

REVOLUTIONIZING HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF MASSIVE OPEN  
ONLINE COURSES IN POPULAR MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

### REVOLUTIONSIZING HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES IN POPULAR MEDIA

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Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, have recently been suggested as a way to radically transform higher education. This revolutionary rhetoric speaks to many democratic educators' goals, but its use warrants closer inquiry. This project first defines MOOCs, looking at the uses and possible limitations of their current technology, their pedagogical background, and their characteristics. Then, using the Bakhtinian concept of centripetal and centrifugal forces, it examines thematic narratives present in popular discourse about MOOCs that reflect these forces. To do so, it analyzes a range of popular media articles, primarily sources with wide distribution to general audiences, like the *New York Times*, that made up the early media flurry surrounding MOOCs.

While MOOCs offer real benefits for some students, MOOCs are largely presented as a tool for those outside the US or as a supplementary resource for university graduates with little consideration of what this means for educationally underprivileged within the US. Hidden behind a rhetoric of radical change, these articles take an economic approach to an educational issues. This focus constructs a view of universities as economic institutions and students as passive consumers of an educational product and so overlooks pedagogical considerations. As such, this discourse is placed in a capitalistic context that displaces the meanings used by educators.

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## DISCUSSING MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES

Recent media attention has placed Massive Open Online Courses, best known by the acronym “MOOCs,” at the center of current debates over the future of higher education. While MOOCs have been around since 2008, these online courses became the focus of extensive news coverage only after the launch of two high-profile Stanford courses in late 2011 and the subsequent formation of multiple MOOC-platform start-up companies. Much of this early reporting presents MOOCs as a dramatically new addition to the education scene with the potential to “democratize” learning and “revolutionize” higher education, perhaps even replacing brick-and-mortar universities altogether. Speculation over MOOCs’ possible impact on universities has only intensified since San Jose State University (SJSU) partnered with Udacity founder Sebastian Thrun in January 2013 to launch a pilot program following Udacity’s MOOC model (Chea). Administrators and professors alike are questioning how to stay in front of and respond to the possible changes stemming from these courses.

The resulting discussions about MOOCs lie on the intersection of multiple debates impacting higher education, including, importantly, the business of education. As such, the conversation about MOOCs is not just about MOOCs. It is also about how we view education: its purpose, who it’s for and how it’s manifested. MOOCs’ presentation is particularly important within popular media sources aimed at a general audience as it is through this medium that most people will learn what MOOCs are and what they can do.

Will readers of the *New York Times* come away with the sense that MOOCs are for them or for others? Will they see MOOCs as an interesting way to pursue a hobby in retirement or a legitimate means to a “real” education? The implied answers to these questions may very well shape how MOOCs become used as well as impacting views of education more broadly. Thus, my focus here is to better understand MOOCs’ discursive construction on a national level and to explore how this construction affects democratic educational goals.

As MOOCs are still relatively new, I will first provide background on their pedagogical influences and course features. These features help reveal the limits and possibilities enabled by their technology and the purposes and constraints that are apparent through current use. My intention here is to demarcate areas of overlap and difference between these and other existing types of online courses. With this background in mind, educators can draw their own conclusions about the usefulness of MOOCs, or lack thereof, based on their own preferences, pedagogical approaches, and needs. Then, in the second chapter, I will lay out relevant principles of Bakhtinian theory as an entryway to understanding words as multi-meaning, simultaneously challenging and confirming the narratives of the established center. Finally, I will investigate the intra- and inter-textual themes presented in MOOC-focused articles aimed at non-academic audiences through major newspapers and periodicals. In doing so, I will examine how these articles deploy terms like “revolutionary” and “democratic” to position these course-types in reference to brick-and-mortar four-year universities and the impact of those constructions on educators’ democratic teaching goals.

The resulting analysis reveals a view of MOOCs and education as a whole that perpetually occurs through an economic lens. Despite the dramatic headlines, reporting on MOOCs tends to construct these courses in ways that make them less threatening to the most elite four-year university systems, both through their portrayal of the students that use MOOCs and the continued primacy attributed to certain brick-and-mortar educational experiences. While the unequal nature of different modes of instruction is recognized, those modes are discriminately allocated as appropriate for different classes of students. Thus, “revolutionary” and “democratic,” as used in these discourses, are limited by a dominant narrative of economic competition. When considering MOOCs as “revolutionary,” these discourses mean MOOCs may be competitive within this market--an understanding that distorts the term’s meaning away from radical change. In the process, these discourses often work to reinforce a transactional view of the student-teacher relationship and an understanding of institutions of higher education as businesses whose purposes align with the needs of the free market. When taken together, the resulting conceptions of education, MOOCs, and learners work against the revolutionary and democratic goals that these articles champion by perpetuating social narratives that hierarchically value the learning of some students in some contexts more than others.

## UNDERSTANDING MOOCS: BACKGROUND, THEORIES, AND FEATURES

Much of the response to MOOCs has initially focused on the transformations made possible through this new technological format, so it is valuable to first look at MOOCs themselves. Moreover, any conversation about MOOCs is made more complex by their still-evolving identity. The term “MOOC” was originally coined to describe George Siemens and Stephen Downes’ 2008 online course “Connectivism and Connected Knowledge” (CCK08), offered through the University of Manitoba (Cormier, “CCK08”). Since that course, “MOOC” has been applied to a rapidly evolving cluster of related, but variable, course structures popularized through start-up companies Coursera and Udacity as well as Harvard and MIT’s non-profit venture, edX. These platforms are host sites that provide access to free, online, interactive courses known as MOOCs. In non-academic contexts, the term “MOOC” refers to the courses offered through these popular MOOC providers rather than courses resembling the original CCK08. The result of this recent change in usage has been a shift in the meaning of the term. As its application has broadened, so has the notion what a MOOC is and how the term itself can be understood. These differences in meaning must be addressed before considering the discourse surrounding MOOCs.

Siemens has attempted to differentiate the original course form and more recent MOOCs by introducing new terminology to distinguish between these two “strains:” “cMOOCs” and “xMOOCs.” Under this nomenclature, Siemens’s own brand of MOOC

is termed a “cMOOC,” or “connectivist MOOC,” after the learning theory he and Downes developed. The popular start-up MOOCs offered by Coursera, Udacity, and edX are contrastingly termed “xMOOCs.” In keeping with their academic origin, the “cMOOC” and “xMOOC” terms are used almost exclusively in academic circles, primarily by those with an interest in e-learning or connectivist pedagogy. I have elected to use the terms “cMOOC” and “xMOOC” in this chapter because of the current academic context and because, as the discussion that follows will show, these MOOC-types do differ significantly in their pedagogical approaches. The cMOOC/xMOOC distinction provides a vocabulary through which to address and analyze these courses’ conceptual differences, avoiding the confusion that occurs when those familiar with xMOOCs try to impose that understanding of MOOCs’ identity onto discussions of the older cMOOCs and vice versa. In order to examine the responses that have arisen to these courses, it is, therefore, not only necessary to crystallize the similarities and differences between MOOCs and other forms of online and distance learning, but also to differentiate between forms of MOOCs themselves.

Moreover, the need to rename the cMOOC emphasizes how thoroughly “MOOCs” has come to be associated with the newer xMOOC type. The varied application of the original term indicates that the notion of a MOOC is still vaguely defined and open to new significations. The shift in usage has effected a broadening that may still be ongoing, and new strains may still evolve. It is important to note that these terms do not distinguish between a MOOC and a non-MOOC; both “strains” are still

widely recognized as MOOCs. Therefore, having distinguished between the species of MOOCs, the genus itself requires interrogation if a more essential understanding of MOOCs, and of the possible proliferation of MOOC-types, is to occur.

Despite the self-descriptive moniker, which suggests certain eponymous features could be assumed, a priori, to exist in any “MOOC,” the identity and features of any so-named course are not easily apparent for either strain. As David Wiley and others have argued, the “MOOC” title is not entirely definitive (“MOOC;” Siemens, “MOOC;” Cormier, “CCK08;” Moe, “Defining”). For any given case, at least one of the titular features of a MOOC may require qualification. MOOCs have ranged in size from a handful of students, hardly massive by the standards of a large lecture class, to hundreds of thousands of students—a course size previously unheard of. MOOCs may be only somewhat open, and the nature of that “openness” is itself debated as anti-open content practices such as DMR protection, are introduced (Wiley, “Concern”). And while all MOOCs (so far) have been online, even this feature must be qualified when they are used to form “hybrid” courses that take place both online and in-person (Wiley, “MOOC”). In particular, the meanings of “massive” and “open” require a more in-depth exploration as the features with the biggest impact on MOOCs’ reputation as a “novel,” “revolutionizing” educational technology. It is through these features that we may find the clearest understanding of what makes a MOOC a MOOC if the seemingly essential features are only optional.

To address these multiple issues of definition, I will first provide background on the origins, pedagogical approaches, and course structures of the two major forms of MOOCs. I will then focus on the notions of massiveness and openness, particularly as they relate to scalability and self-directed participation, as defining characteristics that can illuminate distinctions within MOOC-types and between MOOCs and other forms of online or distance learning. In making these distinctions, however, I also hope to interrogate the definition itself, suggesting that MOOCs' identity is not yet fixed. They can be made to take different forms and, thus, to fulfill different purposes. It is in this state of flux that MOOCs function as an active site for tensions in higher education.

#### Connectivists MOOCs

The original MOOC form was based on Connectivism, introduced as a learning theory in 2004 by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. Connectivism's biggest impact to date has been through cMOOCs and the e-learning community that has grown around those online courses (Moe, "MOOC-MOOC"). Drawing on constructivism, connectivism holds that knowledge is not "acquired, as though it were a thing" (Downes, "Connectivism"). Also like constructivism, connectivism suggests each learner must "construct his or her own mental models in an individualistic way" (Forster 6-7). However, Siemens suggests that societal changes, such as the increased importance of digital spaces and the rapidity with which knowledge now becomes obsolete, require an updated learning theory created and operating with these conditions in mind. Given the vastness of knowledge available in the information age, Siemens and Downes suggest

that a modern learning theory must acknowledge the importance of gaining knowledge through networks: connections between sources of information that reside outside of the individual. It is the act of creating and traversing these connections, Downes argues, that constitutes learning (Downes, “Connectivism”).

However, critical academic assessments of connectivism have concluded that “connectivism’s contributions [do not] warrant it being treated as a separate learning theory” because it does not seem to offer new principles that cannot be derived from previous learning theories. Plon Verhagen argues that new modes of accessing information and contexts for learning (such as through online courses) do not change the way people learn, making connectivism unnecessary as a learning theory (7). Despite this objection, connectivism shows promise as a guide for new pedagogies and curricula by considering ways that learning, and importantly, teaching, can be manifested differently in online spaces (Kop and Hill 11; Kop 7; Verhagen 11). One value of such considerations is experimentation with new models of online course structures, which the cMOOCs attempt. As the principles of connectivism inform cMOOCs’ course structure, these principles help to highlight the differences in approach taken by xMOOCs. Thus, even if connectivism is only considered as a curriculum guide, it provides insight into the potential purposes that can be served by MOOCs and other digitally mediated courses.

