

Confessions of an Unreconstructed MOOC(h)er

by Bernard Schweizer

I am dropping out from the first college course I've taken in more than 20 years. As a tenured professor, I obviously don't have much to lose from this decision. On the other hand, nobody really seems to care anyway whether I am participating or not.

You see, I have been MOOC(h)ing of late. Definition of this lovely neologism? Taking part in a massive open online course (MOOC) without paying the sweat equity required to finish it—in other words, going along for the ride. Specifically, I have enrolled in “English Composition I: Achieving Expertise,” taught by Duke University's Denise Comer and offered free to students through Coursera,¹ to see how it works and to be part of this “historic” moment—the first English composition MOOC on offer.² And now, although having completed only a few assignments, I consider myself educated, not so much in composition, to be frank, but rather in the logistics and the overall philosophy of the MOOC phenomenon.

Let me say two things at the outset: first, as I sit down to write this, the course is still ongoing (though nearing its end), so I am jumping the gun a bit here. Second, and more importantly, I am deeply ambivalent about the success of this MOOC. Ultimately, I think the negatives outweigh the positives. First to the positives: The course is carefully designed. The idea of having a course theme (“what is expertise?”) that mirrors the very aim of the course (i.e., achieving expertise in writing) is not only cute, but can be quite an effective means of linking substance and style, content and form. The major tasks for the course are organized as an

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assignment sequence, which, again, makes sense from a composition theory perspective. Moreover, the didactic modules of the course—discussing matters of structure (e.g., introductions and conclusions), of style (e.g., passive voice versus active voice), of ethos (e.g., plagiarism), etc.—are quite comprehensive. Although I wish Dr. Comer would get around to saying something about the most important nuts and bolts of composition—thesis and topic sentences—she undeniably does cover a lot of ground. Still, I wonder if students actually come away with a unified conception of effective writing or simply a scattered set of lists, especially as the video lectures are voluntary and can be picked and chosen at will (or at random).

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MOOC LEARNING OR MOCK LEARNING?

As for the technical aspect of the MOOC, I was rather impressed by it. The Coursera platform is fully operative and quite easy to navigate; the schedules and requirements are clearly communicated and implemented; the required readings are one click away, and the video lectures are, well, as effective as video lectures can be when a teacher addresses a virtual community of some 60,000 students. Aside from an occasional awkwardness and a certain stiffness that comes from talking into a void, Professor Comer is doing a solid job. I have more misgivings with regard to the virtual “hangouts” that occasionally puncture the steady progression of video lectures and assignments. Seeing David Jarmul, a silver-haired academic, use the word “hangout” repeatedly is a little odd. Aside from that, these video events do have a promotional feel about them. Whether it is David Coyle pitching his book *The Talent Code* or Mr. Jarmul talking in front of a wall splashed with Duke University logos, the commercial aspect of this enterprise is clear—and it makes me feel uncomfortable. I’m just waiting until the folks at these hangouts show up like NASCAR drivers in shirts plastered with the logos of software companies and 5-Hour Energy Drink. At this point, I must ask what is the real purpose of offering such a MOOC? It is not far-fetched to see it as part of a publicity stunt, in this case, raising the global profile of Duke University.

Still, I have to say that some of the advice given by Mr. Jarmul at the workshop about op-ed writing was quite useful, ranging from his insistence on strengthening the personal voice of an op-ed piece to his request that another writer provide clear and specific details as evidence for the argument he was building. But, throughout it all, there is a strange disconnect, and this is what bothers me about the MOOC approach. Yes, student X may have received some useful advice from an online instructor, but after trying to carry out the recommenda-

tions, he sends his revised piece out to the no-man's land of peer reviewing, and there can be no feedback loop to the "teacher" to check how well the student has grasped and implemented the advice he had received, no chance to reinforce the message. More unsettling is the fact that only a handful of lucky students could participate in this mock version of an actual classroom, while the vast majority (possibly numbering in the tens of thousands) are marooned in their studies and left to fend more or less for themselves.

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ANONYMOUS ONLINE PEER REVIEWERS— TEACHERS FROM HELL

Of course, the MOOC provides an outlet for questions, uncertainties, and frustrations in message boards, forums, and discussion threads, but the dynamic of these conversations is often unfocused, tentative, and frankly, misinformed. For instance, Larisa S. vented her frustration on a discussion forum, complaining that her peer reviewers did not give her adequate feedback to improve her writing. After posting her entire research paper on the message board seeking more input, she received a lengthy "review" from another peer who, unfortunately, gave her spectacularly bad advice, suggesting to "lighten it up by using fewer sources and making fewer points of discussion."³ The well-meaning but incompetent reviewer further asked Larisa to dumb down her diction, using a synonym generator to replace "sophisticated" words. What Larisa should have been told is that she had hitched the cart before the horse: her introductory paragraph ended with a series of questions instead of a thesis, and her thesis was the last sentence in the paper. And since she had no valid thesis to guide her, the essay lacked topic sentences, and as a result of that, her paragraphs were unfocused. That's the advice Larisa should have received to begin turning her paper from mediocre to strong.

