

GOING MOOC: MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES

by Phyllis Holman Weisbard

What was the most important new higher education concept of the last year? My vote is for MOOC, an acronym for Massive Open Online Courses. I've been following MOOC developments since 2012 in expectation of describing for *Feminist Collections* readers what MOOCs are all about — and, of course, any gender/women's studies angle. For a while I held off, because the big three — **Coursera**, **edX**, and **Udacity** — were mostly offering free technical courses open to thousands of participants around the globe and sporting other features that make these courses do-able, including peer “grading” and certificates, but not traditional course credit upon completion. But the landscape is evolving so rapidly, with additional players (including University of Wisconsin–La Crosse and University of Wisconsin–Madison) and related new models (including some with fees and some with course credit) that it seems worthwhile to assess the scene at the present time.¹

Let me dispense first with **Udacity** (<https://www.udacity.com/>), which debuted with and continues to offer “artificial intelligence” and other computer science courses, and **edX**, which debuted primarily with science and technology courses, although that may be changing. As the Udacity blog tells it, three roboticists started Udacity to “reinvent education for 21st century by bridging the gap between real-world skills, relevant education, and employment.” To date, Udacity has not announced any movement into the humanities or social sciences.

edX (<https://www.edx.org/>) was founded as a not-for-profit enterprise by Harvard and MIT, and has since been joined by Berkeley, the University of Texas System, Wellesley, and Georgetown. Any time you see a website with *nameofschoolX*, you are in edX territory. Courses are housed on edX's open source online learning platform, which, according to the edX FAQ, includes “self-paced learning, online discussion groups, wiki-based collaborative learning,” student assessment, and “online

laboratories and other interactive learning tools.” Using data from the courses, edX universities are also researching how students learn and how both online and on-campus learning can be transformed by technology. The University of Texas System includes six health institutions, which may give rise to health courses that will be of use to the gender/women's studies community. Neither Georgetown nor Wellesley has yet to announce its edX courses to start in Fall 2013, but with Wellesley in particular representing a liberal arts institution that educates women, one hopes that it will at least experiment with an interactive discussion-based course in the humanities or social sciences. Another edX development that may be good news for non-traditional students, including women, is a pilot project with the City of Boston to make Harvard and MIT online courses available through edX at Boston community centers, high schools, and libraries with Internet connections.

On to **Coursera**, the MOOC with the most partner institutions (33), course offerings (211), and students (2.1 million and counting — in fact, there's a real-time counter on the site at <https://www.coursera.org/>, if you really want an up-to-the-minute number). The University of Wisconsin–Madison joined in February 2013, planning to develop four pilot MOOCs (none in gender/women's studies). Two Coursera courses which started in early 2013 are in our realm: “Women and the Civil Rights Movement,” taught by University of Maryland Associate Professor of History and Women's Studies Elsa Barkely Brown; and “Contraception: Choices, Culture and Consequences,” offered by Jerusalem Makonnen, an Associate Clinical Professor in the School of Nursing, University of California San Francisco. Brown's course description is worth quoting, because it gives a good sense of how MOOCs run. This course consists of lecture videos, each eight to twelve minutes long, plus

a series of video discussions, including an analytical overview of the week's topics and themes and shorter case studies of specific activists, organizations, events. I will also offer video discussions of the major readings. There will be weekly quizzes and throughout the course students will be asked to write short essays offering insights into the reading. After a student has submitted an essay, the student will be given access to the essays written by several fellow students and be asked to read and comment on those. The course will include an optional online forum where students may raise questions about the historical material and engage the contemporary implications of our discussions of citizenship, rights, and political organizing. The forum will be monitored and in some cases I will reply in the forum or post a supplementary video clip for the class based on issues raised in the forum.²

If more instructors and institutions want to develop women/gender-focused MOOCs, assessment of how the discussions and forum work out in this course will be critical, particularly if there are hundreds or perhaps thousands of students.

Some unanticipated problems have arisen with MOOCs. Who would have predicted that students would cheat in a free, non-credit environment? Both Udacity and edX have addressed this by contracting with Pearson VUE, available in 110 countries, to proctor final exams. Students sitting for proctored exams pay a fee to Pearson, and, in the case of edX, will be awarded a different certificate from those who take them under the pre-existing honor code arrangement. Going a slightly different route, Coursera is partnering with online proctoring companies that use Webcams, keystroke biometrics, and other means to monitor test-taker identity remotely. Students who want a verified certificate from Coursera will need to signal, early in the course, that they intend to be on the "Signature Track," and they will need to pay for this verification up front, possibly between \$30 and \$100. Another issue was short-lived: the Minnesota Office of Higher Education announced that universities offering Coursera-based courses needed to register with the state (based on a consumer protection law), to which Coursera responded by cautioning Minnesotans not to take any of its courses

— but in the face of widespread clamour, the state office hastily rescinded its pronouncement.

