POSSIBILITIES FOR MOOCS IN CORPORATE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

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The term *MOOC*, an acronym for massive open online course, has been nearly ubiquitous in recent discussions about online education and distance learning. Some articles have questioned the MOOC's tentative role as "the future of education," while others have framed it as a disrupter of traditional higher education. Research in earlier years trended toward the ways in which MOOCs may be changing the landscape of higher education. However, in the past two years, greater consideration has been focused on how MOOCs may play a role in the corporate world. The year 2012 may have been deemed "The Year of the MOOC," but many saw 2014 as "The Year of the Corporate MOOC." Despite MOOCs reaching their prominence as disrupters of traditional higher education, MOOC providers are now aggressively pursuing opportunities in the corporate sector. This presents a great opportunity for corporations to drive this relatively new learning platform and to tailor it to meet their organizational needs. The potential uses for MOOCs in the corporate world are vast. MOOCs can expand corporate training options, offer new recruiting techniques, and provide innovative marketing and branding channels. This article identifies the features of MOOCs, briefly reviews the history of the MOOC movement from academic MOOCs to corporate MOOCs, and discusses the possibilities for extending the MOOC format to a corporate training and employee development environment.

MOOC, AN ACRONYM for *massive open online course*, has been nearly ubiquitous in recent discussions about online education and distance learning. The MOOC is a technology-based learning format that encourages open education. MOOCs are open in the sense that they are free from the geographical boundary of physical classrooms in that they are held entirely online; free from physical boundaries that limit course size, given that they are able to accommodate tremendous numbers of learners, with the term *massive* suggesting more learners than would be physically feasible for an individual instructor to interact with in the real world; free from temporal boundaries in that their content can

be accessed on demand as often as desired given a working Internet connection; free from entry requirements in that they rarely have formal prerequisites as barriers to entry, allowing learners of all skill levels to explore content; and, in the case of higher education, free from financial limitations, given they are presented without cost to learners, occasionally with options for premium services.

MOOCs are still new and not without detractors. Some authors have questioned MOOCs' tentative role as "the future of education" (Galer, 2013; Hare, 2014; Olney, 2013; Swink, 2014), while others (Ourghanlian, 2012) have framed a MOOC as a "disrupter" of traditional

higher education. Indeed, the unique learning experience provided by MOOCs offers several possible benefits. It is an environment in which students are able to access all course content and resources online, often without cost, and with open enrollment for all.

Although research in earlier years trended toward the ways in which MOOCs changed the landscape of higher education, since 2013, greater consideration has focused on how MOOCs may play a role in the corporate world (Bersin, 2014; Carson, 2014; Clark, 2013; EvoLLLution NewsWire, 2013; Jaitapker, 2013; Kalman, 2014; Nielson, 2014; Weiss, 2013; Wells, 2013). In fact, the year 2012 was labeled "The Year of the MOOC" (Pappano, 2012), and 2014 was dubbed "The Year of the Corporate MOOC" (Nielson, 2014). This article will identify the features of MOOCs, review the history of the MOOC movement from academic MOOCs to corporate MOOCs, and discuss the possibilities for extending the MOOC format in corporate training and employee development environments.

MOOCs DEFINED

The term *MOOC* was first coined by Dave Cormier and Bryan Alexander in 2008 (Parr, 2013). In the same year, Stephen Downes and George Siemens featured the term in their course, Connectivism and Connective Knowledge, widely recognized as among the first official MOOC (Marques, 2013). Downes and Siemens further distinguished MOOCs into two major models: the *xMOOC* and the *cMOOC* (Downes, 2012; Hilger, 2014; Siemens, 2012b).

Note that xMOOCs are more closely related to traditional learning methods employed in higher education. They make a distinction between the role of the instructor and the learner. These courses feature the trappings of formal university courses, including a formal syllabus, and content is often presented in video lectures with assessments administered through quizzes (Hoyle, 2012; Siemens, 2012b). In this sense, xMOOCs align with the instructivist philosophy.

Less traditional are cMOOCs, which deemphasize the roles of the learner versus the instructor. The "c" in cMOOC stands for connectivist and refers to cMOOCs' insistence on the use of collaborative tools that encourage students to work in groups and form social networks, exercising the view that participation and social interaction are key to the learning experience.

Put simply, Siemens (2012b) describes the difference as follows: "cMOOCs focus on knowledge creation and generation whereas xMOOCs focus on knowledge duplication" (para. 3). Although both models of MOOCs adopt the massive-open-online format, they have been paired with contrasting educational ideologies. One model may be beneficial over the other, given a specific set of learning needs or learner preferences, with cMOOCs appealing to desires for social collaboration and learner-agency and xMOOCs appealing to the need for scaling the dissemination of expert, top-of-class knowledge.