#### cMOOC CCK08 Course Features

Decentralized platforms. The first cMOOC course, CCK08, used pre-existing online platforms, such as the open source Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle,

in conjunction with blogs, Twitter accounts, YouTube, and other online resources already available to interested students. These disparate sources were aggregated using an RSS feed to allow students to collect content created by themselves and their peers using a variety of “student owned” spaces. Students maintain access to their twitter feeds and followers even after a course has ended, so the connections that they’ve created as a learning community is not severed at the end of the course in the way that a physical classroom disperses or an LMS becomes inactive. This ownership, Siemens suggests, creates a “dissolution of the boundaries that an institution controls that inhibits or controls student interaction.” Siemens supports this impression by noting his students reported “longer trailing social interaction” following CCK08 than they experienced after other courses. (Siemens, “George”).

Emphasis on content generation. The CCK08 course deemphasized content mastery, instead using content as “a catalyst to make connections” and allowing “the social nature [of the course to] produce the content.” From the connectivist standpoint, part of MOOCs’ potential is the possibility to create networks of student learners who can create and transmit new knowledge between themselves. Thus, the cMOOC will still start with content, in the form of readings, videos, or guest speakers with which participants can engage. However, particularly where non-credit seeking CCK08 students were involved, there was little in the way of required mastery of specific content. (Siemens, “George”).

Instead, CCK08 emphasized “pathfinding and social sense-making.” For Siemens, “making sense of . . . chaos is the experience of learning. If the teacher makes sense of it

for [the students] then they have lost the sense making process” (“George”). Dave Comier goes so far as to argue that without creating content, i.e. simply performing the task of content transmission, MOOCs are functionally synonymous with online video lectures or textbooks and fail to utilize their full potential. The notion of constructed knowledge, accomplished in cMOOCs in large part by digitally mediated peer interactions, is thus a salient aspect of the course structure that distinguishes the cMOOC from passive forms of open educational resources (OERs).

However, Dave Wiley also notes that some of the CCK courses seem to actively “try very hard not to be courses,” suggesting cMOOC courses may not fit easily into university-defined notions of a standard course (“MOOC”). To date, there are few examples of the cMOOC structure being used to accomplish the specific educational goals of a variety of disciplines. cMOOCs have remained overwhelmingly meta-courses, dealing self-referentially with topics related to the MOOC model or connectivism itself and taught to a select set of interested scholars (Moe, “MOOC-MOOC”). Ironically, it is the relative foreignness of cMOOCs’ most revolutionary aims that may be the very factor that prevents their widespread adoption. Simply put, they do not fit easily into the current educational model. Instructors must rethink grades, required participation, and the very purpose(s) of learning. Currently, it remains to be seen whether the cMOOC model will be acceptable to a range of American universities, if it is suitable for a variety of course subjects (e.g., a content-dependent course like Introduction to Biology), and if it will be approachable for a broad swath of instructors who have no explicit interest in Connectivism itself.

## The MOOC Explosion: Enter the xMOOC

To see MOOC courses that are currently tackling content-heavy courses in connection with a wide range of universities, one must turn to the more popular, and more familiarly structured, xMOOCs. xMOOCs are both more common and better known than their cMOOC counterparts. It wasn't until 2011 that MOOCs received notice outside of academic circles when Stanford's "Introduction to Artificial Intelligence" course was offered online for free, taught by Sebastian Thrun, a Google employee and professor of Computer Science at Stanford University, and Peter Norvig, Director of Research at Google and former NASA researcher. This course, labeled as a MOOC, enrolled a previously unheard of 160,000 students. Two other computer science (CS) courses were also hosted by Stanford at this time. The high profile of the university, the reputations of the instructors, and the high enrollment numbers were the ostensible factors prompting a wave of media attention in the form of articles like "MOOCs, Large Courses Open to All, Topple Campus Walls" from *The New York Times* and nearly blow-by-blow reporting from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Lewin).

While Stanford's AI course first drew widespread attention to the existence of MOOCs, the so-called "Year of the MOOC" didn't result until 2012 when a wave of MOOC-related start-up companies began to incorporate, boasting an impressive level of financial backing from venture capitalists (VCs) as well as forming partnerships with elite universities (Pappano). Since then, xMOOCs have proliferated, with Coursera alone boasting 3.9 million students, 389 courses, and 83 partner universities as of June 2013

(Coursera). Currently, three companies have emerged as the primary MOOC providers: Coursera, founded by Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng from Stanford's Department of Computer Science; Udacity, started by Sebastian Thrun, David Stavens and Mike Sokolsky with backgrounds in Computer Science and Robotics at Stanford and NASA; and edX, a non-profit collaboration between Harvard and MIT that grew out of the two universities' respective online education initiatives, Harvardx and MITx (Coursera; Udacity; edX). These companies enter into contractual agreements with universities or instructors who generate educational content and lead courses hosted through their websites ("Online Course Hosting").

For their part, these companies provide platforms that host individual MOOCs and support the videos, discussion boards and millions of user profiles. They are centralized portals through which students can access these free materials. Consolidating allows students to come to one place to access a wide variety of courses, making participation in courses offered through multiple institutions more feasible. The existence of these providers is one major difference in the way students can access and interface with the two different MOOC types. The host platforms act as a single point of entry where a student can access multiple MOOC offerings. Much like YouTube.com allows users to have profiles and access content that is generated by others, xMOOCs allow prospective students to peruse and "subscribe" to updates for content generated by university professors. Ng has referred to this aspect of Coursera's function as a "hub" for "learning and networking" (Pappano, "Year"). The resulting enrollment experience is

thus made easier by utilizing a single familiar start point. This centralization also allows xMOOCs to deliver a more consistent student experience mediated through a standardized platform interface. However, by acting as a hub, these platforms control all aspects of the learning environment in a way that cMOOCs's decentralized course structures seek to avoid.

The xMOOCs' digital interface and course structure share similarities within and across platforms. Current xMOOC platforms have borrowed heavily from the course design of the earliest xMOOCs provided through Stanford. Each course is constructed by different professors and is typically modeled after the course as it is taught in the brick-and-mortar classroom, introducing variation in the pedagogical approaches that each professor incorporates. MOOC platforms do, however, impact how these approaches are manifested in the digital environment. Providers set requirements for adapting course structures into online formats, previous courses serve as templates, and the forms of media and online interactions a specific platform can support limit course design, all combining to determine the structure each MOOC takes (Coursera; Pappano). Udacity, for example, is extending their platform to support "digital labs," thus allowing courses to take different shapes than what could be done before (Udacity). These structural elements are embedded with particular technological affordances that shape the ways xMOOCs are structured and, most importantly, the pedagogical approaches that take place within them.

## The Influence of Khan Academy and Web 2.0 on xMOOCs' Course Features

Two major influences on xMOOCs' initial course structures and pedagogical goals have been Salman Khan's Khan Academy (KA) and social networking sites, which have formed user expectations for participating in online communities. These influences provide online participants with preexisting patterns of interaction with digital technology. Such previous experiences can condition user expectations for how they should interact with a course. Likewise, the form of the technology itself can suggest some uses over others. In the same way a button that invites a user to push it, the design of a technology can encourage some uses while also denying others. Thus, the technology determines some aspects of its use as does the social context in which it was created and in which it is used. Essentially, the use of these courses is dependent on both their structure and the way users understand and choose to use them, and these understandings are shaped by prior understandings (Earl and Kimport).

### Khan Academy and content mastery

Key features of KA's educational approach are reflected in Coursera and other similar MOOC providers. Both emphasize mastery learning—staying with a unit or concept until it becomes clear to the student (Khan; Coursera). In a TED Talk credited with inspiring Udacity founder Sebastian Thrun, Salman Khan contrasts mastery learning through self-paced videos and quiz assessments with what Khan calls a “typical” classroom, in which an instructor tests students on a concept, marks answers wrong, and then moves on to the next concept while the gaps in students' understanding compound

(Khan). The comparison reflects a common theme of measuring online learning against worst-practices in in-person classrooms, but the example is illustrative of the ways these technologies are often grounded in narratives of improved pedagogical practices. In an effort to encourage mastery learning, xMOOCs have widely adopted KA-styled video instruction: short videos where writing appears on the screen with voice-over lectures and instructions. xMOOCs also incorporate short multiple choice quizzes within and between these videos to allow students to check their understanding of material and encourage students to go back to repeat course material they haven't fully understood.

These unidirectional video lectures and automated quizzes often act as the base, but not the entirety, of the xMOOC courses. xMOOCs use quizzes in a more integrated fashion than KA, while also using a variety of other assessment tools and participatory features that KA does not use. Typically, xMOOCs will feature weekly homework, problem sets or application activities, writings and/or peer feedback to create a unified course based on the course goals and materials of college professors with experience teaching their course and with expertise in the topics of instruction. In some cases, this can amount to an intense 20 hour a week load of lecture videos, quizzes, reading, application-based homework assignments, forum participation, and team-based semester projects (Start-up Engineering). However, homework must be completed only if the student wishes to receive a certificate of completion. Students can choose to participate passively, only following lecture materials without turning in anything. In this case, the

xMOOC could be used much like KA or other video lecture series, but their functionality is ultimately more extensive. (Coursera; Udacity; edX).

More than even the course structure, Salman Khan's Ted talk seems to have influenced xMOOC providers' pedagogical goals. In his talk, Khan promoted KA as a tool for educators to "flip the classroom"--a process in which students tackle lecture-like content at home, freeing class time for homework-like practice under teacher supervision (Khan). This suggestion is specifically reflected in Coursera's pedagogy, which encourages "active learning" by using MOOCs to free up in-class time that, presumably, would otherwise be spent on lectures (Khan; Coursera). This particular use of MOOCs assumes a hybrid course, a course structure that splits time between online and brick-and-mortar classroom environments. In this configuration, the MOOC would act as a supplemental content-delivery system while "freeing up class time for discussion" (Martin). The emphasis on active learning and hybrid courses suggests interesting uses for MOOCs. Early studies are showing that students in hybrid courses outperform students who participate in fully online and fully in-person courses (Coursera). However, the argument for flipped classrooms is based on the value of time spent interactively in-class, raising questions about the educational experience of students' whose sole experience is in an online course.

Another outcome of the KA influence is a video-based, content-focused instructional style that biases xMOOCs towards particular subjects. The experience of Dr. Keith Devlin, a mathematics professor who has taught MOOC courses through Coursera,

echoes the different pedagogical needs that can arise in different contexts. He suggests the instruction-recall-application model, by xMOOCs' video-then-quiz style facilitates most easily, is useful and necessary in courses such as Algebra and introductory CS that are intended to teach explicit skills that build on one another, but that the model is, unsurprisingly, insufficient for all courses. Less well suited are courses where students must practice ways of thinking. In line with this experience, humanities courses, with their emphasis on exploring content not memorizing it, are likely to face more limitations within these course structures.

The early makeup of xMOOC course offerings further suggests the xMOOC format is geared heavily towards particular course needs. To date, the majority of courses offered have been in CS, with a smattering of courses from business and the hard sciences. Fewer courses exist from the soft sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology) and only a few courses have emerged from the humanities; however, between March and May of 2013 this is already changing (Udacity; edX; Coursera). In part, the dominance of CS courses in the xMOOC world may result from the origins of xMOOCs themselves as created by CS instructors. Udacity, for example, offers no courses from the humanities; instead, CS courses consist of the vast majority of its offerings. CS and other STEM courses may also predominate at this point because those instructors may be most interested in and feel most comfortable with creating a course in an online environment. Humanities instructors, on the other hand, may face a variety of challenges: learning the technical skills necessary to adapt their content to the platform, finding ways to maintain

their instructional priorities within its restrictions, and assessing learning that isn't amenable to the multiple-choice auto-grading necessitated by these courses' massive scale.