How free is free? Besides student payment for exam proctoring or identity verification, money changes hands in other ways. Students may pay for tutoring and for fee-based advanced courses. Companies may purchase customized courses that are based on the free content and get access to course results for their existing staff or potential recruits. Colleges that wish to use entire courses from MOOC providers pay licensing fees. Textbook publishers and others can pay to have ads appear on course sites. Coursera receives a payment from Amazon when students on a Coursera course site click on an Amazon link for a recommended text and purchase it. Coursera pays university partners 6 to 15 percent of revenues, according to a reading of several contracts between Coursera and its partners.

What about credit? Students are beginning to have the option of receiving actual college credit. Antioch University in Los Angeles awards credit for completion of Coursera's "Modern and Contemporary American Poetry" and "Greek and Roman Mythology"; the University of Washington offers a fee-based credit option for some Coursera courses. Colorado State University's Global Campus will award transfer credits for Udacity computer science courses, if the students pay for the proctored test, and some European universities offer credit already. In November 2012, the American Council on Education (ACE) announced plans to evaluate selected Coursera courses for college credit, and to research other aspects of MOOCs; this venture will be funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In February, ACE approved five such courses. Although accepting the credits is up to individual institutions, ACE endorsement is a recognized standard, and it is likely that most schools will approve the credits.

While the Big Three have captured most of the limelight, they are far from the only MOOCs or MOOC-related things around. Dwarfing the size of the three of them put together is **iTunes U**, Apple's app for lectures, courses, conference proceedings, and other academic material from high schools and colleges around the world, grouped in "collections." But the iTunes U items are a go-to place more for free academic podcasts and videos than for full-blown courses, at least thus far with respect to gender/women's studies. Items pertaining to women or gender abound, but to date they are individual lectures or interviews rather than true courses.

Examples: “What Defines Sexuality?”³ from the Open University; “Women’s Empowerment,” Lecture 10 in the course “Case Studies in Primary Health Care,” from Johns Hopkins University; speakers at “Driving Change, Shaping Lives: Gender in the Developing World,” sponsored by the Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University; “Simone de Beauvoir Today,” at Duke University; and “Women’s Studies 101,” labeled as a two-hour “crash course” for Eastern Tennessee State University faculty and staff.

Of more utility for someone looking for actual gender/women’s studies courses online is the international **OpenCourseWare Consortium** at <http://www.ocwconsortium.org/>. This Hewlett Foundation-funded project indexes open-access courses sponsored by member institutions and hosted on their sites. MIT is by far the main provider of the 300+ gender/women’s studies courses listed, including “Gender and Representation of Asian Women,” “Medieval Women Writers,” “Feminist Theory,” “Psychology of Gender,” “Gender, Power, and International Relations,” and scores of others. The University of Notre Dame, the University of Cape Town, and the Open University also turn up in searches for “women” or “gender” as keywords in the course titles and descriptions. Neither iTunes U nor OpenCourseWare offers discussions, peer grading, or the camaraderie of taking a course along with others.

Besides OpenCourseWare, several new ventures might help students find MOOCs by subject, including **CourseBuffet** (<http://www.coursebuffet.com>), **Class Central** (<http://www.class-central.com>), **Knollop** (<http://www.knollop.com>) and **CourseTalk** (<http://coursetalk.org>), all reviewed by Alisha Azevedo in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.⁴ Searching these for “gender” or “women’s studies” repeatedly turned up the two Coursera courses mentioned above and the MIT and other OpenCourseWare offerings. CourseBuffet is the only one of these indexes that added something else: three courses from **Saylor.org**, including “Feminist Politics,” “Gender and Sexuality,” and “Medieval Women Writers.” “Feminist Politics” is the only one of the three that lists a person responsible for the course: Amy Gangl is listed as “course designer,” and the course lectures are all available through iTunes and YouTube. “Gender and Sexuality” links to lectures from a variety of speakers, also available on iTunes or YouTube, but “Medieval Women Writers,” seems to be in revision (“This course is currently being improved through

our peer review process”) and currently lists two unlinked lectures.

WitsOn (Women in Technology Sharing Online, <https://piazza.com/witson>) is a novel MOOC-like project that tapped the power of the Internet to make connections between female STEM students and prominent women in STEM fields in academe, government, and industry who served as mentors during a six-week pilot in Fall 2012. The mentors answered questions submitted online by students from the participating universities (Harvey Mudd College, Cornell, California Institute of Technology, Princeton, etc.), and each week one lead mentor answered some of the questions in a video. Harvey Mudd College teamed with Piazza, commercial wiki-style question-and-answer software, to offer the pilot. No reports assessing the project from the perspective of participants has as yet been published, nor has WitsOn said whether it repeat the experiment.

History Harvest is a project that may develop into a MOOC; let’s call it a pre-MOOC at this point. Starting in 2010, students and faculty at James Madison University and the University of Nebraska have held community events where community folks bring artifacts and stories, which the students document and digitize. The organizers hope to expand this to a MOOC-like online course with students running History Harvests in their local areas and also collaborating online with students from other regions. This strikes me as a great idea for a women’s history effort.

