

The Future Of Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

Quora



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[What according to you is the future of MOOCs?](#) originally appeared on [Quora](#): the place to gain and share knowledge, empowering people to learn from others and better understand the world.

[Answer](#) by [Deepak Mehta](#), long time student, on [Quora](#):

I think MOOCs are the future. There are many inherent advantages an open online

course has over the standard educational pedagogy that has been the norm for years now.

- **Scalability:** In the conventional set-up, if you want to increase the number of students in a class, you need to move to a bigger classroom. Or in all likelihood, revamp the infrastructure. With an online classroom, scaling up the course batch size is a few clicks away.
- **Optimal resource utilization:** Imagine a Nobel laureate administering a course at UCLA. At the max, he/she can only teach a class of 100–300. In their lifetime, they might be able to directly tutor a few thousands young minds. Is that truly the best use of such rare resources?
- **Self-paced:** Many a studies have found that people have different learning styles, and pick up new concepts at varying paces. Self-paced courses allow one to study and learn at their own leisurely rate.
- **Removal of other constraints:** Not everybody in the world is privileged enough or sufficiently financially endowed to go to the States or Europe for higher studies. People currently in the work-force have very few options for pursuing their academic interests that fit into their work-schedule. Online courses can help mitigate and remove all such systemic barriers, thus truly making education a universally available resource.

And finally, MOOCs are in line with the current job market where any skill becomes obsolete in a decade or so. Gone are the years when what you learned in college stuck with you throughout your working life. With the rapid pace of technological changes, constant learning is the most pressing need of the day. And MOOCs are adequately equipped to address and serve it.

Current challenges towards greater adoption.

Three of the most pressing critiques of an open learning system are (a) lack of an effective system to measure and validate the progress of the learners, (b) how to integrate the course credits into the present system so that it counts towards a degree from a college, and (c) how do you ensure personalized guidance and mentorship.

The first part is currently being tackled by various MOOC providers. The idea is to have periodic assessments that actually test whether the students have understood the concepts. The key challenge would be to come up with a system wherein the answers are easy to check (multiple choice questions or variants thereof) and also not easily “Google-able”.

Coming to the second part, a few Universities have started launching their full-fledged courses online or allowing certain validated MOOCs to contribute credits to their physical courses.

- Harvard has recently (Feb 2017) started an Economics course on edX titled [From Poverty to Prosperity: Understanding Economic Development](#).
- [Leeds and Open University](#) are now allowing certain MOOCs to contribute credits towards the final degree.
- [FutureLearn](#) already awards degrees from various colleges, including, but not limited to, University of Leeds, University of Birmingham, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT University, etc.

The final issue is the one where a viable solution needs to be found. And quickly. A big plus of a physical learning system is that the teacher gets to know their students - their interests, their strengths, and their aspirations, enabling them to provide nuanced feedback and engage with them more fruitfully. The same model cannot be scaled up for

an online course being taken concurrently by thousands of students. May be having a 3-tier pyramid structure with the course professor on top, the students on the bottom, and a middle layer of teaching/research assistants, or doctoral students can help bridge the gap for the time being. But alas, a robust recourse is direly needed.

The Future. *"Will MOOCs ever truly replace physical colleges and universities?"*

MOOCs have been one of the most hotly-debated topics in the education circles over the past few years. Opinions have been extremely polarizing, with some people heralding it as the greatest leap for education since the invention of the printing press, and some dismissing it as another fad.

A 2014 report by the UK Department for Education highlighted some of the key trends impacting the MOOC ecosystem. ([Full report](#))

Through the literature review and from our interviews, we have observed a number of changes underway in the capabilities and model for MOOCs:

- Content is becoming cheaper to make, at the margin. This stems from cheaper and better hardware, easier-to-use editing software, and platforms that can present content more effectively.
- Expectations of content quality are fragmenting – some believe that it is becoming more acceptable to offer very simple videos, while others believe that the “talking head” video style is increasingly unacceptable, and that appropriate animation or visualisation is required.
- Platforms are advancing; better social tools (for example peer grading is increasingly automated) and some progress in building functionality to allow personalisation.
- Course designers are becoming more experienced – not only is there a growing body of experienced MOOC administrators, but those who are coming to their first MOOC are better prepared (more learning material available, including e-learning courses).
- Assessment getting more powerful; multiple choice is becoming a minority grading tool, alongside automated free text grading, peer grading, and – in future – automated long answer grading.
- The proliferation of MOOC provision and availability is fragmenting student volumes, making it harder to reach massive scale.

[Another analysis](#) by an Exec Director at the University of Texas listed down the 10 biggest challenges that need to be overcome in order to facilitate greater acceptance of online learning.