### Web 2.0 and social learning

Courses that have traversed into the territory of writing and content creation, like "Introduction to Public Speaking" and "First-Year Composition 2.0," tend to rely heavily on the social media aspects of xMOOCs' course structure, such as peer-grading, discussion forums, and digital "hangouts" (Coursera). xMOOC proponents have pointed to the influence of social networking cultures, like Facebook, Twitter, and blogging communities, as a source for bi- or multidirectional knowledge sharing within MOOCs that act as digital learning communities (Delvin). xMOOCs attempt to utilize these communicative functions by having students create learner profiles, participate in discussion boards and group forums, and, when time zone differences permit, join real-time "office hour" chats with the professor and/or TA's (Coursera, "Pedagogies;" Udacity, "About"). As social learning theories predict, students have reported that these social features and the insights they gain from other students are vital to their success (Pappano). Moreover, some courses have rigorously defined interactivity requirements that must be met in order to earn a certificate of completion, including collaboratively produced projects and required peer-feedback or peer-grading iterations. These peer-interactive elements are logistical as well as pedagogical, as large numbers of student-graders allow for "crowd-sourced" grading to accommodate larger numbers of students

(Delvin; Coursera). These social network features exist in all xMOOCs, if only as supplemental resources for homework help, but they can also form the cornerstones of course requirements.

By incorporating elements of social networks, xMOOCs and cMOOCs both increase the complexity of possible interactions between students and course content, instructors, and peers, changing the way the courses can be used by participants. Dewaard et al. note relatively well-documented affordances of social networks, including “perpetual connectivity, asynchronous interaction, unforeseen collaboration, and emerging learning opportunities” In the case of MOOCs, the integration of social networking features affords certain modes of interaction between learner and course content and between learner and other students in the course. (102). These modes of interaction can be expected to develop within the social framework of MOOCs to the extent that they replicate the technological features of social networks and, importantly, to the extent that users and instructors take advantage of these features (Earl and Kimport). The quality and quantity of interactions that take place through these modes will be dependent on how instructors and students interpret and take advantage of these modes of communication.

The affordances inherent in video lecture and web 2.0 pull in different directions with regards to the modes of interaction prompted between the student and instructor, content, and peers. Like other environmental features of the classroom--bolted stadium seating versus a circle of chairs--the relative weight of these features in a course’s

construction can have a large impact on how any given MOOC is used. Unlike a physical classroom, the MOOC platform mediates all aspects of the course experience. xMOOCs, thus, differ from cMOOCs not only in terms of a pedagogical focus on connectivism, but also through course structures which lend themselves to different purposes and emphases. xMOOCs' consolidated, video-lecture course structure lends itself to content transmission unlike the content construction emphasized in cMOOCs, a feature which makes xMOOCs more applicable to certain kinds of courses. While xMOOCs are not limited to transmission, content is currently the primary focus of the major platforms with communication features taking an auxiliary role. Not unexpectedly, as courses push into the humanities and certain types of advanced coursework the balance is shifting to place greater emphasis on Web 2.0 influences. Thus, the xMOOC structure presents content more readily than in cMOOC courses--a feature that may be regarded as undesirable but which also makes the xMOOC platforms more easily adopted and adapted by a variety of existing university courses.

In order to do so, students and instructors require a level of a level of digital literacy that is inextricable from the issue of expanding access. It is reasonable to expect that students will apply their prior experiences with online communities like Facebook to the MOOC learning environment. Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport argue the ultimate social impact of technologies is determined not just by what uses are readily available; more important are the ways users choose to engage with a technology and, having made those choices, how successfully they are able to "leverage" the uses they chose (33). MOOCs face the challenge of digital literacy (or an even higher bar of digital comfort) as

a prerequisite for student participation, but for truly expanding access, those prior experiences shouldn't be assumed. To make such assumptions presumes that the students using xMOOCs come from specific backgrounds with particular prior experiences with technology, something that may not always be the case if the goal is truly global access to education. Thus, xMOOCs face the same issues as previous technologically-based educational tools as the need for digital literacy dampens their ability to expand access equally. cMOOCs also assume a level of digital literacy, as they make direct use of the social media platforms that have inspired the interaction models implemented by xMOOC providers. Within the cMOOC course structure, however, students are able to select pre-existing online tools with which they are already comfortable and developing online networks is an explicit, and scaffolded, component of the course.

#### Core features of MOOCs: Massive, Scalable, and Open

In the face of the amorphous definitions between and amongst MOOCs, two primary features of MOOCs appear to be at the crux of MOOCs' definition and so are also at the center of the debate over who can be served by MOOCs, whether they can address any of the perennial problems identified in education and whether MOOCs will or will not have an impact beyond that of so many other would-be technological disruptants.

### Scalability

With an enrollment of over 2,000 students, CCK08 was massive by typical university standards; however, just five years later the expectation for a truly massive MOOC is enrollment numbers in the tens or even hundreds of thousands. And yet, not every MOOC is that popular. Some MOOCs have seen enrollments below a hundred students, hardly massive at all by the standards of an introductory lecture course at a large university. Course size, then, cannot be the sole determinant of whether or not a course is “massive” enough to be a massive, open, online course. However, even MOOCs with low enrollment numbers are designed so that the format of the course doesn’t impose an enrollment cap. Therefore, it is not the size per se but rather this potential for scalability, and the course features that it necessitates, that distinguishes MOOCs from typical online courses.

Implications of scalability for course structure. Maintaining scalability pressures MOOCs to adopt more automated course features as the extent to which enrollments can increase is dependent on the course itself. The closer a course comes to posting static information, the less maintenance is required to disseminate that material to an unlimited number of students. For courses that would typically use short written responses or essays, remaining scalable may encourage instructors into greater dependence on multiple choice questions or automated grading. And despite its validity across certain measures, automated essay scoring still has widely acknowledged limitations and has been vocally resisted by writing faculty (Haswell; Shermis).

Allowing multi-directional interaction on a large scale often requires MOOCs to leverage peer interaction. In courses with thousands of students participating, a critical mass of active participants can be found, even if another, dramatically larger, group of students prefers not to participate in the social aspects of the course (Martin). Discussion boards are one method to increase complexity, while allowing scalability by enabling students to do the work of generating additional content, correcting mistakes, and offering a sense of interactivity. Increasing the size of these boards dampens instructors' and TA's ability to respond to each individual student personally, again negatively impacting the interactivity that would alleviate the automated nature of the courses.

Coursera's suggested solution to avoid these systems is to "crowd-source" peer-grading. Crowd-sourced grading relies on large numbers of student-graders and uses a composite of those scores, which, Coursera argues, results in more accurate grades even without training. Instructors have also attempted training students as peer-graders and requiring peer-grading for participation which, in its initial stages, has demonstrated mixed success (Coursera). The digital medium has also encouraged instructors to experiment with multimedia digital projects and other alternatives to the seminar paper in order to avoid the issue of grading texts on a massive scale. Because of the limitations scalability places on course structures, assignments, and grading, scalability it has been a focal point of arguments surrounding MOOCs' pedagogical soundness. Although these by-products of scalability have implications for MOOCs' use to teach courses across a range of disciplines, it is a particularly important consideration as MOOCs are proposed

as writing courses because the personal, textual basis of these courses challenge the current capacity of these courses (Brown).

Beyond the impact on course structure, scalability also has serious economic implications that come into play in discussions of MOOCs' democratizing potential. Scalability offers to transcend the constraints of location, space, and, economic factors in order to provide services to students who are currently unserved by four-year universities. Students can benefit from the economies of scale created in MOOCs, whereby the cost per student is greatly reduced as enrollment numbers climb. Similarly, the cost of educating a large number of students is reduced, as fewer instructors need to be employed, a possibility that has prompted speculation about MOOCs' potential impact on the role of educators in higher education.

### Openness

Both MOOC types have their roots in the Open Educational Resource (OER) movement. OER leads to MOOCs through several direct lines: MIT's Open Courseware was intended as an OER, but it also provided the institutional structure for MITx, MIT's first MOOC venture prior to joining with Harvard to found edX (edX). The OER movement itself has intellectual roots in issues surrounding open software and copyright movements, issues of which the first xMOOC practitioners were well aware. Creative Commons licensing even shares its geographical origin with the xMOOC start-ups arising from Silicon Valley (Broussard).

The OER movement is based on making educational materials freely available for reuse and modification and seeks to expand education access to those unable to participate in gated knowledge communities, often for socio-economic or geographical reasons. The goal of OERs is often to improve education for populations that otherwise lack access to educational materials (Richter and McPherson). These concerns are salient in discussions of MOOCs, and (many) MOOCs act as OERs, with the extent of the openness determined by the particular university and platform offering the course.

The meaning of “openness” in the context of MOOCs becomes more contested when it moves beyond access to static course materials to the issue of intellectual property rights. The proprietary approach taken by for-profit MOOC providers has come under fire from some supporters of the OER movement (Wiley “MOOC;” Moe, “Defining”). I will first look at some of the important ways that openness has come to be definitive of currently existing MOOCs before turning briefly to ways that the ideal of openness has fallen short.

Official barriers to access. The most straightforward meaning of “open” in the context of MOOCs is removal of barriers to participation and access. In keeping with the OER movement, MOOCs do not charge enrollment fees, and static course materials are often available even without signing up (Wiley, “MOOC”). Cost is only one barrier to participation. The current crop of MOOCs removes additional barriers, including prerequisites and admissions requirements, which can all act as barriers to student participation in two- and four-year colleges. For example, CCK08 was composed of

twenty-five extended education students from the University of Manitoba who did pay fees and receive credit for their successful completion of the course (Siemens). However, unlike traditional online courses offered by universities, full participation in this early cMOOC, including materials, assignments, and resources, were open to students outside of the university for free, opening the course to students located worldwide who may otherwise have been unable to meet the specific requirements necessary for official university participation. This inclusion of students from beyond the confines of a single, specific university has been a hallmark of MOOCs and has expanded under the xMOOC model as the access point--Ng's "hub"--has moved outside of a single university. While xMOOCs partner with universities, they do not adhere to the admissions requirement of the respective institutions for participation in a particular class. Students without a university affiliation of any kind can participate in courses from multiple universities at once, and there are no formal restrictions preventing enrollment.

Social barriers to access. Additional non-official barriers exist which reduce student enrollment and success in traditional universities, and these obstacles can be as varied as the students themselves. MOOCs have offered to remove at least some of these barriers by increasing flexibility, potentially expanding access in the process. Open participation means that those who cannot or do not want to commit to completing an entire course can still participate without risking their GPA or taking out student loans. Other barriers to participation (e.g., the need to work and only take a single course in one's spare time, not enough money, trying to improve basic math skills before starting

college, etc) are better able to be scheduled into the lives of non-full-time students because the courses take place online in an asynchronous fashion, allowing students to complete what work they can, more or less, in their own time and without being physically present. Through these features, it is hoped that MOOCs will be useful to “non-traditional” students or students who are not or cannot currently be served by two- and four-year higher education programs.