PRE-MOOCs AND EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

As noted, the concept and formal terminology of MOOCs is relatively recent. However, some aspects of MOOCs have existed for generations. Precursors of MOOCs include paper correspondence courses, which have been around for over a century; various forms of media-based courses, including radio, television, and video- and computer-mediated courses of recent years; and, most recently, Internet-based e-courses. Like MOOCs, all of these options are representative of distance learning, having offered learners an opportunity to experience education regardless of their location, though with varying levels of success and complication. Likewise, the concept of open education is also preestablished. This philosophy, which took hold from the 1960s through the 1970s in the United States and England, was seated in progressive ideals including holistic learning, group collaboration and social interaction, heightened student participation, and student-directed learning (StateUniversity.com, 2014).

Downes and Siemens's Connectivism and Connective Knowledge online course offered in 2008 holds the distinction of being among the first of the official MOOCs. Connectivism and Connective Knowledge, itself informed by the connectivist approach to learning and inspired by earlier attempts at open courses and open conferences, was hosted by the University of Manitoba. It paired a certified, offline option for learning with an open online option that enabled more than 2,000 web-based learners to access course materials and follow along with the course (Marques, 2013; Siemens, 2012a). In late 2011, Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig introduced another MOOC, Artificial Intelligence, which was taught to 200 students at Stanford along with an additional 160,000 students from 190 countries (Cupaiuolo, 2012).

As noted earlier, in the months following the success of Thrun and Norvig's course, the *New York Times* hailed 2012 "The Year of the MOOC" (Pappano, 2012). Indeed, the year saw the launch of Coursera founded by Thrun, Udacity founded by Stanford professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller, and edX founded by MIT and Harvard, which in 2014 was among the largest and most well-known among providers of MOOCs (Ha, 2014).

FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO CORPORATE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

MOOCs have primarily been the domain of higher education from the very beginning. The most popular MOOC providers have either partnered with universities or have sought out experienced professors as instructors, in attempts to create MOOCs with high-caliber content that is on par with the for-credit and in-person courses taught on college campuses. The majority of these MOOCs correspond to the xMOOC model, with the ultimate goal of making university quality courses and resources accessible to the many, rather than the exclusive few.

On the surface, it is easy to question the appropriateness of the MOOC format for businesses. The MOOC format may appear less compatible with the traditional aim of corporate learning because it is so public and, in some ways, driven to provide generic content so as to be applicable to as many learners as possible. This stands apart from traditional corporate learning, which appeals to private and specific companies that develop or purchase formal training that is specific to their organization's business practices or that is custom-tailored to employee audiences fulfilling a particular role. Given these possible conflicts, is it possible for companies to leverage MOOCs and the MOOC format to support their organizational aims? The key to answering this question is to take a closer look at the benefits of MOOCs in relation to the distinct ways in which a company may integrate MOOCs into its training and development structure.

Option 1: Take Advantage of Existing MOOCs to Supplement Employees' Development

Employers may leverage established MOOC providers' extant courses, encouraging staff to boost their job skills or knowledge by taking relevant courses. Employers may also require that staff complete specific MOOCs as prerequisites to in-house training that is company- or role-specific.

One benefit of this option is that these courses are tried and tested, containing top-of-class content. Many MOOCs hosted by the top providers have been created in partnership with top institutions. These courses may also have the benefit of having been tested before by thousands of learners in earlier iterations or sessions.

Existing courses also provide a cost benefit for both potential students and their employers. As many of these courses are available completely free of charge, there are no financial burdens for learners. Meanwhile, employers who encourage employees to participate in existing

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MOOCs reduce costs because they will not need to purchase access or licenses for the content. If MOOCs are being used in lieu of proprietary courses, employers need not spend resources on design and development of extra in-house training. Employers may also be able to avoid purchase and creation of a learning management system and the costs associated with its maintenance. Even if MOOCs are used as prerequisites or supplemental training, costs for formal in-house training can still be significantly decreased.

Additionally, some MOOC providers offer certifications or credit for MOOC completion. These credentials are valuable as a means of recognizing employees' efforts at attaining newly learned skills, as well for legitimizing the learning experience (Meister, 2013; Yupangco, 2014). In some cases, these credentials will cost a small fee; however, actually taking the course will still be free of cost.

