



MOOCs and Online Education; a real difference

Posted on July 1, 2013 by Jim Farmer



Are online education and MOOC the same? Is any difference important?

MOOC – Massive Open Online Course. As currently interpreted, massive meaning hundreds of thousands of student taking the course, open meaning free for the student, and online referring to the way the course is offered over the Internet. Joshua Kim, writing in *Inside Higher Education*, believes there is more to online education than MOOCs. Online education includes all of the online courses colleges and universities have been offering for several decades using many different instructional technologies. Kim differentiated between the two when he commented on John Tamny’s Forbes article “Online Education Will Be the Next ‘Bubble’ To Pop, Not Traditional University Learning” (here).

Kim labeled Tamny’s work “Confused Reporting.”

When Tamny is saying that online education is the next bubble he is of course not talking about the sort of online education that any of us working in the field of designing, teaching, or supporting online courses would recognize.

Tamny is talking about MOOCs

Kim labels this misuse as conflation.

Kim’s criticism could be made of most press-release based reporting and MOOC provider presentations about online education. Because of this misunderstanding, discussion of online education between college and university boards and administration, and colleges and universities and the public and government bodies has become error-prone and counter-productive. With consequences.

The recent experience of the University of Virginia shows how this misunderstanding can lead to a confrontation between the Board and university executives. This article describes the information the Board of Visitors (BOV) had when President Sullivan “resigned” last year and subsequent actions taken by University administration and the Board the following year.

The University of Virginia: Online misunderstood?

Last year the University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan resigned. Charlie Tyson’s Cavalier Daily article was headlined “Sullivan resignation spotlights long-running debate about online education” (here). The difference in perspective between Sullivan and the Board of Visitors likely arose from the conflation described by Joshua Kim. The University of Virginia was implementing online learning. Apparently unaware the Board thought online learning and MOOCs were the same. The Board wanted the University to have all of the benefits MOOCs are claimed to provide—very low costs, very effective learning and enhanced institutional reputation.

Sullivan had been an effective president, especially from the perspective of those who focused on university rankings. She resigned due to the online learning debacle on June 10, 2012 and was reinstated June 26 by a unanimous vote of the Board of Visitors. But the misunderstanding of online education continues in the discussion, at least through the critical May 12, 2013 meeting of the Board of Visitors.

Because of extensive investigative reporting by The Cavalier Daily’s Krista Pedersen, Charlie Tyson, and their colleagues, the Cavalier Daily made available detailed analytical articles. They also released the email among members of the Board of Visitors and between the Board members and the administration during the several months before the Board suggested she resign. (These were obtained from FOIA-Freedom of Information Act-requests). These exchanges illustrate the damage a lack of understanding can do to a remarkable public research university. There are lessons here for every college or university board and administration. Higher education should learn from this confrontation of Board and President.

Kim’s description of how colleges and universities are using online education is characteristic of most colleges and universities. This is true for the University of Virginia. Two weeks after President Sullivan’s resignation, the Faculty Senate reported there were 107 online courses being offered for UVA credit. Some courses also provide certificates, primarily to meeting professional training requirements. Three were offered only for certificates and 41 were offered for no credit—at total of 151 courses.

The College at Wise describes itself:

A public, four-year residential college located in the lush mountains of Southwestern Virginia, The University of Virginia’s College at Wise is recognized as one of the top public liberal arts colleges in the nation. The only branch campus of the University of Virginia, UVA-Wise was founded in 1954 and currently enrolls 2,000 students.

An analysis of the college’s registration information reveals the College at Wise offered 65 online courses last term enrolling 877 students with an average class size of 13.5.

There is no record in the Board of Visitor minutes or agendas that suggest the College was asked to brief the Board on their online offerings.

Kim's article the day following his article described his exchange with Tamny:

Q. My critique is that your argument was weakened by the imprecise language you use to talk about the specific case of education at scale, lumping all of online education (which can share the attributes of a personalized and intimate learning experience), with MOOCs. Would you like to respond to this critique?

A. You're correct that I didn't distinguish between the two kinds of online education, but then that wasn't really my purpose.

My view is that online AND classroom education are both overrated, but at least education of the classroom variety provides the scarce good coveted by employers.

Tamny continues:

Put plainly, I think college education is overrated, but think college itself one of the greatest things a teen can do. A truly great experience. There's an amazing, albeit intangible feel that comes with walking onto campus, and this is something that online quite simply cannot offer.