Removing the course from an individual university (which each have their own limited student demographics because of location, program cost, campus culture, program specialties, etc) and placing it online can also increase student diversity. In Dewaard’s cMOOC, 85% of students were between the ages of 30 and 61, a significantly different age range than found in a typical university classroom. The notion of a “typical” university student is, in and of itself, a barrier to participation that may be reduced through online contexts as differences between students’ ages, backgrounds, and current life situations are less visible. At the same time, enrollment is unprompted and self-directed. Thus, it requires participants to have already constructed an image of themselves as successful learners. Currently, MOOC-student demographics bear this out—most MOOC participants have already attained a higher degree, suggesting prior success in the role of student (Jordan). Although the technology required to expand access is already available, the social context in which the decision to participate occurs is as yet unchanged.

### Open Participation

One of the most distinctive characteristics of MOOCs is their support for a spectrum of participation levels. Students may be passive participants who access course material but may or may not even enroll in the course, in which case MOOCs act much like textbooks, serving as a mostly static educational resource. On the other hand, students may also elect to be active participants, taking advantage of message boards and other social-interactivity elements. Likewise, students may choose to complete assignments but not interact in other ways. Or, they can choose to participate in the course fully, earning a certificate of completion (under the xMOOC model). More recently, signature-track courses and officially proctored end-of-course tests both attempt to validate the identity of the course participant and their work and provide a “vetted” certificate of completion. In these cases, MOOCs function much more similarly to a typical online course. This flexibility of student interaction across a spectrum of participation levels is a hallmark of both MOOC types, and it offers to let students use the course as they see fit, or as they are currently able, without being penalized by a poor grade or lost tuition if for some reason they do not fully complete the course (e.g., the material is too advanced, the material is too basic or not to their interest, work or family-life interferes, or the online format does not keep them engaged). And currently, many students who “enroll” do not see a course through to its end (Jordan). This ability to self-determine participation without penalization or fees separates MOOCs from other forms of online education offered through non- and for-profit universities.

### Self-directed, self-paced, and independent learning

The open participation allowed in MOOCs has resulted in discussions of MOOCs as a way for students to practice “self-directed” learning. For cMOOCs, this has been used to mean that students guide their own participation level, content generation, and direction of exploration. In this sense, CKK08 students were both self-directed, in regards to the content that they pursued, and self-paced, in regards to how they progressed through generating and generated materials (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, and Cormier 4).

In discussions of xMOOCs, however, these terms become more loaded and more contested. For xMOOCs, the term “self-directed” is often considered to be interchangeable with “self-paced” (Moe, “Social;” Anderson, Annand, and Wark). The conflation of these two terms re-emphasizes the more limited role of content generation in xMOOCs as well as the narrower focus on mastery learning when compared to cMOOCs. In xMOOCs, students are able to self-directed their experience of course content to the extent that they are able to choose their level of engagement with and speed of progression through course material (i.e., self-directed participation level and self-paced unit completion). However, this self-pacing is curtailed when participating in an active class as homework deadlines still have to be met, assignments turned in, etc. The extent of self-directed learning is, therefore, often more circumscribed in xMOOC courses. But still, there is overlap in terms of students’ overall ability to pick and choose courses and to determine what they wish to get out of the course, even if that doesn’t

mean “full” participation leading to a certificate. However, interpreting self-direction as self-pacing assumes a linear path through set content. In this case, direction means knowing when to stay with a conception, not the ability to find avenues of exploration.

This emphasis on self-paced learning has faced criticism not only because of what some see as an overly strong focus on content transmission, but also because self-paced learning in the context of xMOOCs has been seen as out of step with participation in a learning community. Further, independent learning, with its image of a self-motivated student working in physical isolation, seems to cater to and glorify an educational version of radical individualism that is in conflict with social constructivist pedagogies, as the focus on the individual seems to deemphasize and limit students’ access to social interaction (Garrison).

In contrast, proponents of MOOCs have defended the potential for peer interactions in online settings. First, communities of peer learners do emerge naturally in discussion forums for students that are engaged in a course. Because of the diversity of students that are able to access the courses and because open participation allows those students to “self-organize their participation according to learning goals, prior knowledge and skills, and common interests,” courses are able to generate peer activity (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, and Cormier 4). This may benefit from MOOCs’ critical mass of students so that, even when self-pacing, there are other students who are the same, or a slightly more advanced, level. Thus, such a criticism, on the level of practice, rests on discrediting the value of online social interactions in general. Further, proponents

suggest that issues affecting social pedagogical practices are not automatically solved when courses are moved into a physical classroom (Laurillard). Traditional courses following a lecture model do not accommodate peer interaction except as are naturally occurring and self-generating in the form of study groups, etc. At best, these types of in-person courses will offer a smaller class section (often led by a TA) where problem sets can be discussed. Such an argument, however, like many that come up in the discussion of MOOCs, seems to gauge MOOCs' quality against the poorest university practices. Thus, using such comparisons as a standard might introduce MOOCs that raises the low water mark, but alone they will not push MOOCs to dramatically improving education. While MOOCs are not inherently incapable of fostering content generation or peer-interaction, they face many of the same constraints as an in-person classroom as well as pressure to maintain scalability. On the other hand, many of their features can dramatically increase their flexibility for students, both in terms of access and the ability for students to take charge of their own learning.

### Conclusion

On their face, MOOCs' course structure is not radically different from what has come before. Both cMOOC and xMOOCs work with technological interfaces that will feel familiar to students and instructors already used to online platforms—Twitter, forums, video chats, videos and quizzes. While cMOOCs draw on existing technology and builds on a familiar pedagogical base, they present interesting possibilities for student-constructed knowledge in a digital space. However, it is xMOOCs that have

garnered widespread popularity and funding, to the extent that they have come to dominate the meaning of the term “MOOC.” In many ways, these courses are less “revolutionary” than the preceding cMOOCs. They function closer to standard lecture models with the addition of social networking as they seek to replicate pre-existing course content in a digital space. However, they have continued to evolve course features to allow a greater variety of subjects to launch in just the past few months. As more programs move online, the information garnered through these courses will be useful to understand how to use the medium better.

Unfortunately, some of these improvements simply increase the efficacy of the transmission model rather than unsettling it. The courses themselves are neither unprecedented nor are they wholly without value. While these courses do not represent a dramatic break from previous online courses in instructional forms, they are moving towards incorporating more modes of peer-grading and student-student interaction as they continue to experiment with more crowdsourced and social networking features. In the meantime, the current popular xMOOC model will obviously fit the instructional needs of some professors and some disciplines better than others, and there is no guarantee that the form will evolve enough to meet the needs of a fully constructivist pedagogy.

Developing more interactive course structures that allow for more constructivist approaches will, in large part, depend on the value that platforms, instructors, and the students themselves place on these qualities. More broadly, it is our expectations for what

education should be, what it should look like, and whom it should that will likely drive what MOOCs do and for whom. MOOCs, though designed to be more egalitarian by removing significant obstacles to participation, may continue to be used unequally by those who are already educated. But this pattern of use says more about the social context (where, for example, some are more likely to be taught to self-identify as learners than others) than it does about the tool being used in it. It's this social context acting on MOOCs that will be most likely to shape its future purposes. In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to address these issues by using a Bakhtinian framework to analyze discourses constructing MOOCs in the public imagination.

## A BAKHTINIAN THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the analysis that follows in chapter three, I will be drawing on the work of Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin to explore the implications of the public conversation surrounding MOOCs, particularly as it concerns MOOCs as agents of change in higher education. Bakhtinian theory, which acknowledges the “polarities, changes, and contradictions in all social life,” is well suited to an analysis of such a complex set of real word discourses (Rogers 23). Moreover, a selection of popular media articles is particularly apt for a Bakhtinian analysis as “we always speak with words that we have borrowed from the marketplace” (Varenne 390). Bakhtin understands the marketplace as separate from the modern U.S. notion of the free market (which is itself an important aspect of the MOOC conversation). As such, it does not share all the same economic implications. Instead, it refers to the bustling market stalls that are often at the center of human social life. The marketplace, for Bakhtin, is indicative of a space of mixing, where many ideas, registers, and discourses meet together to form a common cultural language. It is this notion of the marketplace that is reflected by the popular media sources I will be examining in the next chapter.

As with the disambiguation just required, the “imprecision” of Bakhtin’s vocabulary, with his reliance on neologisms and terms that shift meaning between texts, has already been widely discussed (Landay 108; Holquist, “Introduction” xviii; Rogers; Rafe 31-2, 63). Given the flexibility of Bakhtin’s terminology, it is necessary to flesh out these ideas and their relationships more thoroughly. Here, I will outline my intended

meanings for a few of the Bakhtinian concepts that are most pertinent to the following analysis and how I see their relation to the topic of MOOCs.

Central to Bakhtinian theory is the dialogic relationship between language as it is spoken and as it is understood--the process through which meanings morph and coalesce. In Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic, "everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Holquist "Glossary" 426). As such, it is a dynamic, social and highly contextual conversation. As Cynthia Greenleaf and Mira-Lisa Katz suggest, the dialogic nature of language means we "are always in the act of responding to the social world, and in making meaning through [our] responses to that world, [we] are also reshaping or 'authoring' it." (173). I would like to emphasize this understanding of discourse, in which each instance of communication is simultaneously impacted by all the factors of its context—the speaker, the listener, and the social constructs that exist around those words—and impacting them.

This process of dialogism occurs in part through the heteroglossic nature of language, in which all words are embedded with multiple meanings as they accumulate semantic baggage. Past uses travel into present dialogues. Similarly, future uses often impinge on our understanding of the past, requiring clarification that can only ever be partial (Landay 108). For Bakhtin, the heteroglossic nature of language results from the interaction between centripetal and centrifugal forces (Baxter 157; Landay 108). Bakhtin uses these forces to describe the competing functions of language as it either pushes into a center, solidifying through repetition the stable language of authority or pulls outwards

towards difference, dislodging normalized meanings (272; Holquist, “Glossary” 425). In this way, centripetal forces “centralize verbal-ideological thought” and, in doing so, “maintain [a society’s] myths” (Bakhtin 271; XXX 90). Centrifugal forces, on the other hand, challenge these central ideologies. Notably, Bakhtin’s use of the term “ideology” is not so politically focused in its original Russian as the translation is frequently meant in the present day United States. It is “simply an idea-system” (Holquist, “Glossary” 429). The ideologies revealed through discourse become modes of social definition, giving societies “their senses of identity” and “reflecting actions, values, and preferences forming ‘thematic logic’” (Baxter 161; Rogers 33). The result of these two forces is a process in constant flux, where meanings are constantly adapting while simultaneously being re-inscribed through continued use.

As the ongoing nature of the dialogic process suggests, the impact of these discourses will only be felt over time. While Bakhtin suggests the interaction between centripetal and centrifugal forces ultimately always trends towards heteroglossia, the movement is not necessarily rapid. My research will be a primarily synchronic snapshot of contemporary discourse, creating some limitations. I will examine media articles primarily from within the first year and half as MOOCs gained popularity--the narrow timeframe engendered by the newness of MOOCs themselves. Where possible, I will look at changes that have occurred in this brief time span, for example, as questions have been resolved or as the conversation faces in on itself. However, the overarching narrative themes that I will identify are long lasting and cannot be expected to have resolved within such a historically short window. As my intention is not to fully explore

the histories of these themes, but rather to look at how they are currently playing against one another in the construction of MOOCs and educational ends more generally, a snapshot view of these issues is not out of place. While it does not demonstrate the movement that Bakhtin himself sees as an inherent part of the dialogic process, it does instantiate the current discursive landscape with the expectation that these meanings are not static.

