

Massive Open Online Classes and International Learning

Written by Michael S. Roth

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MICHAEL S. ROTH, JUL 26 2014

Change, some of it potentially disruptive, has come to American higher education in a very visible way in recent years. Technology promises to expand the reach of compelling teachers while significantly reducing costs. In the last couple of years, massive online classes (MOOCs) have been prominent in debates concerning the future of higher education. Those who want to see universities become much more narrowly utilitarian embrace the classes as quick paths to the certification of marketable skills. Similarly, those who fear the further commercialization of universities see the technology of MOOCs as contributing to growing alienation and depersonalization in higher education. Although at first skeptical, I have come to believe that we can use this platform to advance liberal education. It can also be used for forms of training. No particular technology in itself enables or threatens liberal learning, but those who want to expand its range must experiment with new technologies. That's why I decided to offer a rather traditional humanities class, *The Modern and the Postmodern*, as a MOOC with Coursera and recruited professors from at least six different departments at Wesleyan University to join me in offering online versions of their undergraduate classes.

If *The Modern and the Postmodern* was an unlikely candidate for a MOOC, I was an equally unlikely candidate to teach one. As a university president, I don't have as much time to devote to teaching as I would like, and taking on this additional assignment, with all its unknown variables, seemed to many in my administration overly ambitious. Actually, some told me it was crazy. In addition, I was no fan of the massive online classes I'd checked out. It seemed clear to me that whatever learning happened online via lectures, quizzes, and peer-graded essays was very different from what I'd experienced in residential colleges and universities.

I was intrigued, though, by the prospect of sharing my class with a large, international group of people who wanted to study. This was really going beyond the university's campus, and I wondered if doing so would change the way I thought about teaching and learning. I certainly wasn't looking for ways to replace the campus experience, but I was open to expanding the framework within which to think about it. How would students learn via recorded lectures, and how would I know what they were learning if they were grading each other? Would there really be a "massive" number of students who wanted to take a humanities class focused on literature, history, and philosophy? Would I be able to teach effectively without the instant feedback I receive from students when I am talking with them in a classroom? And how would teaching in the online format affect the way I teach on campus and the way Wesleyan will educate the coming generations of students?

I was surprised that almost thirty thousand people enrolled in the class, but I also found the number intimidating. I was used to facing a room full of eager faces, and we usually came to enjoy one another's company as we studied together. Thirty thousand strangers I couldn't even see just scared me. My "lectures" in the campus classroom are almost totally improvised—I talk about a number of quotations from the assigned reading and respond to questions. And I say dumb things all too often, but in the classroom we always find ways to move on. In an online class, however, some silly joke I make about Freud could go viral and become my epitaph.

On our first day, the website for *The Modern and the Postmodern* was eerily quiet. Finally, our tech-support person discovered that we had neglected to click something akin to a "Go Live" button. We did that while I was driving my daughter home from high school. When I checked the site after dinner, I was astonished at the level of activity. Study groups were forming based on language and geography. There were Spanish and Portuguese groups, study units

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forming in Bulgaria and Russia and Boston and India. “Anyone in Maine?” someone plaintively inquired. (Turns out there are quite a few Courserians there.)

Geographical diversity was just the start. Some members of the class decided to begin a discussion board for older students, and many retired teachers joined in. Three couples were following the class together—all six had Ph.D. degrees—and decided to write me with questions about my definitions of the modern. Students holding down full-time jobs wrestled with Rousseau and Marx but wished the two would just “get to the point,” while a graduate student in the Netherlands provided fabulous lists of secondary sources for those who wanted more reading. There were students who were in high school and dreaming of college, older folks who wanted to discuss poetry when they came home from work, and people from all over the world who just had a deep desire to continue to learn.

After about a month, we organized a Google Hangout (a visual conference call) in which several students (chosen by lottery) could participate in a free-flowing discussion about the reading and lectures. We recorded the hour-long session and made it available to everyone else in the class. One hangout included people in Calcutta, São Paulo, southwest France and . . . Rhode Island. The first question from India was about the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire. We’d talked about his notion of the *flâneur*, the happy wanderer in the modern city. The Indian student wanted to know how I’d connect this notion to Baudelaire’s interest in how our senses can be activated by powerful works of art. The student from Brazil said the week’s readings, by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ludwig Wittgenstein, were “mind blowing,” and she asked how their ideas of memory related to those of the other authors we’d read.

This hour-long intense discussion wasn’t a “massive” conversation; it was a colloquy mediated by technology. Thousands of other students would watch the hangout, and many of them would resume these conversations in different forms—from face-to-face meetings in cafes to virtual encounters in online chat rooms. They were eager for intellectual stimulation and cultural participation; they had a strong desire to learn how to learn—to experience great works of literature and philosophy in ways that would promote further inquiry. They had, in sum, an appetite for liberal learning that extended far beyond the college years and the campus boundaries.

Many have written about the extraordinarily high attrition rates in MOOCs. At Wesleyan we expect (almost) all of our students to complete their coursework on time, while most MOOCs have attrition rates of more than 90 percent. But saying someone “failed to complete” a free, open online class is like saying someone “failed to complete” the *New Yorker* in the week she received it. Most don’t sign up for the class or the magazine for purposes of “completion.” Half of those who enroll often don’t even actively begin the class, while others will learn with the course rather than seek to finish it for purposes of a grade and certificate (although some do want that). There are many access points for increasing one’s understanding of the world and its history. Students use MOOCs differently than students use the classroom, and we should pay attention to that rather than think the online world fails to replicate a “really real” classroom. When I teach my course on campus next year, I want to give my undergraduates the benefits of what I’ve learned from the online version. This will be more than just using recorded lectures as homework. It will be integrating perspectives on things great thinkers have said—and things I’ve said—from an amazing range of people from across the globe.