Here Tamny also makes a sharp distinction between what he believes important to employers and to college students and their parents. This perspective was not included in the Board exchanges.

John Tamny is well respected, informed, and writes for the magazines and newspaper likely to be read by members of college and university boards, state governors and legislators, and Congress and the White House staff.

Few decision makers external to colleges and universities read *Inside Higher Education*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or *e-Literate*, or, if the UVA experience is typical, are briefed on online education. Boards read national sources, often from a business perspective. MOOCs were free, and remain low cost to students. From press reports at the time MOOCs were creating an expectation of substantial cost savings if colleges and universities were to immediately and broadly implement MOOCs for all courses. MOOCs would be a simple and immediate solution to the financial pressures on colleges and universities and tuition.

Unintended misrepresentation

Email obtained by the Cavalier Daily campus newspaper as a FOIA request suggests the UVA Board's action was precipitated by several articles; One was the Wall Street Journal, 30 May 2012, by John E Chubb and Terry M. Moe:

Over the long term, online technology promises historic improvements in the quality of and access to higher education. The fact is, students do not need to be on campus at Harvard or MIT to experience some of the key benefits of an elite education. Moreover,

colleges and universities, whatever their status, do not need to put a professor in every classroom. One Nobel laureate can literally teach a million students, and for a very reasonable tuition price. Online education will lead to the substitution of technology (which is cheap) for labor (which is expensive)—as has happened in every other industry—making schools much more productive.

and another from the New York Times' 3 May 2012 by David Brooks:

But, over the past few months, something has changed. The elite, pace-setting universities have embraced the Internet. Not long ago, online courses were interesting experiments. Now online activity is at the core of how these schools envision their futures.

Brooks quotes Richard A DeMillo of Georgia Tech:

[Online education] turns transmitting knowledge into a commodity that is cheap and globally available. But it also compels colleges to focus on the rest of the [residential] learning process, which is where the real value lies.

He did not use the term “MOOCs” and he cited the experience of the University of Phoenix. But he wrote:

The elite, pace-setting universities have embraced the Internet. Not long ago, online courses were interesting experiments. Now online activity is at the core of how these schools envision their futures.

He used Harvard and MIT (edX), Stanford and Coursera as examples—all MOOCs. He concluded:

President John Hennessy of Stanford summed up the emerging view in an article by Ken Auletta in The New Yorker, “There’s a tsunami coming.”

What happened to the newspaper and magazine business is about to happen to higher education: a rescrambling around the Web.

Note the immediacy of his prediction.

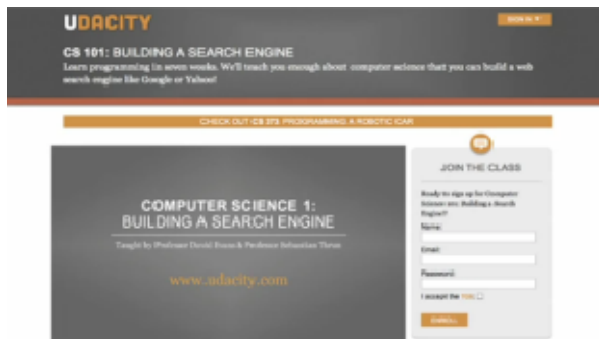
The British Open University is celebrating 40 years since its first graduate. Phil Hill reports “1.8 million have obtained degrees.” “The number of UK-based distance learning students has shot up by around 50% over the past decade to over 260,000, and it’s largely down to the Internet.” For credit and respected for quality as assessed by the UK Quality Assurance Agency

Plato, an online learning platform, held its Plato@50 conference in 2011—fifty years of online courses originally focusing on simulation of science experiments. Plato had a number of online games for learning. Separately the aviation industry began broad implementation of online courses beginning as early as 1987 using software supporting adaptive learning and other features not yet available in the MOOC platforms.

Online learning has a long history of effective use. Adding context, these stories appear missing from the press description of online learning.

Ironically one of the early Plato course developers, beginning when he was in high school, was University of Virginia physicist, Louis A. Bloomfield. He will be teaching a Coursera course “How Things Work.” While the UVA Board of Visitors was discussing the lack of vision towards online learning on their campuses, a nationally recognized expert in online learning was available on campus.

A Board member of the Berklee College of Music, in Boston, Massachusetts, recommended the University of Virginia [UVA] Board of Visitors members watch a video where Sebastian Thrun announced leaving his Stanford professorship for the MOOC startup of Udacity. At Stanford he taught a course in artificial intelligence to his 200 student on-campus class and simultaneously via a MOOC.