Moreover, centripetal and centrifugal forces will likely overlap, as instances of speech can simultaneously draw on powerful dominant narratives even while seeking to disrupt. For Bakhtin, “all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces,” only some of which come to bear in a given dialogic relationship (Holquist, “Glossary” 428). Because multiple tensions exist in many directions, discourses can disrupt one tension while re-confirming the dominant discourse that exists along another axis. Bakhtin describes this phenomena saying, “no living word relates to its object in a singular way” (Bakhtin 276). In this sense, “competing definitions” may surface beyond those consciously intended by the writer (“Talk” 390). It is possible to engage in contradiction, to act against your intents, to reinscribe where you hoped to challenge, or to be the conduit through which “institutionalized” understandings are reinforced. My intention in the chapter that follows is not to ascribe purposes to individual authors or publications, but rather to look at language as it is acting, its roots and its reach, so that it may be considered openly and critically.

Through this theoretical lens, the discourses surrounding MOOCs are seen as responses to their own cultural situations as well as active forces, themselves shaping the

social context of future utterances. Acting in this way, these discourses can provide insight in multiple directions. They can be examined for their reflection of the cultural narratives that have resonated in the past, and they can be considered for their impact on the meanings that will take hold in the future. In the next chapter, I will explore ways in which contemporary discourse attempts to make sense of MOOCs by repeating centralized ideologies and, in doing so, also constructs them.

What's more, a Bakhtinian reading asks us to focus on how the discourses involved embody or challenge "shared understanding[s]" (Rafe 3). The discourses used to talk about MOOCs are invariably tied to previous meanings as well as current uses and interpretations. None are free from the contexts in which they are, have been, and will be used. Thus, our understandings are always modulated through past usage. I wish to use these utterances as an entry point to the values that are imbedded in those narratives, identifying discourse that acts centripetally. These are narratives that, through repetition, reinvest in dominant ideologies or that must be understood through reference to these ideological assumptions.

Together, these elements of Bakhtinian theory indicate the conflicting social forces that interact to construct multiple ideologies embedded in these texts. As a reflection of the "marketplace," these articles speak to the broadest national audience, and in doing so, speak from a common language to reflect collectively shared ideas. Thus, from a Bakhtinian perspective, the connections between the language used in these articles and the standard understandings they rely on (either as justifications or as assumptions) become clearer and more vital. Bakhtin's notion of speaking with borrowed

words further emphasizes the historical construction that influences the way we speak of things--our conversations about MOOCs are not newly created, but rather draw on the meanings of the past (Varenne 390). The articles and blogs that make up public discourses about MOOCs represent “living utterance[s]:” concrete acts of language occurring within particular contexts. Like all utterances, these discourses are “active participant[s] in social dialogue” (Bakhtin 276), their importance extending beyond themselves to their impact on other social discourses.

We can understand language, then, not as inert, but as reflective of past uses and active creators of future understandings. This observation emphasizes the importance of this discursive body given the impact it may have on the creation of public opinion--these articles shape how we talk about MOOCs and even the purposes to which we may think to put them. For MOOCs, these discourses are made even more important by the relative recency of the topic itself. As “new” entities relatively unmarked by a language of their own, they rely on pre-existing ideologies to place them into a context that is understood. A Bakhtinian understanding underscores the importance of examining these discourses to see how oftentimes old ideologies about the purpose and mode of education are being reinscribed through the discourses of radical change that are now being applied to MOOCs. What’s more, in their nascent state, these discourses have a greater power to shape MOOCs’ future use as they compile the “baggage” that the public, learning about MOOCs for the first time, will carry alongside their conception of these tools. What is meant by “MOOC” and what is understood as belonging to that category--its properties, its purposes--is still in flux but is rapidly congealing in the image of popularly portrayed

by the major MOOC providers and popular media sources such as the *New York Times*. Taking our words from the marketplace, this media may shape not only the language that we have to think about and discuss these courses in the future but also how we use them. The form these courses eventually take may be the one that we first create discursively as we open and close future possibilities by defining the roles that MOOCs may occupy.

## TALK OF REVOLUTION: ANALYZING MOOCS IN POPULAR DISCOURSE

The conversation on MOOCs offers a window into multiple tensions that are currently transecting the national conversation on the future of education. Within this dialogue, MOOCs have become the latest, though not the first and likely not the last, “innovative” technology to be vaunted as a means of transforming education. MOOCs have been advertised as “revolutionizing” and “democratizing,” fulfilling the aims of democratic educators to provide equal access to education. Given the recent attempts to incorporate MOOC courses into undergraduate education at state universities, this rhetoric warrants closer scrutiny. My aim here, then, is to illuminate the meaning of “revolutionizing education” in the context of these discourses and to consider how the characterization of MOOCs as a revolutionary, democratizing force impacts democratic teaching goals. To do so, I will analyze the multiple centripetal and centrifugal narratives repeated in popular media articles in order to consider how these discourses construct MOOCs, what these constructions suggest about the relationships between MOOCs and brick-and-mortar universities, and the implications of MOOCs’ deployment based on this construction.

I will look at modes through which popular reporting relays an image of MOOCs and universities as engaged in economic competition at the expense of other possible narratives, such as educational quality or democratic relationships between teacher and student. Despite the emphasis that MOOC providers’ own promotional content places on

issues of increasing student access to education and teaching best practices, consideration of MOOCs' value as a source of knowledge, their course structures, and their educational quality is subsumed by speculation on MOOCs' ability to work more effectively (i.e. profitably) within a for-profit education system. Narratives regarding democratic access to education are deployed in service of a narrative in which MOOCs are evaluated against four-year universities on their ability to attract students with the promise of employable skills. Embedded in this narrative focus is a construction of students, teachers, MOOCs, and four-year universities that is detrimental to democratic education in terms of both access and relationships within the classroom. Thus, this treatment reduces the significance of transgressive rhetoric by constricting its application to economic concerns. "Revolutionizing education" takes on layered meanings in the context of these discourses, primarily implying change within the system, not *of* the system. Ultimately, these discourses relate an entrepreneurial success story that fails to interrogate the educational potential and consequence of these courses and, in so doing, short-changes democratic goals for educational access and quality.

#### Popular Media News Sources

I will discuss articles from multiple online and print news sources, including *The New York Times* (with selections from both the opinion and education sections), *USA Today*, and *The Atlantic*. I have defined popular media articles as those written for a general, non-academic audience with national distribution and household-name recognition. I have chosen to focus on these sources as they are explicitly intended to

reach the widest audience, which requires that they frame academic debates as they relate to more general social concerns. In doing so, they may draw on our most broadly appealing narratives about education. Moreover, by representing the idea of what a MOOC is, what it does, and whom it is for to a primarily non-academic audience, these articles powerfully construct MOOCs in the popular imagination. The semantic baggage attached as a result of these narratives has the largest impact on how MOOCs will be seen in the present and thus how they may come to be used in the future. For example in this chapter, when I use the term “MOOC,” I use it as it is used in popular media, in its privileged and undialogized form, “[un]aware of competing definitions” embodied in the cMOOCs that came before, to refer to the courses I have otherwise distinguished as xMOOCs (Holquist 426). While journalists do sometimes recognize Siemens and Downes as early founders, few acknowledge, much less specify, the instructional differences in format or approach between the “forerunners” and the current popular models. The undifferentiated use of the term “MOOC” blurs over significant differences in instructional methods and educational goals, which is also indicative of a general lack of emphasis on pedagogical approaches in these articles. But, it also shows how popular conceptions of the forms’ identity and expectations for its future incarnations can be strongly influenced by popular discourse, both now and in the future (Varenne 384). It is just such a retroactive transformation that has caused the current use of the term “MOOC” to coalesce around one central meaning, essentially erasing connectivist approaches, so that it has come to signify a conception of massive open online courses that more closely follows a content-transmission model than it previously had.

## Overarching Narratives about Technology

To better understand the context in which MOOCs are being approached, I will first turn to the attitudes commonly taken towards technology, particularly educational technology, as they provide the most immediately accessible social constructs that can be applied to MOOCs and may, therefore, illuminate in broadest strokes the attitudes applied to MOOCs themselves. Cynthia Selfe points to deeply rooted cultural beliefs about technology, which impact our approaches to new promises of technologically-rooted change in education, and these beliefs are apparent in the approaches taken towards MOOCs. The articles in question indicate, implicitly or explicitly, whether or not MOOCs are viewed as a source of change, impacting the university system and (formal) learning as we currently know it, and whether such a change would be for the better. Following a Bakhtinian analysis that looks to discover the narratives that are repeated through unspoken assumptions, the answering predictions may be best understood as extensions of familiar cultural narratives: technology as a source of beneficial innovation and social improvement, increased technological dependence as a gateway to dystopic futures, and technology as an over-hyped agent of change (Selfe).

Though rarely directly addressed by these articles, one of these perspectives typically informs any given article's underlying theme, visible in the rhetorically framing headline and introduction. Most common is the cultural narrative that "link[s] technological progress closely with social progress" (Selfe 293). Educators will recognize this perspective as a common element of success narratives detailing the introduction of

educational technology within the classroom. For example, in an essay aimed at writing teachers, Dave Boardman offers an optimistic description of the digital classroom, which “offers unlimited, transformational possibilities” to connect students, de-center learning, and help “students discover a more resonant voice on their way to becoming proficient, independent learners” (171). In the same collection, Thomas Newkirk begins his essay “Looking Back to Look Forward” with a self-conscious replication of just this sort of “futuristic” rhetoric, speaking of “unprecedented technological change that calls into question traditional ways of teaching writing,” thus causing “the traditional organization of school itself [to] need to be changed” as “the very nature of writing is being transformed at a breathless rate” (1).

These well-known themes of transformative technology form the ideological backdrop in which the discussion of MOOCs takes place, and they become clearly visible in many article titles, such as “Disruptive Innovation: Open Online Courses are Changing Education Forever,” “Revolution Hits the Universities,” and “College May Never be the Same” (Baker; Friedman; Marklein). These titles, like many others, conform to the overwhelming bent of most mainstream media sources, which ask, “how MOOCs will change” higher education, not “if” (Marklein). Much early reporting goes even farther and suggests that MOOCs’ impact on higher education’s status quo will be a positive one. Tamar Lewin writes in *The New York Times*, “while the vast potential of free online courses has excited theoretical interest for decades, in the past few months hundreds of thousands of motivated students around the world who lack access to elite universities

have been embracing them as a path toward sophisticated skills and high-paying jobs, without paying tuition or collecting a college degree” (“Instruction”). Likewise, Marcella Bombardieri writes, “behind the goofy acronym is an idea that flips the old ‘online degree’ on its head. Instead of Internet diplomas offered by sometimes dubious schools for a price, MOOCs make an elite education available to anyone, typically for free but without course credit.” Such descriptions have become almost rote and are, incidentally, near word-for-word reflections of Coursera’s own tagline. Meanwhile, they offer a perspective that not only accepts these courses as equivalent to an elite education and truly accessible to anyone, but also as a radical innovation over previous online course offerings. MOOCs, we are told, have finally realized the, previously speculative, potential of technological advances for teaching.