Option 2: Develop MOOCs as an Opportunity to Market Your Company's Offerings to Potential Clients, Business Partners, or End Users

Companies may choose to partner with established MOOC providers or developers, or even with related businesses in the same field when following through with this scenario. This option is less about a company training its own people, but rather more about using the MOOC

as a tool for marketing and reaching out to other organizations or to individuals who may be able to benefit from the company's services or products. This creates positive brand awareness: Companies who create MOOCs for the public are not only sharing their knowledge, but are also able to attach their brand to something that can be useful and meaningful to consumers. Meister (2013) cites the example of partnership between Khan Academy and Bank of America to create branded but open web-based courses that teach consumers about managing their money.

The major benefit of this option comes in the form of additional publicity and marketing. Companies, especially in the software and technology industries, may build MOOCs aimed at introducing their products and training for interested learners who seek to be proficient at using these products. This increases awareness of company offerings while also building an increasing base of users.

An extra benefit of creating and distributing a MOOC is that a company can help learners build targeted skills, identify top learners through course results, and reach out to these top learners for hiring or business relationships. Herring (2014) provides the example of Aquent, a firm that released a MOOC on HTML 5 that received 10,000 registrants and went on to interview and hire 200 successful top performers.

Option 3: Implement "MOOC-Like" Solutions in Your Existing and Future Corporate Training

Rather than integrating a full MOOC solution or opting to have employees seek outside providers for training, companies may opt to tweak the MOOC format or to borrow the most useful features of MOOCs for their training and development models. One benefit of this option is that, rather than building from the ground up or completely deviating from previous attempts, a company may already have a formal learning structure upon which it may integrate the features of MOOCs that are most applicable and effective for the company's needs and corporate culture. For example, an organization may have an existing, manager-assignable e-course within a learning management system, but might opt to add MOOC-style collaborative tools and allow open enrollment for all employees to boost participation.

This option also enables greater control over content. Large companies may find the MOOC format to be suitable for their training needs, but may not wish to have employees rely on content from outside providers. By creating a private MOOC, companies can still have large scale courses that are always available for their employees, while still being able to ensure that content is secure and specifically designed for an internal audience (Herring, 2014).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR BUSINESSES

Swink (2014) states succinctly: "[I]f a MOOC doesn't contribute to organization goals, then question its necessity" (para. 4). MOOCs may be trending, but companies interested in integrating MOOCs into their official training structure will need to seriously consider whether the courses truly align with their aims for employee development. Questions that should be asked include:

1. *Is there a need?* MOOCs should not be employed simply for novelty. As with other training, a specific performance gap or additional need should be identified and training should be concretely recognized as the solution.

2. *What is being trained?* Course content should always be considered when deciding upon an appropriate format. MOOCs may not be the best choice for certain types of training. For example, MOOCs may not work well for compliance training in which learners must complete all content and wherein results of training may have serious legal ramifications (De Coutere, 2014). What other formats, such as learning management system–based e-learning, instructor-led courses, blended learning, and so on, may be more applicable to the content being covered?

3. *Who is the audience?* MOOCs are all about self-directed learning, but have been called out for notoriously low completion rates. Learners will need to stay motivated to continue on with a course. De Coutere (2014) explains, "[p]eople who can immediately benefit from the course, who can make the time and are capable of directing their own learning process, will thrive" (para. 11). Additionally, digital literacy is a requirement of the MOOC. What percentage of the company's workforce will feel comfortable with using the required technologies?

4. *Does the MOOC effectively tap into the benefits of the format?* Will the company rely on existing MOOCs, or will they develop their own MOOCs? Who will develop or has developed the MOOC? Has the MOOC been previously implemented, tested, or otherwise reviewed? Poor design may lead to passive learning, likely the opposite of what companies desire. Consider a MOOC that is essentially a transfigured lecture-based course wherein learners simply watch video presentations. If sufficient interactivity has not been built into the course, learners may lose interest, may not have avenues to practice the skills learned, or may not have

opportunities or impetus to interact with classmates and instructors. A course may be a MOOC nominally, but might not afford all of the MOOC benefits.

THE PRESENT OF ACADEMIC MOOCs AND THE FUTURE OF CORPORATE MOOCs

The popularity and success of MOOCs has been seen in K–12 and higher education settings. According to MOOCs.co (2014), a global directory of MOOCs, between June 2013 and June 2014 there was a 327% increase in the total number of MOOCs worldwide from a total of 615 to 2,625 by June 2014.

With regard to K–12 learning, MOOCs provide abundant opportunities to expand learning from traditional brick-and-mortar teacher-led classes to a more blended learning method. They also offer students access to courses that may have previously been out of reach, such as expanded language or advanced placement classes. MOOCs can also provide retrieval feedback more frequently, often referred to as knowledge checks or quizzes. These knowledge checks provide a chance to determine whether or not the learner understands the concepts presented. If the learner does not pass the knowledge check or quiz, that learner cannot proceed further in the course materials. In addition, the deadlines, tests, and homework that are present in traditional K–12 courses still exist in MOOCs.