Describing the MOOC-like version of his artificial intelligence course, Thrun said 176,000 students enrolled, a student said [the students] found his videos more “more intimate” than his lectures, and students who continued to participate in the course achieved comparable performance to those on Stanford’s campus. At the same time Thrun said only 30 of the Stanford classroom students continued to attend his lecture preferring the MOOC videos. (This

contrasts to video and audio of law school lectures where most students attended the lecture and subsequently reviewed the lecture video and audio, often more than once. Some students also reviewed lectures of other professors teaching the same course).

It is ironic Thrun would team with David Evans at Udacity to teach the first MOOC, Computer Science 101, at Udacity. Evans was on sabbatical leave from the University of Virginia working at Stanford University. He would also have been an excellent resource for the University of Virginia’s planning for online education.

The Board’s interest in MOOC-like online-education technology is illustrated by this comment by Rector Helen Dragas writing to Jeffrey Walker entitled “Re: on-line education comes to the top universities:”

[T]he BOV is squarely focused on UVA’s developing such a strategy and keenly aware of the rapidly accelerating pace of change. Good op-ed last week in the WSJ [referenced above] on this as well.

But the articles UVA’s Board of Visitors exchanged and videos watched from the published emails had the same misrepresentation that frustrated Joshua Kim. Online education is more than MOOCs, and already in used at the University of Virginia.

The unintended lack of precision in the articles most likely to be read and exchanged by Board members led to misunderstanding. The University of Virginia may have not have understood

what information the Board needed at what level of precision. Here is another email comment of a “Re: Sullivan” email:

One small data point that seems consistent—I was not impressed with [President] Terry’s rather pedestrian answer to my question at the Sulgrave Club about online learning and what UVA was doing given what Stanford and others had announced.”

The UVA Board was learning about online education from what they were reading, not from information provided by the University. Other Boards could make the same error by depending only on the national press and broadcast for judgments about the effectiveness of instructional methods.

The epilogue

The issue the Board raised—strategic use of online learning—morphed into “governance” and then a test of political power. In December UVA’s accreditation agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), “placed the institution ‘on warning’ ... in response to Board governance concerns.” The accrediting agency avoided any consideration of the educational issues raised by online learning, especially MOOCs.

Earlier on July 17 the Cavalier Daily reported the University had announced:

“[A] new agreement to distribute several courses online beginning in fall 2013 through a new partnership with Stanford-based education-technology corporation [Coursera].”

The announcement came as a surprise to many after the University spent nearly three weeks debating the role of online learning in its future during the botched ouster of President Teresa A. Sullivan in June. The courses will be in the same line of massive open online courses, or MOOCs, which top institutions such as Stanford and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology began offering recently.

J. Milton Adams, the vice provost for academic programs said: “The only cost at this time will be the time faculty members spend gathering materials and putting them in a format appropriate for online distribution.”

At the September meeting of UVA’s Board of Visitors the Board appointed a Special Committee on Strategic Planning. In a letter to President Sullivan co-chairs Frank B. Atkinson and Lindwood H. Rose wrote “Undertaking a comprehensive institutional assessment with the engagement of University stakeholders might be a productive first step in the planning process.”

On February 21, 2013 Coursera Co-Founder visited the University. UVA Today reported (here):

Just 10 months after its launch, Coursera, a social entrepreneurship company funded by two venture capitalists, provides “massive open online courses,” or MOOCs, to approximately 2.7 million students from 196 countries. They are taught by faculty members at 33 top universities across the U.S., including U.Va., which launched its first MOOCs in January [2013].

On April 30 at the invitation of the Associate Provost and the Vice President of Information Technology, Michael B Horn led a discussion at the School of engineering and Applied Science. He is co-author, with Harvard Business School's Clayton Christensen, of the book "Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns" published five years ago—May 14, 2008. UVA Today reported:

Universities, however, have a broken business model, said Horn, who described three types of business models –solution shops, where problems are solved; value-adding process businesses, where materials or information are improved; and facilitated user networks, where people benefit from information.

Universities combine all three models, Horn said, but this model is failing. Costs are rising and to cover the costs, universities raise tuition, which then prices customers out of the market. As these customers are priced out, other vendors arise to satisfy the market.

Student achievement has been demonstrated to increase when taking online courses that are administered and created by instructional designers, Horn said.