These discourses become centripetal when they go beyond simply suggesting change is a possibility and assume that change is inevitable. In a quote that has reverberated from *The New Yorker* to *Wired* and nearly every early write-up of MOOCs in between, Stanford president John Hennessy notoriously describes MOOCs saying, “there’s a tsunami coming” (qtd. in Auletta; qtd. in Brooks). This notion of MOOCs as a “tsunami” signals an unbridled, possibly destructive force and, ultimately, over-emphasizes technology’s deterministic power. Representing MOOCs as inevitable removes attention from difficulties of implementation as well as the realities of the social context into which they are being introduced--a context that impinges on both their meaning and their use (Selfe, Laurillard). Further, the metaphor suggests that those that

do not hurry to participate with MOOCs will be swept away or left behind—a kind of rhetorical strong-arming. By downplaying the complex realities of social issues, a deterministic approach to MOOCs acts, perhaps unintentionally, to leave those issues unquestioned and free to influence the use of these new tools.

Within the popular media sources I've examined, there is little deviation from the general perspective that MOOCs' technological advancements are synonymous with social progress. Gregory Ferenstein's article on the *TechCrunch* blog makes for a notable exception as he, like others at the academia-oriented *Chronicle for Higher Education*, speculate about the possibility of campus closures while on-campus education "returns to its elite roots," although he notes some may view even that outcome as a positive one. Significantly, the primary dissenting perspectives I encountered did not follow Ferenstein's lead and forewarn the possibility of negative social implications; rather, unoptimistic early pieces question MOOCs' ability to be competitive with four-year universities, and thus their ability to engender change at all (Weissmann; Adams).

Signs of deviation also appear in more recent articles that have begun to reference the "hype" of previous reporting. To characterize previous reporting as "hype" may be first and foremost a way to establish the comparative moderation of the present writer, but it also implies the "tsunami" warning has been downgraded. *The New York Times*'s article "The Year of the MOOC" toed this line as it describes the standard list of education-improving outcomes promised about MOOCs as the "shimmery hope of MOOCs" (Pappano). Here is a trace of double-voicedness that subtly shifts previous

meanings through a moment of sarcasm and doubt. Playing on the same language of “hope” as previous articles, Pappano emphasizes the potential hollowness of possibility rather than using it to point firmly into the future and away from current hurdles. In doing so, she insinuates the wished for outcomes of MOOCs may be nothing more than a “shimmery” mirage, alluring but ultimately elusive.

As Bakhtinian theory suggests, the distinctions between these perspectives can be better understood by looking at the contexts of these different discourses. At the national level, popular media sources play on strong national and cultural stories about the social progress made possible through technology. Calling on such tropes makes use of broadly appealing national stories, the same stories we have heard from the race to the moon to a global, connected world with the United States firmly situated in the center. MOOCs’ “revolutionary” and “transformative” qualities can be understood, in part, as an extension of these optimistic themes, which insist on change, and they rely heavily on future-oriented, open-ended language like “hope,” “potential,” “possibility,” and “promise,” emphasizing the beneficial prospects that MOOCs make available (Friedman, “Revolution;” Marklein; Chea, “MOOCs”). However, other expected meanings are not upheld in the discourse about MOOCs. Specifically, notions of “democratizing” and “revolutionary” as they apply to student access to higher education as well as instruction at the institutional level and within the classroom take on more centripetally conscribed meanings in the context of these discourses.

## Tempering the Transformation

In between the optimistic intros and outros, coverage on MOOCs indicates more conservative elements than transgressive ones and more centripetal forces currently at work than centrifugal. As is often necessary to provide entry into a new conversation, these articles welcome us to understand MOOCs through references to the already understood. Further, technology cannot create a new system of value in and of itself, but rather, must imbedded itself, or be imbedded into, pre-existing value systems (Selfe, Laurillard, Earl and Kimport). However, such a contextualization delimits the interpretations that are made possible for MOOCs, as the situating acts that these articles perform lock the subject in a frame that impacts future understandings. Even if followed by an exploration of difference, it is a centripetal act, conscribing MOOCs to familiar contexts, which are never value free but rather carry their own particular set of expectations.

In the case of the early discourse surrounding MOOCs, the context provided situates MOOCs alongside established universities rather than as the next evolution in online and distance learning. MOOCs are most consistently described as “a budding revolution” or even a “brave new world”—a dramatic departure from higher education as we know it, unlike online courses that have come before (Friedman, “Revolution;” Lewin, “Instruction”). As outlined in the first chapter, amidst the distinctions there are significant links between MOOCs and other online courses; and yet, the present narrative perspective consistently emphasizes the transformative nature of these courses without

regarding their relationship with prior online tools. This forgetting of online forerunners is most sharply seen by the absence of the original MOOCs, the cMOOCs, from the now-standard history, but it also applies to a range of online programs, some of which, like the United Kingdom's Open University, have also been open and free (Watters, Laurillard). The negation-by-silence of previous online learning experiments avoids questions about MOOCs' practicality, quality, and ultimate impact on the higher education landscape that might arise through a comparison to previous online program initiatives—advances which, despite promise, changed little of higher education's status quo. Contextualizing MOOCs in such a way is, at the outset, a dramatic reframing that characterizes MOOCs as an outside (privatized) solution to academia's woes (Watters).

Instead, brick-and-mortar four-year universities provide the primary context in which MOOCs have been situated. A shared image of these universities, what they look like, what they do, and how they function, already exists in the minds of readers. Thus, universities provide a conceptual foundation on which to build the myriad of dialogic associations with MOOCs courses. Journalists are able to orient their readers by relating MOOCs to brick-and-mortar universities and thereby draw on shared understandings of the system of valuation connected to these universities. Pointing to the involvement of Harvard or Princeton, universities with acknowledged standing within a well-known hierarchy, acts as a shorthand to communicate notions of consequence, prestige, and, ultimately, worth. Whether or not Ivy Leagues deserve these distinctions is debated;

however, they served the function of establishing and imparting significance to the otherwise unvetted early courses.

In many instances, this association between MOOCs and brick-and-mortar universities relates to an already common point of comparison: the idea that MOOCs should be judged in light of how well they replicate a university experience. With regards to teaching with technology, however, such a notion of replicating physical activities in a digital space becomes particularly fraught. Placing online learning into a clearly recognizable pattern often means replicating the most iconic notions of education rather than the most pedagogically sound. Newkirk suggests that all instructors face pressure to conform to instructional styles that “match an image of instruction that [appear] normal.”

In this image, the instructor is “at the front of the classroom talking, passing on information that students would be held responsible for” (4). For most, Newkirk suggests, a “real” classroom looks like a lecture. It is a view of teaching that is reflected in the content-heavy presentation employed by the most popular MOOCs, as well as in the popular media articles that discuss them as tools for shaping education. One such article, Thomas Friedman’s “Revolution Hits the Universities,” provides an eerie visual representation of this translation of the “image of ‘normal schooling’” into digital forms, seen in the Appendix. The image, an instructor at the front of a classroom speaking to neat rows of disembodied heads on screens, exactly mimics the physical presence of Newkirk’s “normal” classroom with teacher in front of expectant students. In doing so, the image sacrifices an accurate representation of the structure of relationships within

these courses in order to portray a more clearly recognizable image of teaching. The danger demonstrated here is the tendency to subsume other teaching structures in order to adhere to the expected.

For those who critique the lecture model, it is possible to read the image as a counter-narrative that highlights a negative interpretation of MOOCs as tools that encourage student conformity and passivity as this view is reflected in the image. These critical perspectives of computerized instruction contradict the content of the article itself, which states that “nothing has more potential” to enable us to re-imagine higher education than MOOCs” (Friedman, “Revolution”). Reimagining higher education and replicating transmission-model worst practices are widely different assertions, and, for critical educators, the disconnect is sharp. The image can play on pre-existing fears about technology’s industrialization eradicating teaching’s humanity for the sake of efficiency. Such concerns are apt to make educators more resistant towards the optimistic claims of the article that follows.

However, in context, the image functions as a continuation of an explicitly optimistic piece about MOOCs. The article itself appears in *The New York Times*’s OpEd section, not the Education section, suggesting that the intended audience is not presupposed to have a thorough background in teaching pedagogy and relevant debates from within the field. For non-specialist readers, already predisposed to understand “real” teaching as the normal school model, there is no signal from within the article that the author has a different vision of teaching in mind or that the issues noted above are

concerns. Thus, for most, it is left as an uncritical illustration of the accepted notion of teaching, acting centripetally to reconfirm this image as part of a positive outlook. Likewise, this image reinforces an understanding of MOOCs in relation to familiar, traditional teaching contexts.

Working with these familiar contexts, reporting tends to construct MOOCs in ways that make them less threatening to elite four-year universities and mitigates their transgressive potential, both through their construction of MOOC students and the continued primacy attributed Ivy League universities. MOOCs, we are told, are “for motivated students around the world who lack access to universities and learners outside the U.S” (Baker; Lewin, “Instruction”). The revolutionary changes to the educational status quo are placed in this “global” context (Baker; Friedman, “Revolution;” Pappano, “Year;” Marklein; Lewin, “Instruction”). The “MOOC phenomenon” is shown primarily taking place away from United States’ colleges in “the most remote corners of the planet” (Pappano, “Year”). This distance allows these courses to create minimal discomfort at home by acting as an extension of efforts to export American education abroad (Selfe).

Not unexpectedly, the majority of current international users occupy the middle- and upperclass of their respective societies given that the same issues of technological access exist, and are sometimes magnified, by these remote social contexts (Friedman, “Revolution”). Users must not only have reliable access to a computer and internet, they must have a workable understanding of English, and they must have the resources to spend time pursuing coursework at the expense of paid employment or other means of

support. Beyond these minimum requirements, students generally must already have a level of foundational knowledge and have already established successful learning strategies in order to negotiate the demands of college coursework of a particular caliber with minimal immediate support—a set of skills that already puts these students in an elite class that excludes many worldwide. These social realities underscore the difficulty of providing access to those who already “lack access to universities.” Making courses available is necessary but not always sufficient to provide access to those who have not traditionally had it, and it is as of yet unclear to what extent elite universities will actually be opened en masse to new groups of students. On the other hand, by marketing globally, the universities partnered with MOOCs are able to promote their name abroad and potentially attract lucrative international students. The emphasis on global students, then, is not only an appealing narrative that paints these MOOC companies as humanitarian endeavors, but also places the possible “revolution” resulting from MOOCs at a comfortable distance while possibly effecting minimal change in the social class of the students who are able to experience educational opportunities.

The other type of student, related by popular media through inspiring anecdotes, uses MOOCs to supplement their university education, not as a replacement. These are exceptional, “highly-motivated” students who have already attended college or are attempting to make themselves hyper-competitive college applicants. Jonathan Salovitz is one of these motivated students. He is “participating in a grand experiment,” taking a “grueling [course load] . . . taught by professors at big-name schools” (Marklein). Like

Jonathan, these exceptional students are often praised for going above and beyond. They are precocious children taking on advanced courses, high achievers attempting more challenging course loads, and driven professionals looking to climb up the corporate ladder. Each depiction relies on familiar tropes of exceptional individuals achieving success through their individual determination and gifts. In these cases, the reader is not expected to match these inspirational stories in any real sense; as the often repeated description of “highly-motivated students” suggests, these students lie at the far end of the bell curve.