To date, the most common K–12 MOOCs are primarily tutor-style courses. These courses are set up in a way that assists learners with specific subjects such as math, English, science, and so on (MOOCs.co, 2014). Most K–12 MOOCs are currently non-credit bearing, but some courses are beginning to offer certificates, enhanced learning services, and credit options for additional costs. Additionally, according to the MOOCs.co (2014), some MOOCs students are starting to submit their MOOCs course work to their current colleges and universities for credit.

Since MOOCs' inception in higher education, they have continued to grow in popularity. Their availability and low- to no-cost feature have pushed higher education institutions toward MOOCs as an answer to their growing challenges. According to a recent pilot study on MOOCs and higher education conducted by students at St. Xavier's College (Nath, Karmakar, & Karmakar, 2014), there are six major goals of MOOCs with regard to higher education: extending the reach of the institution, building and maintaining a brand, improving economics by lowering costs or increasing revenues, improving educational outcomes for MOOCs and on-campus students, innovation in teaching and learning,

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and conducting research on teaching and learning. Among these institutions, there are several different approaches to MOOCs. First, there are institutions that are actively developing and producing MOOCs. Second, there are institutions that are using or consuming MOOCs already developed by other institutions. Last, there are institutions that are taking a wait-and-see approach to the MOOCs movement. The latter group has considered MOOCs but has yet to make any moves to officially engage with MOOCs.

Best practices for K–12 MOOCs and higher education are still being established. During a recently organized European MOOCs conference, an editorial paper was published to help identify experiences and best practices around MOOCs. According to Koskinen and Ullmo (2014), many higher education institutions are requesting their staff to offer MOOCs in an effort to gain visibility. However, these courses can be daunting and require a lot of planning. Additionally, higher education institutions have to ensure that the MOOCs developed and offered by their staff align with the standards and caliber of their traditional courses. Their reputations are tied to every course offered under their name and the degrees and certificates awarded by them. These considerations, combined with the popularity of MOOCs, are sparking the attention of higher education institutions, giving way to an increased sense of urgency to research MOOCs and define best practices.

It stands to reason that while there is definitely a market and an interest for MOOCs in K–12 and in higher education institutions, defining best practices that are universally accepted may be challenging. One such challenge is accreditation; more specifically in terms of whether course completion should translate into credits that count toward degrees or diplomas and which institutions will accept them. However, higher learning institutions, which are the shapers of education policy, and investors expect MOOCs to change the economics

of higher education and make exclusive learning experiences available to an unlimited number of learners.

MOOCs are not only upsetting the more traditional learning offerings of higher education. In an effort to create sustainable business models, MOOC providers such as Udemy, edX, and Coursera are beginning to create and market corporate training programs. According to Castellano (2014), companies are able to access online courses and develop them based on their needs for a fee. These MOOC providers are developing offerings aimed at the corporate sector. This means that corporations can start to use MOOCs to lower the cost of employee training, build talent pipelines and identify job candidates with demonstrable skills, and get closer to prospects and customers.

CONCLUSION

Corporate learning seeks to enable the training and development of its employees in order to fill knowledge gaps and increase productivity. Corporations can leverage the MOOCs that have been developed by higher education and creatively apply them for their own specific purposes and needs. The training and development needs of corporations are vast and can be very specific depending on various factors. MOOCs provide a potentially low-cost means for companies to educate not only their employees, but also a global audience about products, services, and the company.

The sustainability of MOOCs in the corporate learning and development space relies heavily on its ability to measure the success and effectiveness of those MOOCs. Corporations need to be able to show not only that MOOCs are cost effective but that they also provide a learning resource that their employees will actually use. To meet these needs, MOOCs providers have started to react. For example, Coursera and edX are now selling certificates that verify that a student has completed a particular course. Udacity formed the Open Education Alliance with corporate members to create courses on technology skills desired by employers.

While MOOCs may have gotten their beginning in the higher education space, they are primed for use in the corporate sector. They may already have come to prominence as disrupters of the traditional higher education style, but MOOC providers are now aggressively pursuing opportunities in the corporate sector. This presents a great opportunity for corporations to drive this new learning platform and tailor it to meet their needs. The potential uses for MOOCs in the corporate world are vast. MOOCs can expand corporate training options, offer new recruiting techniques, and provide new marketing and branding channels. ☈

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