Not enough has been made of the peer-review system in recent debates over the merits and demerits of MOOCs. But in many ways—certainly in courses on composition—the review and grading approach is the crux of the matter, and it ultimately dooms the whole enterprise. To farm out the task of judging the merit of arguments, of applying disciplinary conventions, and of assessing intellectual integrity and coherence—not to speak of correcting grammatical mistakes—to laymen seems, on the face of it, absurd. Would one want to have first graders to correct the multiplication tables of other first graders? Would one want an immi-

grant from China to correct the English spelling of an immigrant from Ethiopia? This leveling between teacher and student is highly doubtful if not utterly wrong-headed.

So, while the content delivery format is strictly top-down and one-way—the teacher makes, the student takes—the peer-review system flips this teaching approach on its head: suddenly, where the teacher should have all the discretion, influence, and power, she doesn't have any, and instead the responsibility for editing, proofing, and grading is handed over to the students themselves. Surely, huge, and possibly insurmountable obstacles are attached to this delegation of the pro-

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fessor's duty. Most alarmingly, the peer-review responses are not guided by a unified pedagogical vision, they lack methodological rigor, and they are wildly unreliable. The MOOC tries to address this problem by posting detailed instructions about how to carry out the peer review, but this only gives a systematic veneer to an impossible proposition. The instructions on Dr. Comer's peer-review task sheet, spelled out as a set of 10 points, assume their readers are professional or professorial proof readers and critics rather than amateurs and learners. The question "Has the writer organized the paper effectively in terms of paragraph order and paragraph unity?" assumes a critical reader who knows what a coherent paragraph progression and a solid paragraph structure is. However, the students are precisely there to learn these things, not to implement them already.

Accordingly, the results of this approach are often abysmal. For instance, in response to the question "where does the writer analyze the image?" I received three differing and mutually exclusive answers on one of my own drafts: "the first paragraph" (incorrect); "paragraph 4" (also incorrect); and "this may need some work" (irrelevant). If I were truly in need of strengthening my paragraph progression and cohesion, such peer feedback would tell me exactly nothing. I cannot speak about receiving feedback as a developing writer, but because the comments I received on my compositions were so banal or plain wrong, I very much doubt the usefulness of the peer-review system for others. The intentions behind this approach may be noble, involving ideals of democratic equality, notions of self-empowerment, and hopes of turning students into dialectical teaching-learners. In practice, however, this does not work very well, as the grading and feedback criteria provided by the MOOC simply ask too much of a non-expert peer reviewer to be implemented competently.

Another problem with the peer-review system is that all comments on another

er's writing have to be delivered in global summary fashion. There is no possibility to inscribe oneself directly into the text in particular places. So, general comments about "paragraph" or "argument" are given without imbedded word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence, or paragraph-by-paragraph corrections. I am highly doubtful if my students would be willing and capable to implement most structural, grammatical, and semantic changes without my inscriptions into their text. With only the possibility of summary feedback, students with problems on multiple levels may at best tweak their performance here and there, but they won't be able to do a thorough revision.

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Then there's the fact that the MOOC's peer-review system does not take into account the subject position of the person whose work is being evaluated. It does matter—in fact, it matters tremendously—if the person whose work one corrects is a middle-aged Korean housewife, a retired Engineering professor in Germany, or a 19-year old American high-school dropout. Quite different attitudes, feedback mechanisms, and grading strategies need to be activated in each case to match the student's abilities and needs. However, the MOOC peer-review system cannot distinguish between these different individuals and treats the ESL type or the adult learner or the expert in the same fashion.

MOOC'S FRINGE BENEFITS

Speaking of skill level, when it was my turn to evaluate other writers' compositions (you can only have your essays graded if you grade other people's essays in return), I was surprised to be assigned three polished essays that sounded like the work of trained professionals, either academics or science writers or editors. What were they doing here? Their skill level demonstrated that they did not need to learn basic composition. It became clear to me then that I was not the only MOOC(h)er, taking advantage of the system (for reasons other than the ones the system was designed for). In this case, I did actually benefit from insights of the three talented writers I was evaluating. And this really is the upshot of Dr. Comer's composition class for me: Instead of looking at it as a class about composition, I began to see it as a class about ideas, an intellectual "hangout" for discussing concepts and exchanging viewpoints, no matter one's skill level. The course theme centered around the assigned texts by Daniel Coyle⁴ and Geoffrey Colvin⁵ about the relationship between talent and work, specifically what expertise is and how it is accomplished. Reading a chapter from Coyle's *The Talent Code* raised issues of a



historical nature for me (e.g., what did the Romantics contribute to the notion of inborn talent?), it made me think about the role of culture in developing talent, and it brought into play questions of intertextuality, with other writers such as Malcolm Gladwell having argued the work-talent nexus before.⁶ Following the discussion forums and viewing a video conference with the author was quite effective in sharpening distinctions and making me think more deeply about my own convictions with regard to the subject of talent.