Conspicuously absent in popular media articles are those students within the U.S. who currently do not have access to college; as Pappano states, MOOCs “are not for everyone” (“Year”). Many articles do note that most students don’t have access to “elite” universities; however, this description includes most of the college-bound students and college graduates in the U.S. without specifying the realities of access as it affects students that are already educationally marginalized. One implication of MOOCs existing “for highly-motivated students” is the corresponding suggestion that there are other, less motivated, students that do not or cannot take advantage of them. If these students are not prepared for acceptance to a university, they are, theoretically, also not prepared to complete commiserate college-level coursework or they lack the motivation needed to remain engaged and successful within the courses. By valorizing student success stories and defining courses as “good for” some students and not for others, articles avoid critiques that MOOCs can’t or don’t serve many students. In effect, it shifts the onus of

low retention rates onto the traits of the student and away from issues of course structure or the impersonal nature of the online course experience.

While these issues surface in e-learning educators' and *The Chronicle for Higher Education's* blogs, popular news articles sidestep them through a focus on U.S. college-bound students. There is little discussion about the potential impact, positive or negative, that these courses could have for students within the U.S. that are otherwise barred from two- and four-year colleges through any of the many institutional and social barriers to access. As noted in the previous chapter, these issues are wide-reaching, systemic issues impacting educational access in the United States. Differences in economic access are minimized while other forms of social capital and intellectual accessibility are ignored. Likewise, these students are implied in descriptors like "students around the world who lack access," but issues of access within the U.S. is obscured by the repeated global emphasis, which reinforces the impression that these are things that happen out there, in "third world" countries, not here at home.

These specific characterizations of certain students and absence of others rests on the narrative of a fair and functioning meritocracy at work in the U.S. and a corresponding lack of such abroad. Globally, they suggest, a meritocracy can't function because those smart and motivated self-starters don't have the ability to access to education. Within the US, however, this doesn't apply. These MOOC student success stories appeal to several pernicious ideas about American society. Their appeal draws on a glorified notion of individualism and plays on a bootstrap view of success. In doing so,

these stories redeploy the American meritocracy myth in which opportunity and access are equal for those “self-motivated” enough to take advantage of that access. The result is a view that overlooks personal and, importantly, systemic issues surrounding economics, cost, access, social class, etc. that can impact a student’s ability to attend a four-year school. Ignoring these issues feeds into the deterministic view of MOOCs as a new technology, which overestimates their ability to overcome systemic inequity merely through their existence.

What’s more, both the positive and negative impacts that these courses could have for students who are not already college graduates or expecting to apply to hyper-competitive schools is overlooked as are corresponding issues, such as the defunding of state universities, that contribute to lack of access. By avoiding these issues, the discourses around MOOCs are able to deploy appealing narratives about revolution, social progress, and democratization without complicating these views with more problematic applications that may arise out of placing MOOCs and public and private universities in economic competition. When speculation about replacing universities does occur, it is not accompanied by consideration on the broader, more complicated impacts that this replacement might have for students that traditionally attend those universities. This is especially true for the traditionally marginalized students who have benefited from the wide array of additional support available at brick-and-mortar universities, including bridge and remedial programs, scholarships and student-work programs, in-house tutoring, mentorship and student-peer support networks. While claiming to

democratize education and bridge these already existing socio-economic gaps, such a discourse may indeed make such gulfs of inequality deeper.

To be sure, publications continue to recognize an in-person education at a prestigious university, with all its attendant benefits, as the more valuable educational experience. Although the accuracy of this appraisal may seem self-evident, it belies the primary narrative that has been championed within these articles: MOOCs' ability to "open elite universities to the masses." Even while presenting MOOCs as transformative, these articles simultaneously justify the extensive media attention focused on MOOCs with three primary reasons: elite universities are involved, big name professors are participating, and students are enrolling in large numbers. Within this construction, MOOCs are valuable, both as a topic of discussion and also as a tool, by way of their involvement with extant universities. This positioning suggests that MOOCs cannot displace these elite universities. By attributing MOOCs' importance to the involvement of elite universities, they reconfirm the social value already placed on degrees from these particular institutions and so, ultimately, resist the challenge that MOOCs might possibly pose to brick-and-mortar institutions as the primary source of socially valued learning and work in favor of the most elite universities to reduce MOOCs' impact on those particular types of institutions.

Moreover, it has not escaped notice that MOOCs lack the benefits traditionally associated with in-person courses and the "true" college experience of being on campus. Weissmann, writing for *The Atlantic*, proposes online learning will not do away with in-

person education as the “college experience,’ is not just an education.” Weissmann’s evaluation is still based on a comparison between MOOCs’ and universities’ ability to provide a “stamp of approval” that is recognized by employers; however, brick-and-mortars, he points out, will continue to provide advantages for job placement that MOOCs simply cannot. Colleges do a better job of allowing for networking and, more importantly, carry more prestige and more value to employers, all leading to better preparation for the job market (Weissmann, “Why”). Campus experiences are beneficial to students as they prepare for careers, but the socialization and networking that occur through the interaction of students with professors, peers, and student groups, also act as important social markers for class and status in other areas of life. This stamp of approval represents the socially legitimized learning that takes place in a college setting. It is, ultimately, a top-down designation for which forms of learning will be valued and which forms will not.

The importance of this on-campus interaction is intensified when “big name” Universities are involved. The value of going to an elite school is more than just the final degree--a truth made apparent by resistance to proposals to include more online courses in this experience: “Student regent Jonathan Stein said that most students would consider the idea of a full two years of online classes as ‘a degradation of their education.’ Online classes can be ‘supplemental’ but not central to a UC education, he said” (Gordon, “UC”). For students already enrolled in a top university, moving to an online format

means both a loss of extracurricular opportunities but also, importantly, a loss of the prestige and exclusivity that is part of a highly-competitive schools' hefty price tag.

While there are significant differences between the structure and approach taken by MOOCs and other online institutions that profit directly through student fees and have largely been characterized as predatory, there is still a serious lack of prestige associated with online degrees that, currently, makes such a degree considerably less socially valuable than a degree from a brick-and-mortar university. A telling insight comes from Stanford provost John Etchemendy as he discusses why Stanford courses offered through Coursera aren't considered Stanford courses: "Our business is education, and I'm all in favor of supporting anything that can help educate more people around the world. But there are issues to consider, from copyright questions to what it might mean for our accreditation if we provide some official credential for these courses branded as Stanford" (qtd. in Lewin, "Instruction"). The news article itself provides no commentary or context for this quote, leaving it as a stand-alone paragraph; however, a critical reading here is useful. Aside from the easy conflation of education with business and the implicit goal of educational globalization present in Etchemendy's statement expresses concern that these courses, though cheered for providing egalitarian access to "Stanford" courses, would damage the university's reputation if they were to be more closely aligned with the school. Worries about accreditation indicate a concern for a gap in educational quality between the MOOC offerings and the actual experience of taking a course at Stanford. Within the universities themselves, these courses are not seen as representing access

equal to institutions. Instead, there exists a pragmatic awareness of the difficulty of ensuring quality in the MOOC format, and, perhaps more importantly, of maintaining the social value of their brand in an open, online setting.

By avoiding these issues, the discourses around MOOCs are able to use appealing narratives about revolution, social progress, and democratized access to higher education without complicating these views with more problematic applications that may arise. When speculation about replacing universities does occur, it is not accompanied by consideration of the broader, more complicated impacts that this replacement might have for students that have traditionally attended those universities. These aspects act to construct MOOCs as outside of traditional universities, acting as an arm in support of elite universities, expanding the service already provided to the same people while increasing economic pressures on less prestigious universities to compete.

These contradictions highlight a key concern raised by the “revolutionary” rhetoric of MOOCs--do they transform, or do they create an educational second class? When universities like SJSU take on the call to compete with these online courses, students struggling to attend college are the ones who feel its impact. In January 2013 SJSU joined up with Udacity to create MOOC-like courses that provided credit through the university with an explicit focus on revamping the way the university handles remedial courses. Kamenetz previously suggested “the traditional [college] experience is still going to be around for students who can afford it” while middle tier universities should be most concerned about being replaced as community colleges will be “needed

for remediation and transition” into campus life. (Kamenetz qtd. in Baker). However, SJSU’s pilot with remedial courses indicates these courses, offered at four-year universities and two-year colleges, could be the first choice for replacement with MOOC-styled alternatives (Ferenstein). The prediction is made, in part, because the introductory survey courses that many transfer students already fulfill outside of four-year institutions (i.e., at community colleges) tend to be more easily handled by MOOCs’ current content-heavy delivery system than other courses can be. Further, money and convenience can be significant factors for why students consider community colleges in the first place, and by allowing students to work remotely for free or for limited cost, MOOCs excel at catering to those needs. Community colleges offer other benefits of in-person attendance; however, attendance at these institutions is generally not considered as prestigious, meaning MOOC participation isn’t seen as sacrificing clout. It’s a prediction that seems at once more likely and highly problematic as it represents a loss of those in-person resources, still enjoyed by students in more “elite” institutions, for students who are already among the most marginalized in the US within the current education system.

The initial results from SJSU’s pilot program are even less encouraging. Students in MOOC-modeled courses demonstrated lower completion rates and lower average grades than students in the courses’ brick-and-mortar counterparts, with only 25-50% of students finishing the MOOC-modeled course with a C or above compared to 65-75% of students in the typical in-person course. These disparities caused the program to be temporarily suspended for the Fall 2013 semester; however, summer courses showed

significantly higher passing rates, with online courses reaching C-or-higher pass rates as high as 70-80%. Likewise, Coursera's published completion rates have been discouraging, mostly lingering under 10%. Due to differences in why students approach MOOC courses (e.g., out of curiosity or as a hobby) and in the external motivators for completion (e.g., hefty fees or degree requirements), these numbers have been difficult to generalize to traditional university settings. However, SJSU's results provide strong empirical support for the concern that the current MOOC model does not provide adequate support for student success.

And yet, the current lack of access afforded to some students, usually abroad, is already being used to defend MOOCs against criticisms of lower educational value by arguing that anything is better than nothing. In terms of global students, Daphne Koller of Coursera dismissed concerns about MOOCs' comparison to in-person university courses saying, "I don't think it is a perfect substitute. The question we must ask is whether what we're providing these students is better than they would have had otherwise" (qtd. in Marklein). She isn't wrong—one of MOOCs' strongest qualities is its ability to open educational opportunities for those who didn't have them before, and to deny MOOCs' value for students who benefit from them is easier done from a vantage point where one has the privilege to wait for something better. And yet, this approach also acts explicitly to end the conversation, to respond to a line of questioning without answering it and shut it down. An appeal to the "good" is used as a shield to deflect concerns about student learning, and it suggests a pragmatic acceptance of on-going educational inequality. In

doing so, it raises a compelling concern. While only acceptable as a supplement for UC students, MOOCs will continue to be good enough for those who are already educationally marginalized if MOOCs are only held to the standards of the worst (or non-existing) teaching practices currently available to those students--the standards themselves depending on what is likely to be an uninformed perception of the educational quality available overseas. These comparisons, made for some students and not others, has the potential to further the divide between education haves and have-nots in terms of overall educational quality, even as it disseminates the content of exclusive courses.