Challenge 1: Discussion Forums

Why is it that comments on newspaper websites are rich and widely read, while the discussion forums in MOOCs or class LMS sites are not? Too often, discussion forums in courses consist of disconnected comments and mindless chatter. The explanation is straightforward: Newspaper forums have a facilitator who deletes unproductive or offensive postings. A rating system that makes use of “likes” prioritizes strong and compelling contributions.

Challenge 2: Cohorting

Small online discussion groups or collaborative teams too often work poorly—in stark contrast to the kinds of connections that dating sites or

listservs produce. Why is this? Dating sites and listservs understand that groups emerge organically when individuals share common interests, profiles, and motivations.

Challenge 3: Interactives

Across the country, campuses are reinventing the wheel: creating animations, simulations, virtual laboratories, and other teaching resources of varying quality and utility at great expense. Redundancy is widespread. Quality is highly variable. Why? Because of the lack of a carefully curated repository and a recommendation and comment system.

Challenge 4: Student Engagement and Persistence

Although some MOOCs have experimented with term length, rates of learner engagement and persistence remain low. Lurkers and dabblers abound. How might we change this? One possible answer: Challenge or crowdsourcing MOOCs – which take a pressing problem and strive to solve it. Imagine a timely MOOC offered by Médecins Sans Frontières on best practices in caring for Ebola patients. Another possible model was pioneered by Cathy Davidson's History and Future of Higher Education MOOC, which combined an online component with face-to-face courses in multiple countries.

Challenge 5: Progressive Personal Profile

Google rests on a personal profile. So, too, does Linked In. A personal profile allows a website to tailor recommendations to a user's interests. A progressive personal profile would allow educators to follow students' learning trajectory, including areas of confusion or misunderstanding, facilitating the development of personalized learning pathways.

Challenge 6: Personalization

Customization is a watchword of contemporary marketing. Personalized adaptive learning, with embedded remediation and enrichment, ought to be one of MOOCs holy grails. Given their large "n," MOOCs hold out the prospect of developing multiple learning pathways to better meet students' learning needs.

Challenge 7: Data Analytics and Learning Dashboards

Big data and predictive algorithms, which underlie today's search engines, can be equally useful in education. These tools can identify learning pinch points, toxic course combinations, students at risk, and the efficacy of student support programs.

Challenge 8: The User Experience

Commercial websites differ profoundly from learning management systems. Unlike LMSs, with their file or tab structure, commercial websites are more elegant and easily navigated. Design elements are transparent. Support is a click away. And, most strikingly, commercial websites are mobile first and are supplemented with individualized notifications.

Challenge 9: Credentialing

It remains striking: Almost no campuses that have created MOOC offer them

for credit to their own students. Nor is it clear that the various badges, certificates, or specializations have a clear value in the labor market. A great challenge for MOOC providers is to ensure that the credentials they offer are genuinely meaningful—industry aligned or validated by professional associations or another respected organization.

Challenge 10: A Sustainable Business Model

Gated Executive MOOCs. Verified certificates. Licensed content. The MOOC provider as LMS. MOOC as loss leader for for-fee programs. The quest for a sustainable business model remains one of MOOCs' biggest challenges. One potential model is MOOC as next generation multimedia textbook, which might be especially attractive for students who are unwilling to undertake sustained reading and who are seeking a lower cost alternative to printed textbooks.

In essence, there seems to be some amount of convergence towards a common standard in the near-future.

1. The “freemium” model: MOOCs can't always be free. They cost a lot to make, more than the cost of actual education. However, if MOOCs are completely pay-walled, they would diverge from their major mandate - to make learning accessible to all. The solution: a middle-of-the-road solution wherein course content is made available for all (free) but a certificate/degree/diploma requires extra evaluation and a fee (premium).
2. MOOCs as a supplement rather than a full-fledged replacement (at least in the near future): MOOCs will be utilized hand-in-hand with the traditional methods wherein completing a particular online course contributes a certain amount of credits towards the actual course or the degree program.
3. Increased proportion of self-paced courses: Self-paced courses provide flexibility to the aspirants in terms of time and effort commitment and they have been constituting a ever increasing chunk of total available courses. Some MOOC providers like coursera have time-bound courses, but with regular new sessions starting every month or so allowing students who couldn't meet a particular deadline to transfer all of their work done to the next session and simply shift their timetable by a month or two.
4. Personalized learning modules: Online courses currently are static, and for understandable reasons. With the advent of Big Data and AI, the natural course of action would be to use the data collected on a student to build a learner profile that can effectively mimic their learning behavior, allowing the content to be tailored to the course-taker.

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