MOOCs: Get in the Game

In July 2012, John V. Lombardi (someone I have admired for nearly three decades and came to know personally during our shared time in Louisiana) wrote that investing in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as the “next big thing” in higher education is largely about institutions trying to “seek visibility and preeminence to validate their claims of significance and advertise their association with the latest educational trends and enthusiasms.” Lombardi was spot-on in assessing that these “free” courses are by no means free and that many questions remain to be answered. However, I would argue that there is value in institutions sticking their proverbial toe in the MOOC waters, as my own institution—and scores of others—have done via Coursera and other MOOC efforts.

In the EDUCAUSE 2012 session “MOOCs: The Coming Revolution,” which I presented with Coursera’s co-founder Daphne Koller, I opened my portion by emphasizing that the current IT-driven disruption is not actually about information technology but is, rather, about pedagogy. I’ll take this opportunity to state my view again: the focus of this disruption should be on teaching and learning. However, I believe that there is value in having the IT organization take an active role in helping the institution to embrace this change, even going so far as to move onto “point” for change. I believe the move by my institution, the University of Maryland (UMD), into Coursera perfectly illustrates why institutions—and IT leaders and organizations—should get involved with some form of MOOC initiative at this time. I see two primary reasons, along with a third, more fundamental reason beyond those two.

First, there are opportunities available. The current “name-brand” MOOC entries are still interested in developing content—providing partners: Coursera has expanded twice, growing from its original four partners to thirty-three as of December 2012; edX has grown from the Harvard-MIT founders to include the University of California–Berkeley, the University of Texas System, Georgetown University, and Wellesley College.

Second, this is what leading institutions do. As UMD President Wallace Loh said, we stick our necks out (in the metaphor of our mascot, the terrapin). Presidents and provosts at all levels of institutions are, if not under pressure, certainly being encouraged by their boards, legislatures, donors, and others in the community to take action. They are also being pushed by their own faculty, who are eager to give MOOCs a try.

Third, and more fundamentally important, actively participating may be a better way to learn than simply watching from afar. I believe we’re at a point of change, where information technology not only is useful for automating the status quo in teaching and learning but can be truly transformative in the evolution of pedagogy (perhaps rapidly) to a “flipped classroom” model. By actively engaging in these start-up efforts, we bring the lessons directly to our campuses and, more important, to our faculty and our academic staff who must assume leadership for how our colleges and universities embrace online and blended education.

Institutions that take a responsible approach and make a reasonable investment of time and resources to get a few courses into a MOOC environment can benefit by seeing things up-close and personal. The debate about all aspects of MOOCs is only getting started; it will become even more robust as more data on experiences emerges and as more people join the discussion. Being “in the game,” rather than simply watching from the sidelines, provides a better set of insights to inform that robust debate. We will be able to use our own experiences to judge what our unique institutions do rather than basing our decisions on the experiences and views of others who are not us.

Although UMD is still in the early days with MOOCs, I can share our experience to date:

- Contracting with the provider. Working out our contract with Coursera was not overly challenging. I’ll credit that to the flexibility of Coursera and its understanding of the concerns of higher education institutions. The agreement is not secret, with many of them available for perusal online, including UMD’s.

- Choosing the course offerings. Recruiting faculty and selecting courses was a task of winnowing to a reasonable number from a large set of quality offerings (rather than hunting for volunteers). Today, we have a steady flow of faculty who are interested in being “in the next wave,” and our first Coursera offerings won’t debut until early spring of 2013. In fact, at this time, our biggest challenge involves how to deftly and sensitively say “No, not just now, maybe later” to an increasingly eager and ambitious number of faculty.

- Preparing the courses. Here, we are still gaining knowledge. The first to-do with Coursera involved creating the “course landing pages” (like “trailers” for a coming-attraction movie). This was revealing on many levels, including the need to establish better video support services (we used our University Relations studio and talent) and also support for our faculty on “being ready for their close-up.” What we’re only now starting to understand is how much goes in to actually preparing the course “modules”: Coursera’s structure encourages faculty-led “imparting” sessions of 12 to 15 minutes, augmented with associated assignments, discussions, and assessment...
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exercises to create learning modules delivered via its online platform in a synchronous approach.

The challenges we’ve exposed in our process have illuminated a broader set of questions:

- **What is this new approach to pedagogy?** There is a definite need for a better understanding on the part of faculty of what the new paradigm of pedagogy means to them. Many faculty may come to the discussions thinking of the current model of IT enablement in blended and online learning, which is largely one of using information technology (learning management systems and their many attendant parts) to automate the process of course delivery, with little impact in the classroom or in the curriculum. Coursera’s approach is challenging this model and is opening up what may be a renaissance in faculty members’ approach to teaching (and students’ approach to learning) in a 21st-century IT environment. What we have here is a new way to apply an old IT term—Business Process Reengineering—to the fundamental business of our universities.

- **MOOCs are “it,” right?** The focus on this “next big thing” has often been viewed as a search for what might be called the Highlander Model—that is, there can be only one, and MOOCs are the one. Of course, MOOCs are just a single tool in the online education toolbox. We need to stop thinking in terms of a MOOC revolution and instead think in terms of teaching and learning revolution, of which MOOCs are just one (currently very disruptive) element.

- **Do we need another administrator?** A critical challenge is the shortness of time to act. Events are transpiring quickly, and the revolution in online education may not patiently wait for the evolution of our institutions in terms of how our faculty and scholarly support structures respond. Several leading institutions have decided that there is value in a senior-level position (e.g., vice provost, special assistant to the president), not necessarily to take ownership of all facets of online education but to coordinate the process by which an institution can quickly evolve its collaborative activities.

- **What is the role of information technology?** Many observers, including me, argue that MOOCs are not really about information technology and are not something that should be led by the IT organization. That said, as the debate rages in the academic divisions and the cabinets of our institutions, the IT organization is well positioned to take a “recon” role—that is, to establish a beachhead, or a pilot, or a furtive first experiment or discussion. I’m sure I’m not the only CIO to be called by the president or provost when the MOOC events began to unfold. This makes sense: those of us in information technology are well positioned to contribute in turbulent times. Our challenge will be how to do so and then how to relinquish the point position when the academic divisions are ready to assume their rightful place leading this charge into our future.

In his blog post, Lombardi advises colleges and universities to watch and wait until the leading institutions have experimented and developed a viable strategy that can deliver value (from MOOCs) to their communities. He further cautions that governing boards should exercise caution in demanding trendy responses from their institutions and that it is often best to observe, study, and evaluate and to perform a cost-benefit analysis before jumping onto the next big thing. This is sound advice for many, to be sure.

But I would argue that we can better do these things—including learning about these new environments, platforms, and processes so as to apply their value in the broader blended and online initiatives we undertake, well beyond MOOCs—by taking an active role rather than simply watching and waiting. We should be in this game, and actively so. Our higher education institutions are about creating, sharing, and preserving knowledge. By taking an active role in the MOOC revolution, we are fulfilling the first, to the benefit of the second.

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**Notes**


2. See, for example, Doug Guthrie, “Jump Off the Coursera Bandwagon,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Commentary), December 17, 2012.


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