A Short Course on MOOCs

What is a MOOC?

MOOCs are going to take the place of universities.
MOOCs are a passing fad that will have no impact on higher education.

As you might guess, neither of the above statements is likely to be completely true, but there are reasons why many leading universities, like Emory, are producing MOOCs.

Those of you who attended our luncheon colloquium in December of 2013, and heard Lynn Zimmerman talk, know what MOOCs are and about Emory's involvement with MOOCs. For the rest of you, MOOC stands for Massive Open Online Course. The hallmarks of MOOCs are that they are offered in a completely online format (usually without any credit), they are free, and they can enroll massive numbers of students-sometimes into the tens of thousands at a time. Most MOOC courses are offered for a period of 4-8 weeks, with new modules and assignments appearing each week. Each week, there will usually be several videos to watch spanning a total of approximately an hour, perhaps reading assignments and/or quizzes, and online discussion forums in which students will ask and answer questions or make comments.

There are numerous articles being written on MOOCs and a lot of research is also being done on the effectiveness of education via MOOCs. I will make no attempt to summarize all of the literature, but there are several findings that seem to be true for all MOOC providers: A vast majority of students signing up for a MOOC do not complete the course and many don't even complete the first week. Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of those taking a MOOC have a bachelor's or higher degree. Although it is an appealing idea that MOOCs can allow those without access to quality higher education anywhere in the world to educate themselves, the lack of access to computers and the internet is a substantial barrier to many. It is the case, however, that students all over the world are taking MOOCs. If you are interested, you can read a short article from an August conference on Learning with MOOCs, and one person's opinion about some of the advantages of MOOCs compared to live classes.

It should come as no surprise that the quality of MOOCs varies considerably from course to course, even from the same institution. Emory is providing MOOC courses through the Coursera platform and from the start has put considerable resources into making high-quality courses. There is a Provost's Faculty Advisory Committee on Online Education (FACOE), of which I have been a member from the first, that reviews faculty proposals for Coursera courses and establishes general policies and procedures. In addition, there is a Coursera Support Team using a specially designed production studio with a videographer, course design specialist, and others to help the faculty members design and produce an “Emory-quality” course. If you are interested, you can see the faculty guidelines for preparing a Coursera course and some early comments on the resulting courses here.

Anyone in the MOOD for a MOOC?

Why might members of EUEC want to take a MOOC, and if they did, why should any other members care? Quite apart from any effect MOOCs might have in higher education (if you want to know what MOOCs are, read the article in this issue of the newsletter), I think they could represent a 21st century reimagining of the book club. I hope some of you will be adventurous enough to try to see if and how that works.

In their original conception, it seemed that MOOCs might be suitable for science and math education, but could one really imagine humanities courses being taught via MOOCs? I hope you will read EUEC member Holly York's article below. She now has extensive experience in taking MOOCs ranging from The History and Future of Higher Education to Les problèmes métaphysiques à l'épreuve de la politique, 1943-1968. Her article gives a good idea of what one might expect in a MOOC and her experience has certainly been positive.
MOOCs are designed so that students anywhere can take a course by themselves as long as they have access to the internet and some device to connect to the internet. The way that students are to interact with others is through the discussion forums that are usually provided as part of a MOOC course. One might view books in the same way, as a method of conveying material from author to reader. The reader is alone and there is in fact no built-in mechanism for a reader to share the experience of reading a book with anyone else. That method works well and all of us have read many books in just that way and enjoyed the experience. However, most of us have at sometime or another been part of a book club in which participants read a book and then discuss the book as a group. Given the right book and the right group, that can be an incredibly enriching experience that greatly adds to the pleasure of reading a book.

Could taking a MOOC together be something like a book club? Usually in a book club, members will read all or parts of a book, and then come together to discuss what they read. With a MOOC, each week there are videos to watch and frequently some additional readings or other assignments. Those activities can be done individually, just as one (usually) reads all or part of a book before the book club meeting. Once a week, those who were taking a MOOC could meet together and discuss the course in any way the group wanted. Read further for how this proposal could work:

What MOOC courses are available?

There are several major MOOC organizations. Two of the best well known are Coursera, through which all Emory MOOCs are delivered, and EdX, through which Harvard, MIT, and a number of other prominent schools deliver their MOOCs. Most of the MOOC courses begin and end on fixed dates, although there are a few that can begin at any time. The range of courses offered is extremely broad, including Principles of Electric Circuits, Poetry in America: The Poetry of Early New England, courses delivered in languages other than English, and courses that would not seem to be candidates for MOOCs, such as Principles of Written English, Part 1. I have compiled lists of Coursera courses and EdX courses starting in September, 2014; a full list of courses along with more detailed descriptions can be found by visiting the websites for the two organizations (Coursera and EdX).

