

Online courses might transform higher education

By Danielle Allen

If you care about college costs and educational quality, you should care about MOOCs, or "massive open online courses," which deliver college courses digitally and just might revolutionize higher education. With MOOCs, a lecture course that draws a couple hundred students on campus can be converted to something that draws tens of thousands from around the globe. A seminar for 40 on campus can be reorganized to teach 800 when each on-campus student is deputized to be a virtual seminar leader for 20.

Whether for good or ill, MOOCs augur a disruption of the relationships among students, colleges and trade schools, and the credentials those schools offer – a relationship that has stabilized higher education for at least a century. Yet if done right – a big if, as recent events at San Jose State and Colorado State universities have shown – they may help address the quality and cost of higher education.

What's the nature of the disruption?

For the moment, providers of MOOCs make their courses available to anyone. There is no admissions process. As in a video game, anyone can start, but you have to master levels that can include very difficult work. For the 10 percent who get to the end, the learning is real.

The range of subjects that might become available to everyone through MOOCs is potentially as broad as the array of specialties represented throughout the professoriate at all institutions. Already some of the most successful MOOCs involve not science and technology but rather Greek mythology and modern poetry.

The hard work involved in creating high-quality opportunities for interactive learning online is generating important pedagogic payoffs. To create a good MOOC, the faculty member and support staff need to understand how people learn. A body of scholarly literature called "learning theory" has explored this for some time, and the world of MOOCs draws heavily on that research. What's more, the data generated by students' participation in MOOCs promise to dramatically expand our capacity to understand diverse learning styles and to tailor pedagogy to the individual student.

These features show the limits of educational institutions as they presently exist.

At present, no college can offer every conceivable course. Schools implicitly acknowledge this by permitting students to do independent study. The student picks a subject and finds the faculty member best – though usually only partially – equipped for it; that faculty member agrees to stretch, and the pair proceeds. With MOOCs, a student can find an expert instructor on a broad range of specialized arts and sciences subjects, well beyond those previously offered in distance education.

Today, no college can tailor a student's curriculum to her learning style. Perhaps one student learns math well in the digital environment but needs small, in-person interaction for copyright law; another can learn to build data visualizations through an online course but needs an intimate space for discussions of novels tackling difficult questions of psychology and identity. With MOOCs, a student could mix and match on-campus and online courses

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to best support her learning style, and schools could focus on what they do best without students needing to forfeit other kinds of learning.

Most colleges bundle different types of learning – general education and liberal arts learning on the one hand, and vocational learning on the other – into a single package with one "tuition" price. But the delivery costs of different courses can vary significantly. Maybe for some of one's learning ambitions a person needs the more expensive, in-person, hands-on, campus-based learning, while for other goals the cheaper (but not free) digital space is better. With MOOCs, a student who chooses a vocational program – say, a film school or technical institute – might build an online liberal arts wraparound, or vice versa. In so doing, students would personalize not only their learning but also its costs to them.

When students realize that by using MOOCs they can personalize their education in this way, they will seek academic credit for their MOOC certificates, just as they get credit for Advanced Placement, independent study and study-abroad courses.

And what grounds will colleges have to say no? Most institutions have pursued for decades something much closer to an open curriculum than a core curriculum, with loose distribution requirements at the general education level followed by a major that often tilts in a vocational direction. And can four years of residential experience still be justified? For generations, Oxford and Cambridge universities have thought that three years was adequate for the specific benefits provided by collocation.

It is possible to envision substantial structural change in higher education, but that change is likely to emerge slowly. Colorado State's Global Campus advertised last year that it would give credit to enrolled students who passed a MOOC in computer science. This would cost students \$89 instead of the

\$1,050 for a comparable course. There were no takers. Seven additional institutions are set to make similar offerings in the coming year. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, they expect only hundreds, not thousands, of takers.

The questions before us are whether top-ranked colleges and universities will use MOOCs to enhance their educational offerings and whether decisions to give credit for them – when they are made – will be driven by pedagogic aspirations and considerations. The future of college costs and quality turn on these questions. The goal should be to bring excellence and affordability together.

Danielle Allen is a professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J. Her most recent book, co-edited with Rob Reich, is "Education, Justice, and Democracy."

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