On the Discussion Forum for *The Modern and the Postmodern* there are any number of threads. Some comment on the teaching (happily, they are very enthusiastic about the lectures), others on the grading (more than a few complaints about the peer evaluations), and still others offer complementary materials to add to our study—from songs to scholarly articles to cartoons. One student wrote about how much he enjoyed the class because it was a respite from taking care of his disabled parent. This sparked a conversation with several others who were in similar situations. Others talked of missing the excitement of being at a university, while still more talked about never having had that opportunity. At Wesleyan we embrace the label “Diversity University,” but we are highly selective and admit a small percentage of the very qualified people who apply. My MOOC impressed upon me aspects of difference and inclusion I don’t often encounter on my campus.

One of the threads of our discussion board asked why those in the class felt the need to keep studying. A student from Singapore wrote about our class “igniting the fire for learning,” while a Swiss graduate student enrolled with his

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“mum” so that they would be able to discuss the material together. She’d dropped out, but he said that he finds the camaraderie online a reminder of why he went to a university in the first place. Somehow, the graduate seminars he takes in Zurich don’t live up to his expectations. A student in South India related that decades after having completed formal schooling, “learning makes me feel alive.” And a student who didn’t say where she’s from simply wrote: “Baudelaire has captured me. I love the living and the feeling and the participating in life’s beauty and ugliness. I have taken to carrying Paris Spleen around town with me as I walk and bike.”

I have now repeated “The Modern and the Postmodern” course a few times. This is an odd experience, because the “personality” of each class is a little different, even though my lectures (for the first time in my life) are the same from semester to semester. By now, I’ve taught students from more than 100 different countries, and I’ve interacted in substantial ways with many of them (although still with a minority of those enrolled). In 2013 I developed a new course called “How to Change the World” (HtCW), in conjunction with the 92nd St Y and several other organizations that sponsor the Social Good Summit during United Nations Week in New York City. Whereas “The Modern and the Postmodern” is an online version of an on-campus class I’ve taught for almost 2 decades, HtCW is a class I planned very much with online students in mind. I wanted to “MOOCify” the Social Good Summit – take the best of the lectures and discussions and turn them into educational materials that could be distributed through the Wesleyan-Coursera partnership.

HtCW is comprised of units on the concepts of social good and the commons, and then on global challenges and how to begin to meet them. We take on the following topics: Poverty and Development; Climate Change and Sustainability; Disease and Health; Gender and Education; Activism and Social Change. Since I’m no expert in these areas, I offer only introductory talks on each topic and then interview faculty, activist and NGO leaders who are deeply informed about the issues, why we should care about them and how we can make a positive difference.

I’ve had almost 100,000 students sign up for two iterations of the class, and their responses have been dizzyingly diverse. Some of the activists find the class too academic or conservative, and they want both stronger condemnations of the status quo and clearer paths for radical action. Others want to find ways to make a personal difference through volunteer efforts, while still others are immersing themselves in the details of one or more of the topics just to understand them better. Student set up their own Facebook page and a Wiki to forge links and create organizations outside the structures of the class. This month we have partnered with OpenIDEO, a crowdsourcing project of the design firm IDEO to enlist input on issues affecting the globe. Over the coming months OpenIDEO and the Clinton Global Initiative are asking for design responses to the problem of youth employment. As of now hundreds of my students are working on this issue with these other networks. MOOCs can open onto very different pathways.

Turns out the “massive” part of these open courses was the least interesting thing about them. My students didn’t feel like a mass. It’s the differences among them, and how they bridge those differences through social networks, that energized their MOOC experience and mine. Of course, like books and lectures, films and recordings, MOOCs can also be used for much more utilitarian ends, but I found in teaching one that there is plenty that is compatible with the goals of liberal education. The technology of MOOCs revealed that there was a wide international interest in learning for its own sake, an interest in broadening one’s cultural experience and in connecting with other people who share one’s passionate curiosity. Like the “Modern and the Post-Modern”, HtCW is a gateway course that stimulates a desire to learn more. My course, which I like to call “good-enough books” class, aims to combine the intertwined traditions of inquiry and cultural participation. I am trying to help my students develop their critical thinking skills while also inviting them to revere great achievements in philosophy, history, and literature. In HtCW, I am asking the students to digest a significant amount of data on, say, poverty and economic development, while also helping them to think about how to present this data in a way that can stimulate effective action. My aim, then, in both classes is to contribute to the student’s liberal education—and this is just as true online as it is in person. Liberal learning mattered to my online students in some of the same ways it matters to my students on campus: it helps them in the process of self-discovery while bringing them into a more thoughtful conversation with the world around them.

Much of the euphoria and hype around MOOCs has died down in the last year, and some of the fear-mongering, too. That’s a good thing. Online classes that reach an international audience won’t solve all the problems of higher education, but they are an effective tool to use for increasing awareness, stimulating research and creating widely

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dispersed networks of learning and action. Rather than fear them or celebrate them as “disruptive forces,” we should work at making them more effective for reaching an international group of “learners” who want to connect with important material and with one another.

About the author:

Michael S. Roth is president of Wesleyan University. His most recent books are “Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters” and “Memory, Trauma and History: Essays on Living With the Past.”