Universities now may look at outsourcing education services in the future via providers such as Coursera, Udacity, 2U and Dev Boot Camp, with the university providing the brand name and the pedagogy and the online company providing the technical expertise, the metrics and the platform.

Horn observed, as Rector Helen Dargas also believed, "institutions are reluctant to alter how they do business."

On May 16, 2013 UVA reporter Lorenzo Perez in UVA Today wrote of Emanuel Grant's experience taking the first UVA Coursera course:

The weekly multiple-choice tests that the MOOC students must pass to complete their no-credit version of the course don't warrant the study demands imposed on [UVA student Emanuel] Grant and the other U.Va. students who took Green's course for University credit this spring, Grant said. However, the enthusiasm for the material was much more evident among online students, he said.

And he concluded:

*U.Va.'s **decision last summer to enter into a partnership with Coursera** [his emphasis], which also offers an online platform for courses offered by Stanford University, Princeton University and other leading institutions, marked an effort to expand the reach of its academic offerings to a global audience eager to sample free, noncredit versions of the course offered on Grounds.*

The Special Committee on Strategic Planning of the Board of Visitors met May 20 and 21. Presentations were made by President Sullivan and the consulting firm Art & Science Group LLC. At the Education Policy committee meeting engineering student Matt Hamilton made a short presentation "Jefferson Learning Online?" (482 pages of documents from the meeting are available here).

Hamilton, echoing Michael Horn's presentation, recommended:

1. *Sustain Innovation through offering online courses or part online integrated courses. (Michael Horn)*
2. *Create autonomous experiments to disrupt ourselves. (Michael Horn)*
3. *Emphasizing the benefits of an "On-Grounds" experience*

Art and Science Group reported:

"I wouldn't invest a lot of money in MOOCs. There's too much uncertainty about where those technologies will end up."

and

"MOOC's are not the silver bullets – it's one form of democratization of higher education, but there's no substitute for interactions among students. Technology can flip the way we use information and then faculty use the information to solve problems with students. But the days of the large lecture in traditional form are over."

"... There's no ideal cost model and no sustainable economic model – yet. It's not even clear that these technologies can save money if they still provide a high-quality experience. And we don't know yet if students are learning or how they're learning over time."

The Board's discussion papers did not estimate the investment proposed for online education or MOOCs specifically. Producing course materials or costs and supporting the platform and the technical and tutorial supports students cannot be accomplished with a few months of faculty time and available IT support. With available data benefits of online education—student performance, student engagement, and student satisfaction—and the impact on faculty research can be estimated and may be included in the strategic plan itself. The Art & Science assessment report itself provided some of the data that can be used for such estimates.

The University of Virginia, like all research universities, has a tradeoff between the quality of research that differentiates the university from others and creating a learning environment with technology that contributes to improved learning. Faculty incentives remain aligned with research. The best strategy is neither simple nor preferred by all parties.

Joshua Kim's solution

Expressing both frustration and disappointment, Kim wrote:

I have a simple proposal.

Any reporter writing about online education and MOOCs should understand the difference between the two.

Any reporter writing about online education should talk to people who have been designing and teaching online courses for the past few years. Any reporter writing about the benefits or faults of online learning should have to enroll in a quality online degree program.

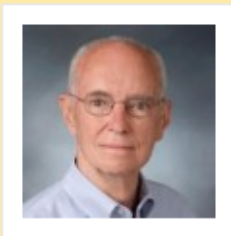
And anyone that is writing about the pros and cons of residential vs. online education should experience a blended course.

Few reporters would be able to do this, but his point—*informed* discussion of online education—could have prevented unintended damage to the reputation of the University of Virginia, a concerned Board, and an effective President. He cautions current press coverage may not be a balanced and complete source of information online education or even MOOCs.

Perhaps Kim’s colleagues—“ learning designers and subject matter experts” and those who support their work—can provide a solution for Boards facing difficult decisions about the nature and extent of a technology-driven transformation. The Boards need and would likely benefit from their expertise and experience. As the University of Virginia confrontation shows, there is a cost to not knowing.