How do I take a MOOC?

The process of taking a MOOC is relatively simple. In general, you will need to sign up with an organization such as Coursera, getting a user ID and password (which is free) and then select the course(s) that you would like to take. When the course starts, you will get emails informing you when there is new content. Although there is no cost to take a MOOC, Coursera is a for-profit company and most MOOC providers are building in some type of revenue model. None of the courses offers credit, but a number of courses will offer a "Certificate" that acknowledges completion of the course with some minimum standard of performance on class assignments and quizzes. If you would like a certificate suitable for framing (if you print it out on good quality paper) you can sign up for the certificate instead of the free version and pay the fee. You do not get the fee back if you don’t earn the certificate!

How can I find other EUEC members who would be interested in taking the same course that I want to take?

I have created a listserv, EUEC-Courses, to which all EUEC members in GA are subscribed. (Members who live outside GA are welcome to be part of this list--just let me know.) If you are interested in taking a certain MOOC along with other EUEC members, just send an email to EUEC-Courses (EUEC-Courses@listserv.cc.emory.edu) stating what course you would like to take and when and where you might like to meet with others taking the same course. Anyone else in the list can then reply to you. [A technical note: It is important in this case for members to be able to get connected with other members. However, a list with a large number of members (we have over 400 in GA) can quickly get out of control. For this reason, the list is moderated so that SPAM and replies meant to go to a single person do not get sent to the list by mistake.]

When and where should a MOOC discussion group meet?
We will certainly try to arrange for meeting space for any interested groups here at the Luce Center. However, there is no reason that people would have to meet here. There are clusters of our members living all over the metro area. If you wanted, for example, you could invite interested members to meet at your house once a week—that would give members living inconvenient distances from the Luce Center a release from having to travel into Atlanta. If you would be willing to have members meet at your place, just mention that in your initial email to EUEC-Courses.

What Emory MOOCs are offered?

You can see the entire list of Emory-produced MOOCs by clicking here. Whenever an Emory MOOC is offered, if there are EUEC members who take the course, I will try to get the Emory faculty member(s) teaching the course to meet with our members at the end of the Course. You will note that Pamela Scully and Deb Houry are offering a MOOC on Understanding Violence that begins on September 3. The short synopsis of their course states "Violence is among the top three leading causes of injury and death in the US and globally. We will focus on different disciplinary approaches and perspectives to understanding and potentially preventing violence.” A longer description as well as an introductory video is available here. There is also an Emory news article about the course available here. Pamela has said that she would be delighted to meet with any of our members who take the course to discuss it at the completion. Given that the course is offered by two faculty who hold appointments in the Medical School, School of Public Health, and College, this course promises to be quite interdisciplinary and it might be very interesting to take it with colleagues from different backgrounds.

Summary for those who would like to try out a "MOOC Club"

1) Look through the lists of upcoming MOOCs that you would be interested in taking and discussing with others: Coursera Courses, or EdX Courses or other MOOC websites.

2) Send an email to EUEC-Courses stating your interest in a given course and suggestion for time and place to meet for discussion (probably weekly, but meetings could be less frequent, although most MOOC courses last 4-8 weeks).

3) If you have a group that at least starts a MOOC, try to find someone in the group who would be willing to write a short article about your experience to share with the rest of EUEC once your course is finished.

MOOCs I Have Known

EUEC Member Holly York describes her experiences in taking MOOCs. If any of you have more experience than Holly in taking MOOCs, please let us know—that would be fairly impressive! In the meantime, read her article to get a feel for what the experience of taking a MOOC course is like.

Like most of my colleagues who teach languages to college students, I have been an early adopter and avid consumer of new classroom technologies. They continue to transform our discipline and dramatically improve the linguistic and cultural competence of our students, as has been observed both anecdotally and empirically.

My class space became a little corner of France, as students arrived in a room with TV tuned to live French news broadcasts. Since the early 1990s, their papers have been turned in electronically. Initially, they were typed into a server called Babel in the language lab, where professors could load them onto floppy disks and take them home for grading, then return to the lab with the floppies and upload them to Babel so that students could receive their grades and recorded comments. With this marvel, students no longer had to rewrite the whole paper, thus risking more errors, but could simply correct those indicated. Plus there was a "gee whiz" factor that was highly motivating for both students and faculty.

While the "gee whiz" soon gave way to a demand for ever more speed and convenience, things kept getting better and more dependable with smart classrooms and tech support a quick cell phone call away. The
technology has become so good, in fact, that there is now some question about the necessity of the classroom itself and the professorial presence.

Enter the Massive Open Online Course. MOOCs have sprung up in a number of different formats and business models, amid much discussion of their effectiveness and more importantly, of what may be lost when there is no face to face classroom presence. Time will tell.

