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Will MOOCs Destroy Academia?

"Thy destroyers and they that made thee waste shall go forth of thee," wrote the prophet Isaiah. This phrase has been popping into my mind as I have been following the recent raging discussions over the topic of MOOCs.

For those readers who paid no attention to recent developments, a MOOC is *massive open online course*; it is a tuition-free course taught over the Web to a large number of students. While online education has a long history, the current wave started in the fall of 2011 when about 450,000 students signed up for three computer-science courses offered by Stanford University. Since then, MOOCs have become the hottest topic of discussion in higher education in the U.S. Within months of the Stanford experiments, several start-up companies debuted, including one that immodestly claims to be "the first elite American university to be launched in a century." Many leading U.S. universities now offer MOOCs, either on their own or in partnership with some of these companies, even though no business model has emerged for MOOC-based education. Some describe the current environment as "MOOC panic" or "MOOC mania." John Hennessy, Stanford's president, describes the phenomenon as a "tsunami."

Early rhetoric about the educational value of MOOCs was quite lofty, talking about the goal of reaching the quality of individual tutoring, but it is difficult to reconcile such rhetoric with massiveness as an essential feature of MOOCs. A more honest comment from one of the early MOOC pioneers was: "We were tired of delivering the same lectures year after year, often to a half-empty classroom because our classes were being videotaped." In fact, the absence of serious pedagogy in MOOCs is rather striking, their essential feature being short, unsophisticated video chunks, interleaved with online quizzes, and accompanied by social networking.

The bitter truth, however, is that academic pedagogy has never been very good. It is well established that a professorial soliloquy is an ineffective way of teaching. We do know what works and what does not work when it comes to teaching. Much has been written in the last few years about "active learning," "peer learning," "flipping the lecture," and the like, yet much of academic teaching still consists of professors monologuing to large classes. We could undoubtedly improve our teaching, but MOOCs are not the answer to our pedagogical shortcomings.

To understand the real significance of MOOCs you must consider the financial situation in which U.S. colleges and universities have found themselves in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The financial crisis dealt a severe blow to U.S. higher education. Private institutions saw their endowments take significant hits, while public institutions saw state support, which was already shrinking, decline even faster. While outstanding student debt has exceeded the $1T mark, students are facing a highly constrained job market, challenging their ability to repay their debt. After years of college tuition escalating faster than inflation, the very value of college education is being seriously questioned; an Internet entrepreneur is even offering a skip-college fellowship. In this environment, the prospect of higher education at a dramatically reduced cost is simply irresistible.

It is clear, therefore, that the enormous buzz about MOOCs is not due to the technology's intrinsic educational value, but due to the seductive possibilities of lower costs. The oft-repeated phrase is "technology disruption." This is the context for the dismissal (and later reinstatement) last summer of Theresa A. Sullivan, University of Virginia's president, because she was not moving fast enough with online education. The bigger picture is of education as a large sector of the U.S. economy (over $1T) that has so far not been impacted much by information technology. From the point of view of Silicon Valley, "higher education is a particularly fat target right now." MOOCs may be the battering ram of this attack.

My fear is the financial pressures will dominate educational consideration. In his recent book *What Are Universities For?*, Stefan Collini, a Cambridge don, describes universities as "perhaps the single most important institutional medium for conserving, understanding, extending and handing on to subsequent generations the intellectual, scientific and artistic heritage of mankind...we are merely custodians for the present generation of a complex intellectual inheritance which we did not create, and which is not ours to destroy." If I had my wish, I would wave a wand and make MOOCs disappear, but I am afraid that we have let the genie of the bottle.

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