THE METHOD IS FLAWED AND SO IS THE VISION

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Despite being pleasantly surprised by these ancillary effects of the MOOC, I have grave reservations regarding the larger educational implications of this kind of teaching. Let me illustrate some of the irremediable shortcomings of MOOCs by reference to my own teaching experience in a seminar setting this past semester.

Example 1

In my honors seminar, I had a student who was unhappy with my grading. After three weeks, she asked me why she had only received a B on two consecutive response papers. She was clearly annoyed, and the situation could have become confrontational. However, I calmly explained my reasons and showed her what it would take to earn a better grade. Lo and behold, from then on, she turned in A+ work. Not only that, her final paper was so outstanding I nominated it for the English Department essay prize. Before our conversation and my subsequent mentoring, she had been somewhat resistant to my teaching; afterward, she dug in her heels and became a staunch ally of my educational mission in the class. It was the challenge of high expectations coupled with the face-to-face encounter and the ensuing sense of cooperation that had lifted this student from the middle of the pack to the top. This dynamic could not happen in the anonymous world of the MOOC, where student-teacher contact is minimal, if not absent entirely, and where software algorithms and randomly assigned peer groups take the place of personal teacher-student interactions.

Example 2

In an introductory class on Asian literature, I experienced moments of reverse teaching, where students instructed me on points of interpretation. We were reading Haruki Murakami's novel *After Dark*, and one student remarked that she had



seen a Japanese anime film, *Spirited Away*, that bore a strong resemblance to the novel. I was unfamiliar with the movie and asked specific questions about some dominant motifs from the novel, and indeed it turned out that the movie (deliberately or not) must have served as a template for some of Murakami's plot ideas. This discovery energized the whole class, and it emerged that some other students were also familiar with the movie and could make connections between it and the text, thus teaching me a lesson in cross-genre influence studies. I did not hide my ignorance but rather accentuated it, letting the students get ahead of me on this (as well as some other) occasion, with the result that students were glowing with

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enthusiasm. This is student-teacher interaction at its best, and it happens frequently in the real classroom, but is simply impossible to play out in the virtual classroom. Yet, it is empowering for students to feel that their experience counts for something and that any connections, even ones that the professor has not himself thought of, can lead to fruitful discoveries in the laboratory of a lively, interactive classroom.

Example 3

The final example concerns a student who underwent a dramatic mid-of-semester slump, after first suffering from pink-eye for weeks, then going into student leadership campaigning, ultimately being elected president of the student body. As a consequence of these upheavals, he missed several classes and some key assignments. The MOOC would be absolutely inflexible about that. Miss a deadline and you're out of the running for that assignment. However, in this case, I talked with the student and laid out a strategy that would allow him to make up for missed work, even take a make-up exam, and graduate from the course with a solid grade.

If one strips the human element from education, one ends up with a MOOC. But it is precisely the human element that is reflected in the term humanities. Sure, the (oxymoronic) "digital humanities" have become a buzzword and can unleash remarkable networking powers and serve as an engine of dynamic research. But when it comes to teaching, one of the most complex, multi-leveled, intimate, and interactive of human undertakings, the machine simply cannot take the place of the immediate human context of learning. In this sense, I agree with Daniel Porterfield, who, discussing the superiority of the seminar model over MOOCs, wrote, "students grow from directly engaging with scholars and witness-

ing how they think.”⁷ The keywords are “directly engaging” and “witnessing.” No canned online video addressed to nobody in particular can take the place of this personal mode of learning. MOOCs do not allow a teacher to look their students in the eye, reading the mood of the class, sparking enthusiasm, improvising solutions, responding ad-hoc to new ideas, and engaging in the immediate (and unpredictable) give-and-take of active learning. It is these factors—ultimately human factors rather than technical knick-knacks and algorithms—that make for the magic of superior teaching and learning.

I am confident that students are wise enough to continue going to traditional classes and shelling out the tuition to partake in an education where personality, transparency, accountability, experience, and mentoring hold sway. Humanities MOOCs can play a role in stimulating cross-cultural exchanges of ideas, but they are, and will remain, not the real deal when it comes to learning as an interactive practice driven by intellectual rigor, by pedagogic competence, and by authentic dialogue. 

ENDNOTES

1. Coursera is a major player in the MOOC world, now partnering with about 70 higher education institutions. Founded by Stanford University Professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller, Coursera reaches tens of thousands of students via the Internet.
2. In a personal email (07/11/2013), Denise Comer confirmed that although there had been a prior MOOC about science writing from Stanford, to her knowledge, hers was the first English composition MOOC.
3. English Composition I: Achieving Expertise, Discussion Forum > General Discussion > Top Forum Posters > Larisa > “Peer feedback grumbling again.” https://class.coursera.org/composition-001/forum/thread?thread_id=19091. Accessed July 12, 2013.
4. Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How*. New York: Bantam, 2009.
5. Geoffrey Colvin, “What it Takes to be Great,” *Fortune*, 19 October 2006.
6. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2008.
7. Porterfield, “Let's Make 2013 the Year of the Seminar,” B19-B20.

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