A precursor to MOOCs was The Teaching Company, which offered first on audio cassette, then on CD, a vast catalogue of college lecture courses given by professors who were exceptionally engaging speakers. There was no interaction, no certificate, no credit, but many a long car trip has been made more bearable with this lifelong learning tool. Open Yale is an example of the next step in this format with its menu of online courses that are free and open to the public. The experience is different from The Teaching Company in that Open Yale is accessed by computer and each lecture is a video recording of the professor's actual class, students and all. Reading assignments are included but there is no real time calendar, registration, assessment or interaction. Paul Fry's class on Literary Theory at Open Yale was my first foray into the world of online courses.

As a participant in Emory's Academic Learning Community on the Future of Higher Education in 2013-2014, I became aware of Cathy Davidson's MOOC on The History and Future of Higher Education (Duke), offered on Coursera. Having read Davidson's Now You See It, her work on the impact of electronic media on learning, I decided to register for the course. Registration is free unless you want an official certificate of completion. Even with the free track, you can receive peer feedback, a grade and recognition that you have completed all required assignments.

Because Davidson saw this project as a "meta-MOOC," she and her team made it a point to exploit as many of Coursera's features as they could. The course was being taught on the Duke campus concurrently with the filming. Each week, Davidson and the graduate assistants held real time online office hours. The lectures, in various venues and often featuring interviews with colleagues, were available for viewing at the online student's convenience, with new lectures appearing each week. Locations of the thousands of students were plotted on a world map.

Forums were available to all students with the caution to maintain civility and be mindful of the fact that English was not the first language of many participants. Anyone could start a thread and questions were regularly answered by graduate assistants or Davidson herself.

Two more Coursera offerings, Les problèmes métaphysiques à l'épreuve de la politique, 1943-1968 (Crépon and Worms, l'École normale supérieure) and Marriage and the Movies (Basinger, Wesleyan) followed a similar pattern of lectures and short multiple-choice quizzes and discussion forums, with outside reading and viewing assignments. Absent from these two was the written essay requirement and required peer review. An interesting dynamic of the French course was the number of International students requesting subtitles, in French at first as the professors spoke at a normally rapid pace, then there was a clamor for subtitles in English, which took a bit longer to produce. Another challenge of the French team seems to be the final assessment and awarding of certificates to those qualifying. While the American courses provided these at Internet speed, the French had made no visible progress two months out, much to the consternation of students.

Writers on Writing Poetry was the most successful thus far of the MOOCs I have experienced and illustrates the potential strength of the medium because it is almost entirely based on creative interaction. Its vision is described on the website: http://courses.writinguniversity.org/course/how-writers-write-poetry. The Writing University Open Courses website provides MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) for creative writing
through the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, which will offer new opportunities for the study and practice of creative writing and literary analysis to an unlimited number of participants around the world.

The poetry course, while only the second in the series, is well-organized and user-friendly. Each of the two weekly lectures features two different poets/professors and ends with a prompt for a poem illustrating the particular technique in question. For those wishing to have their work considered for workshopping, there is a deadline. Each of the ten moderators runs a workshop on two poems per week, and all are invited to comment. All poems, whether on time or not, are submitted to a forum, where they receive constructive comments from other participants.

In this course, the participants themselves were among the greatest strengths. Among the more than 3000 participants worldwide, a range of skill and experience was represented from award-winning established poets to complete beginners. All came together to be sure that every poem received attention, support and constructive comment. Reading and analyzing the work of others was every bit as useful as writing the poems. Participants formed subgroups by affinity, following the contributions of those they appreciated most. Many of these networks will continue long after the course is over. If the course is offered again, I will sign up, even if the syllabus is unchanged. With different students, it will always be fresh.

But before that, I will take How Writers Write Fiction, ( http://courses.writinguniversity.org/course/how-writers-write-fiction ) beginning September 29 and welcoming new participants every day for the duration of the course. On September 6, I will begin another Coursera offering, Modern American Poetry, ( https://www.coursera.org/course/modernpoetry ) known among its international followers on social media as "ModPo." Al Filreis at the University of Pennsylvania has taught this course in various forms online since 1994 (!) and it has an impressive online presence as well as "meet-ups" in cities around the world. I look forward to seeing how this community works and if learning about something can be as effective as honing a skill.

There is still much to be learned about this system of "information delivery," as education is coming to be seen, in terms of both effectiveness and financial feasibility. All the courses I took were free, while they were undoubtedly costly to produce and maintain. Coursera offers a "Signature Track" where, for a fee, students can have their identity and grades verified so that their certificate may have more credibility. One wonders how long the high quality free offerings can continue, as institutions search for new ways to "monetize" their endeavors. For lifelong learners, it is time to seize the day, while a wealth of offerings is still open.