

I spent some of the past semester trying to be an active learner on a Coursera massive open online course (Mooc) on modern poetry from the [University of Pennsylvania](#). It was an impressive, well-structured offering with a charismatic leader and great audio and visual materials. I completed only one quiz, and my sampling of materials was at best sporadic and idiosyncratic. It was very different from the contemporary American poetry course that I took with 30 others in 1970 in a dingy hall in the Old Quad at the [University of Sydney](#). Then, Jim Tulip lectured for an hour, three times a week, without a note or a visual aid. I never missed a class or took a quiz, but I went prepared to all tutorials and Tulip personally graded every essay. Conversely, I never walked the two blocks to meet the guy who was running the Mooc, and I didn't turn in any papers for peer grading or post to a discussion thread.

Musing about the contrast, I started wondering what Moocs were really about. In this I am not alone. Much has been written about Moocs, but there seems to be little by way of solid study and analysis. So I began to sketch out a research agenda for Moocs. Most pundits seem to want to know how to "monetise" Moocs. The motivations are self-sustainability and profit. Solutions include having students pay for examinations. This looks like a return to the old model of examination boards and guilds - in which the opportunity to learn and the design and delivery of learning materials is separated from the assessment of competence, a separation that fragments the process of education.

The heart of the revenue issue is the assessment of learning. In a mass educational model in which learners are also peer evaluators, how are the assessments moderated for reliability and fairness? After all, this is the element with potential market value. How does a community or an employer know that learning has taken place? How does a Mooc certificate gain authenticity as a signal of competence?

I would like to see where Moocs are placed in the history of distance education. How do they line up with the [University of South Africa](#) (Unisa), which has been a "distance-only" provider for 65 years and has some 350,000 students? Do Moocs share the same aim as Unisa: to "inspire learners to create meaningful futures on their own terms"? What do they offer that [The Open University](#) does not?

Next I would like to know who signs up. What is the composition of the mass enrolment? Is it dominated by people who have access to conventional programmes, or do Moocs reach under-served or excluded populations?

And who actually completes? What is the "yield" from these mass enrolments? The few figures I have seen give completion rates that range from one in 10 to one in 20. Who is and who is not completing? What pushes students out of the programme? And what is the long-term impact of non-completion? Does it deter "students" from further study, online or face to face?

Finally an analysis of what constitutes a Mooc-based programme of study is needed. How does participation in an array of Moocs tot up to a credential? What combination of units of study forms the basis for a qualification as a secondary-school teacher or a psychologist or an engineer? Catering for individual interest and the love of learning are commendable, as is increasing access to top-quality materials and teaching. But there is also a responsibility to prepare people for participation in work and other social institutions where credentials serve as paths to success. In sum, there is more to the debate about Moocs than money.