Another company to jump into the MOOC fray is **Instructure**, a course management system (more recently such products have been dubbed “learning management systems”) vendor, whose Canvas software competes with Blackboard and Desire2Learn. In December 2012, Instructure launched the **Canvas Network**, a directory of free open online courses run by Canvas customers, including Brown University, the University of Central Florida, and several others. Encouraging for *Feminist Collections* readers to note is that this new venture already sports one gender-related course among its initial twenty: “Gender Through Comic Books” (<https://www.canvas.net/courses/gender-through-comic-books>), taught by Christina Blanch, a doctoral candidate and adjunct professor at Ball State University. Blackboard itself created **Coursesites.com** as software for MOOCs and used it to offer one course in Fall 2012:

“Designing an Exemplary Course.” The course is still available as a self-paced experience.

Desire2Learn is in the MOOC picture as well. In November 2012, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse a \$50,000 grant to develop an algebra MOOC using the Desire2Learn platform. Learning Management System companies may have an advantage in the long run over upstarts using new platforms in MOOC creation, as instructors on client campuses are already familiar with their product and may even have courses ready to “go MOOC.”

In January 2013, Udacity and San Jose State University announced a pilot hybrid plan in which SJSU professors will create the videos to be used in remedial and introductory math courses mounted by Udacity, with Udacity supplying online mentors. Students will pay \$150 tuition per course, much less than for other SJSU courses, will also have in-class sessions with professors, and will receive credit upon completion.

Hard on the heels of the Udacity/SJSU announcement, the Dallas-based company Academic Partnerships (AP) debuted **MOOC2DEGREE** (<http://www.mooc2degree.com/>), in collaboration with several of AP’s public university partners, for introductory online courses at no charge. It’s a recruitment strategy, according to Michael Tanner, vice-president for academic affairs of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, as quoted by Tamar Lewin in *The New York Times*. Says Tanner: “[G]ive them a free sample, and maybe they’ll find they have an appetite for it”⁵ (and pay for subsequent courses.) There is no list yet of MOOC2DEGREE courses available online (the Academic Partners site links to individual campus participants, with each requiring separate registration to receive more information), nor have CourseBuffet or any of the other MOOC indexing sites picked these up; but according to news coverage, for starters, the courses are mostly professional-oriented, for potential nursing, education, and business students.

Two more upstarts to mention: **Semester Online** (<http://semesteronline.org/>) and **Udemy** (<https://www.udemy.com/>). Semester Online is a consortium of ten universities (including the University of North Carolina, Brandeis, and Northwestern) whose courses are the opposite of MOOCs. Where MOOCs are massive, these are small; where MOOCs rarely offer credit, Semester Online does, and where MOOCs are

free, Semester Online comes with hefty tuition bills. The target audience for Semester Online, which will debut in Fall 2013, is both on-campus students and distance learners. Exactly what distinguishes this venture from the type of online courses already available for years at numerous institutions is unclear.

If Semester Online is the opposite of MOOCs, **Udemy** is the opposite of academic courses from scholars, offering practical and avocational classes — although Udemy instructors may be “experts” in their fields. What first drew me to Udemy was an offering called “The Feminist Startup: Single Founder Startup Kit For Women.” For twenty-five dollars, D. Sapp, identified as the founder of “matriarc,” a DIY social PR platform, provides one and a half hours of content. But if your interests run more to pole dancing or “how to impress women with magic tricks,” you can find those on Udemy as well.

MOOCs, pre-MOOCs, MOOC-like entities, and MOOC opposites all bear exploring by everyone who works in higher education, as well as by those who want to tap the Internet for self-improvement and enlightenment.

Notes

1. For this article, I have drawn on the websites of the companies and university partners, the American Council on Education website, and coverage in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *The New York Times*, and other news accounts. Full citations are available upon request. If you’d like to keep up with MOOC developments generally, try “What You Need to Know about MOOCs,” a *Chronicle of Higher Education* page in the form of a timeline, with new items added regularly: <http://chronicle.com/article/What-You-Need-to-Know-About-MOOCs/133475/>, accessed February 19, 2013. The effects of MOOCs on actual teaching and learning are only beginning to be felt and are beyond my scope in this article.
2. <https://www.coursera.org/course/womencivilrights>
3. <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/course/what-defines-sexuality/id495059065?ign-mpt=uo%3D2>

4. "New Guides Aim to Become the YELP for Mooc's," December 4, 2013, <https://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/new-guides-aim-to-become-the-yelp-for-moocs/41183>, accessed January 24, 2013.

5. Tamar Lewin, "Public Universities to Offer Free Online Classes for Credit," *New York Times*, January 23, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/23/education/public-universities-to-offer-free-online-classes-for-credit.html?_r=0, accessed January 24, 2013.

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