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Responses to MOOCs and Online Education; a real difference



Laura Gibbs says:

July 1, 2013 at 6:01 PM

Jim, thank you for this great post about UVA and the problem with MOOC reporting in general. My school, University of Oklahoma, is also suffering from a MOOC backlash as it were. In August of last summer, the president sent out an email to all instructional faculty (including even adjuncts like myself), the first such email he ever sent to all instructors in the 10+ years I have been at the university. It was a strong declaration against MOOCs (at the time, University of Texas was dithering about whether to go with Coursera or with edX, and what University of Texas does is of much concern in Oklahoma, not just re: football) but also against online learning for any student “physically able” to be present in a classroom. The declaration against online learning was so strong, in fact, that I feared for my job – I teach online courses but to students who are almost all resident students on the Norman campus; they simply prefer (for all kinds of reasons!) to take an online course. Luckily, my job was spared... but not the job of the dean who created the online course program which employs me. Much to everyone’s surprise, that long-serving and excellent dean was forced out of his position back in May for reasons having to do with pedagogy and technology. This forced resignation even got written up in Inside Higher Ed:

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/05/16/faculty-raise-concerns-about-cronyism-u-oklahoma>

So now I am back to wondering again just how long my job will last. My courses are some of the mostly highly rated in our General Education program at my school, and I have been teaching online for over 10 years now, with excellent student evaluations year after year – but with the MOOC-inspired backlash against online education, I really don’t know what to expect in the future at my school. If you are curious, the text of President Boren’s email in defense of face to face classes and against online is here:

<https://plus.google.com/111474406259561102151/posts/YHF1N983rUJ>

Thank you again for this nice write-up... I have followed the MOOC scene very closely over the past year, and the way in which people too quickly equate all online learning with MOOCs is something that is a very very very serious problem. The cost of not knowing is, just as you say, a high price indeed.



johnakline says:

July 2, 2013 at 11:58 AM

The problem above typifies a modern and undisciplined approach to news reporting and digestion in our modern world – in general. But it is especially sad that insiders like the Virginia Board would not be digging a little deeper than the WSJ and main stream news sources – or

tapping into their own experts as the above article points out. E-Literate writers do a great job of presenting the complexities of the issues we are all so passionate about. Thanks!



Debbie Morrison says:

July 2, 2013 at 1:40 PM

Thanks Jim for calling out what is serious issue that is hindering the discussion and progression of education – which is the confusion about what online education really is. The need for journalists to be informed is critical – I agree that Inside Higher Ed is one source that is the most informed – even The Chronicle has added to the confusion. The article “Major Players in the MOOC Universe” published in May of this year demonstrated a lack of full understanding of the differences even within the MOOC realm, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Major-Players-in-the-MOOC/138817/>.

Even educators that should know better are adding to the confusion. I attended Sloan Consortium’s Symposium for Emerging Technologies in Online Learning as a virtual attendee in April, and one of the sessions I attended “MOOCs: Monetization Models and Pedagogy as Part of a State University’s Strategic Vision” was misleading about what MOOCs are.

The session was led by Cathryn Cheal, director of online learning at San Jose State University. She described the project the school created with Udacity, however the model she described was not a MOOC at all – it was an online learning class with under 100 students. San Jose students were kept separate – had their own discussion boards and course site. Students attended in-person orientation sessions, had access to live tutoring and personalized feedback and interaction with the course professor. <http://sloanconsortium.org/conference/2013/et4online/moocs-monetization-models-and-pedagogy-part-state-universitys-strategic-vi>

So here was an example of an educator that should know better, that was presenting the school’s ‘experiment’ as a MOOC. And one that was not even financial feasible according to Cheal as well [apparently the school needs at least 300 students to break even with the Udacity arrangement]. Furthermore she was presenting to other educators, who most likely have an incorrect impression of what online learning is, and what MOOCs are.

The cycle continues. So frustrating.

Thanks again Jim for a calling this out. And Laura, this is most distressing, an example of how lack of knowledge and depth of understanding hinders the progress of education.

Debbie



Donna Murdoch says:

July 7, 2013 at 12:19 PM

THANK YOU for writing this – I am sorry I am just noticing now. I have been saying the same thing, though did not know the UVA story in such detail (I only knew it was Coursera related) so thanks for sharing. MOOCs and online education are synonymous in so many articles we read, and they couldn't be more different. Everyone above, and their comments, are absolutely right (as is the article.) It hurts, rather than helps, progress. It is also a quick litmus test – should I read this article or not? – when a title insinuates they are the same thing. Frankly, I think the term MOOC will go away (to be replaced with whatever 2.0 and 3.0 look like) in an OER type delivery format but high quality online education will not. And it is such a shame they are confused. Boards of Directors and Admins are confused enough as it is.....I only see this resulting in more logjams and the loss of fantastic online instructors.