The Adult Learner and MOOCs

In the past twelve months, many interesting alternative models to the learning that has traditionally occurred in the classroom have been presented. Students are hacking their education by gaining more non-collegiate credit through their employers and looking to providers such as Udacity (https://www.udacity.com/) and Coursera (https://www.coursera.org/) for additional learning. This has been the year of the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC): a recent search on Google Trends for Massive Open Online Course shows the trend picked up in February–March 2012, peaked in March 2013, and was down by almost 20 percent in June 2013. We’re seeing the trend of the MOOC disappear and the work of the MOOC begin.

Colorado State University–Global Campus (CSU-Global) is one of the newest public universities in the United States and is the only fully online, independently accredited state university with a mission of helping adult, non-traditional students complete their bachelor’s degrees and earn master’s degrees. As an institution focused on adults, we understand that quality learning emphasizing real-world skills happens inside and outside the classroom. That’s why we have enjoyed the growth of MOOCs: they have so much potential to be a positive force for motivated adults who want not only to learn but also possibly to earn credit for that learning.

CSU-Global was the first U.S. institution to accept credit from a MOOC. In that case, our faculty reviewed the CS101 Introduction to Programming course from Udacity and determined that the scope of the learning outcomes and the strategies to support student learning were typical for an introductory programming course. Based on that analysis, we decided that instead of developing our own introductory programming course, we would advise our students to complete the Udacity course; when they pass the proctored exam, we award transfer credit for their demonstrated learning. Since that time, other institutions have developed partnerships with the major providers of MOOCs. With the possibility that many MOOCs will receive American Council on Education (ACE) equivalency through the ACE CREDIT program, such partnerships will only increase.

At CSU-Global we also developed our own MOOC, designed around preparation for the New Product Development Professional Certification as part of a broader project to better understand the andragogy of such a learning platform to support our adult, non-traditional students. In this case, students who completed the MOOC could take a proctored exam to earn undergraduate credit. From the work we have done, we believe that adult learners can benefit from the openness of this style of learning. Indeed, for working adults, open might be one of the more attractive aspects of a MOOC. Before the MOOC explosion, there were many ways to participate in self-guided coursework: publishers have offered products, including adaptive online labs, that support learning; and other providers have been moving into the realm of providing ACE-approved coursework. But for working adults, it is the open part of a MOOC that is compelling. We understand that as some of the big players need to find ways to generate revenue from their platforms, the openness of MOOCs might not be around for long. Based on the population of our own MOOC, we believe that while these resources are still open, adult learners will continue to take advantage of MOOCs to learn on their own schedules.

The impact of “the year of MOOC” will be felt for some time to come. Although much of the focus so far has been on more traditional institutions and the impact of MOOCs on their students, we need to remember that non-traditional learners compose the majority of higher education students in the United States. Educational institutions that focus on adult, non-traditional learners thus need to embrace MOOCs and the open aspect of MOOCs. Not every institution needs a MOOC, and our own experiment with creating a MOOC was more about developing a knowledge-base of best practice than about joining in the revolution, but much of what we’ve seen with the platform is here to stay, and it can be leveraged to support degree completion by working adults.

As more MOOC providers receive approval for their courses through the ACE CREDIT program, institutions that accept non-traditional credit should treat MOOC credits the same as other common ACE-approved credits, such as from military and industry training. This affects adult learners in two important ways:

1. **Shorter time-to-completion.** Students can continue their studies at an institution while taking a MOOC on their own time, and if the MOOC is ACE-approved and the institu-
tion accepts ACE-approved credit, students may graduate sooner. For traditional students, this may not be a high priority as they gain additional experience on campus, but at CSU-Global, we know from experience with our adult students that additional credit decreases time-to-completion and can enhance persistence—which are often issues for adult learners and for transfer students in particular. Our data shows that many of our graduates have improved their employment outlook by getting a better job, receiving a raise, or improving their current job security—all good reasons for completing a degree.

2. **Lower costs.** At CSU-Global we are proud of the learning that occurs and the relationships that develop between faculty and students, and though we are holding tuition steady, MOOCs provide a good option for many adults to complete college credit without taking on additional debt. Keeping the cost of a degree low is important for all students but especially so for adults—who, because of the timing of their degree completion, may have a shorter professional career to pay off college debt before their own children enter college. Much of the debate about student debt focuses on traditional students graduating with high debt, but high debt loads significantly exacerbate loan repayment for middle-age completers. MOOCs can help these students complete more credits, at lower cost.

The change that MOOCs have brought to higher education may wane over the coming year as the innovation is adopted by more institutions, but the need of adult, non-traditional students to learn job-relevant skills and to complete a degree is only increasing. MOOC providers should thus consider adult learning theory as well when developing MOOCs. Many MOOCs were developed by faculty who transferred, to the MOOC environment, an on-campus course typically taught to traditional students. We need to better understand what works for adults and build that into the MOOC environment. MOOCs can provide solutions to help adults complete degrees and enhance their opportunities for employment. We hope we see more institutions focus on adult learners and embrace the ability of MOOCs to open up learning and help students complete degrees more quickly, at a lower overall cost.

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