to rely solely on his imagination. One cannot possibly think critically if there isn't a knowledge base on which to rely. "Rich spontaneous interactions [that] can take place" in the classroom, as Prof. Gad-el-Hak suggests, are as rare as black pearls.

There is nothing magical about a classroom when time spent does not translate into knowledge and cognitive skill. In fact, MOOCs are gaining traction precisely because the deficiencies in the current higher education system are so apparent and the cost for courses exceeds the value they produce.

Admittedly, the MOOC option is not viable for everyone, but it should be available to all if it opens horizons for students at a fraction of the tuition for in-person instruction. Online courses that are free shatter elitism and the insularity reinforced by accrediting bodies. When basic competencies are recognized as the real symbol of achievement, the labelling effect of many institutions will be ignored and accreditation will be as anachronistic as college beanies. MOOCs could usher in this desirable change.

But let me not gloss over Prof. Gad-el-Hak's comment about the need for "connection" as a catalyst for learning. The student who sits in a lecture hall with a hundred others rarely connects or interacts. He is as isolated as if he were alone. By contrast, an online student often has a mentor available from dawn to dusk. It is as if he is sitting on a metaphorical log with a tutor. Of course, not all of this instruction works well, just as most of what we call higher education doesn't work well.

At a recent higher education meeting, the maverick entrepreneur Larry Ellison said, "Faculty members are underpaid." The audience applauded. He added, "I believe professors should be paid a million dollars a year." These words brought the house down. Then Ellison noted his poison pill: "But I only need 100 of you." Needless to say, the audience of professors was stone-faced. What Ellison was getting at is that we should take the best historians, the best economists, etc., put them online and have them apply their skill to a generation of students. Ellison was implying that even with additional expense we still spend far too much money on marginal instruction.

When San Jose State University chose to have Michael Sandel, the distinguished Harvard philosopher, teach the Introduction to Philosophy course, the faculty rebelled. For these professors, MOOCs are the equivalent of a conspiracy to undermine the professoriate. In a way, they are right.

Online programs are challenging the status quo. They will contend against faculty members who read from the same yellowing lecture notes semester after semester. They might even invite a diversity of thinking in a political hothouse when new programs are established.

As someone who has experienced the evolution of liberal, but fair, institutions into those that are radical and impervious to open discourse, massive open online courses might well be just what higher education needs at this time.

In *The New School: How the Information Age Will Save American Education from Itself*, Glenn Reynolds contends that we have created an assembly-line system meant to churn out assembly-line workers.² The bell rings and you enter the classroom; the bell rings again and you leave and move on. Students are processed in the same way and in the end graduate with what Thorstein Veblen called “educated incompetence.”

As Reynolds points out, schools remain one of the few institutions untouched by technology, notwithstanding the obvious condition that computers and the Internet can tailor education for the individual. Steering students off the common track could save them money and offer genuine learning.

There are huge, powerful forces resisting this change in education. But it is beginning and Prof. Gad-el-Hak’s arguments to the contrary, there is as much chance of it being stopped as horse-drawn plows organizing to prevent the tractor from being introduced a century ago.

²Glenn Reynolds *The New School: How the Information Age Will Save American Education from Itself* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014).