MOOCs, then, seem to be slotted into two student-dependent uses: a supplement for college graduates and the college-bound or a replacement for those that can't make it to a college that is perceived as good enough. Given this twofold use of MOOCs, the job market benefits that MOOCs confer to some students may not be felt equally by all. The perceived reason for taking a MOOC is likely to make a large difference in perception. For already-successful university students, MOOCs do not need to provide the legitimizing function that a degree can perform; however, that form of voucher may be invaluable to students who do not have it from another source. Moreover, for some students, the social and educational privilege they've experienced prior to college, and the attendant social markers those privileges provide, may give them the freedom to experiment with educational pathways that don't provide official validation. This choice, which might make some students read as "self-motivated," might work against students if they are read instead as having resorted to MOOCs because they lacked access to other

education options.

### Bringing the Revolution to Brick-and-Mortar Universities and Classrooms

While all the articles under discussion compare MOOCs to four-year, brick-and-mortar universities, the relationship depicted between the two educational contexts varies. How this relationship is constructed suggests and is suggested by the purpose(s) for which MOOCs are considered. The stated purpose of these MOOCs impacts the assumed relationship that they have towards traditional universities and, thus, what implications exist for their influence on these systems and in what terms these courses could be (and are being) considered “revolutionary.” Within popular media articles, MOOCs’ usefulness as a tool to facilitate professional skill development is consistently emphasized, and the more directly MOOCs can provide job access, the more they are seen as successful competitors that could replace universities, suggesting that the primary role of universities is also to provide these services (Baker; Friedman, “Come,” “Revolution;” Lewin, “Instruction,” “California;” Marklein; Chea, “MOOCs;” Brooks; Anderson, N; Weismann). Lewin writes, “in what some see as a threat to traditional institutions, several [MOOCs] now come with an informal credential” (“Instruction”). Here, MOOCs are said to challenge universities in the sense that they may out compete them by diverting students that would otherwise purchase a brick-and-mortar educational “product.” The challenge to the status quo does not, in this case, refer to challenging universities to develop new teaching methods so much as it refers to a potentially more

effective way of monetizing education. Perhaps the most telling theme of these narratives is relentless comparison of MOOCs and universities not on the basis of educational quality, but on the ability to provide the credentials demanded by employers and so attract students in numbers that would make MOOCs economically competitive with brick-and-mortar universities. Thus, providing credentials that will be acknowledged by the market is established as the overlapping territory in which competition with universities' purposes occur. It assumes this goal is shared, but MOOCs have "revolutionized" how to reach it. In doing so, the words themselves are appropriated, made to mean less and other than they might. The main thrust of these articles, the strongest centripetal force present, is a push towards the commodification of education so that the education sector can compete in the free market.

#### Student-commodities, student-consumers

Udacity has been suggested as one of those highly competitive monetization strategies. It is the first MOOC platform model to facilitate a direct connection between course completion and employment. Its monetization strategy consists in part of offering headhunters access to students who performed well in relevant courses. It opens up a process that essentially bypasses the need for a degree to speak, in a general way, for the particular skills learned. For students looking to leverage their extracurricular coursework into a new job, this is certainly a benefit. Udacity's course offerings reflect the "shift in postsecondary resource allocation to disciplines that are located close to the market, with direct linkages to the broader economy," which has been noted since at least the late

1990's. Udacity offers a smaller selection of primarily Computer Science courses--a field that has shown itself to be more willing than others to accept professional skills mastered through a variety of methods, including autodidactic learning and on-the-job experience. Udacity's monetization strategy most clearly suggests education's purpose is to help students "garner skills of value to business and industry and help to redefine the global labor force," in effect, treating students like commodities (Levin 12).

John Levin connects this educational approach to its twin, the student-as-consumer. Both constructions of students reflect the influx of business and capitalist influences into education, with the result of changing the "focus from liberal arts to workplace preparation" (20). The danger of treating students as consumers has been recognized within academic circles and roundly criticized since it gained a foothold in institutional policy-making by the late 1970's. With this view of the relationship between students and institutions of higher education, the incentive becomes attracting students to courses or colleges by the most effective means possible while, simultaneously, the incentive for the provider becomes decreasing costs (Farnsworth).

Popular media articles concerned with MOOCs consistently reflect a view of student-as-consumer. When evaluations are given, the focus rests primarily on student response while other measures of course quality are rarely considered as part of a good course "product." Instead of speaking to the pedagogical approaches being taken by the different MOOC providers, emphasized in the MOOC platforms' own self-descriptions, most articles consider the quality of courses insofar as it does or doesn't deter student

interest as measured by enrollment, particularly amongst graduates and postgraduates. Presumably, the educational experiences that these students have already undergone have made them more reliable judges of the quality of these courses. The evidence of graduate degrees shows that these students have already been vetted and know what “real learning” looks like in the context of traditional universities. The suggestion here is that these students’ perceptions of MOOCs are sufficient indicators of their worth. Adopting such a position relies on a number of assumptions. First, it assumes that those with advanced degrees are more trustworthy judges of educational quality than those without; however, the instructional methods that are appropriate for graduate-level work and those that are appropriate for introductory-level work for novice students can be quite different. Further, it assumes a successful target audience is those with college experience. Valuing the opinions of those with university experience over those without defines successful courses as those that cater to students with previous university experience rather than students without such experiences. Ironically, it is for just those underserved students that MOOCs’ democratizing benefits have been championed.

Moreover, prioritizing the experiences of students as adequate and accurate measures of a course’s quality and efficacy overlooks the insufficiencies of student satisfaction as a measure of pedagogical soundness in favor of a consumer-based approach to the student-course relationship (Richardson 403). Undoubtedly, student experience is an important measure, and for MOOCs, it may be more necessary than usual as a “successful” course can vary widely depending on the individual goals that

students bring with them to the course, ranging from personal growth to degree preparation or a mid-career shift. However, in the context of MOOCs' equivalency to university courses, these measures fall short. Prior research has suggested that student response best captures how well a course meets students' preexisting expectations about their educational experience, a measure that may be unrelated to teaching quality, instructional effectiveness or learning achieved by the student (Wiers-Jenssen et al.). Further, the emphasis on student impressions present in these articles can act to reinforce a view of students as the consumer of an educational product, and it is in just such a consumer theory model that many student satisfaction measures are grounded (Richardson 403). With a product-consumer understanding of the course-student relationship, students may not be best qualified to speak to the instructional quality of a course, but they are best qualified to speak to the *appeal* of the course, in effect, the market demand.

Some have argued that a free-market capitalist approach to education, wherein students "vote" with their tuition dollars on a course-by-course basis, may benefit educational quality through the competition generated by "consumer insistence on a quality product" (Farnsworth 10). And while this consumer-oriented system may have "appearance of democracy," the consumer-student metaphor is an essentially dominant narrative, rooted in the power of "market" forces and the cultural dominance of business meanings and relationships. Under this system, the student-consumer sacrifices "the democratic rights of citizens' for "the contractual rights of consumers" (Newson). And

the “rights of consumers” most frequently works in favor of those already empowered, broadening gaps not closing them, as it distributes power on the basis of unequally distributed wealth (Cheney, McMillan, and Schwartzman). What’s more, it assumes that students, like other agents acting in the free market, are perfect consumers, perfectly informed and always able to act in their best interest. There are, of course, many factors that make this assumption illusory, from the unpredictability of the future job market to students’ short-term interests weighing against their long-term educational goals.

These “consumer” pressures can have negative effects at the institutional level by “challeng[ing universities’] traditional missions” as the need to ensure high enrollment trumps educational concerns and introduces a host of competing incentives, which “lower quality, refocus valuable resources, encourage passive learning, and undermine social and civic values” (Levin 11, Snare 122). Levin has noted, “as consumers, students and their demands increasingly shape the curricular and organizational strategies that community colleges use to garner revenues (20). In an effort to woo students, universities are incentivized to cater to “the provision of momentary customer satisfaction”(Cheney, McMillan, and Schwartzman; Levin 20). Yet, fulfilling these desires does not necessarily lead to higher quality education and can in fact be detrimental to these goals. For traditional universities, these impacts have been observed in institutional decisions to increase course sizes or to invest in flashy student centers rather to maintain tenured faculty lines.

Moreover, research has shown that students are aware of their treatment and status as consumers, an awareness that impacts the classroom-learning climate. Jill Singleton-Jackson found students identify with the role of consumer and “feel they are pursued and treated as customers by the institution” (354). Treated as consumers, students then respond as consumers, reconstructing their relationship to the institution and instructors. The result, Singleton-Jackson suggests, can be seen in instances of “student entitlement.” For instance, students may feel free to make calls in class because they paid for it--the class and the instructor is a service they’ve engaged with the expectation of receiving passing grades that lead to a degree as a matter of course, while the professor fulfills the role of “customer service” (352-54). Unfortunately, the short-term consumer goals of students do not always align the long-term benefits associated with actually learning course material. Students’ incentives may “define learning as obtaining a grade or staying in school rather than understanding and mastering themselves and this world” (Snare 122). Thus, students face the challenge of recognizing that their role as shopper while selecting which college to attend does not extend into the classroom, even though the institution as a whole may continue to cater to them as consumers in order to maintain retention rates in the face of “competition” from other universities and even MOOCs (Singleton-Jackson 255).

#### Instructor-entertainers

Within the discussion about MOOCs, the position of the student-as-consumer is further suggested by a complementary view of professors-as-entertainers. The role of

professor and student exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship as the construction of one suggests the other. If students are to be understood as consumers, professors, then, are part of the package being sold, and to be successful instructors (as gauged by student preference) they must meet student-consumer expectations. Indicative of this role is the frequent comparison of MOOC professors to educational entertainers such as Bill Nye, host of the popular 1990's children's science show *Bill Nye the Science Guy* (Pappano, "Year;" Pappano, "Online"). Udacity's Thrun furthers this motif by describing professors as rock stars. Thrun intends this rock star status to cause a shift in focus towards teaching ability, not research ability (Caulfield). And yet, under this construction, the measure of teaching ability is redefined. These characterizations suggest good instructors will be fun and delightful, attracting students to view their videos and keeping them engaged and entertained. However, the emphasis on "a 'fun' class" that corresponds to satisfying student-consumers can result in courses that are "entertaining rather than educating" (Snare 122). Given the focus placed on the professor's ability to draw students, it may not be surprising that, to date, it has been primarily well-known, research-oriented professors, like Thrun himself, who have had the star power to attract large student enrollments.

This is not to say that including *Bill Nye the Science Guy* occasionally in a science classroom couldn't be a good instructional choice. Rather, it's intended to raise a concern about discourse that glamorizes replacing the entire classroom experience, hands-on work, group work, and discussions, with an entertainment-oriented top-down

instructional model. Thrun's rock star analogy embodies "our culture's shared image of the Great Teacher"—an image that, though persistent, unfortunately cleaves to a view of instructors as a sage on the stage. In a return to Newkirk's "normal" view of education, this view resists educators' attempts to enact more democratic relationships between students and teacher (Finkel 5). Like the earlier image from *The New York Times* suggests, the sagacious instructor simply replaces their stage with a computer screen. These constructions of teacher and student as entertainer and consumer, respectively, distorts learner-centered education within the classroom as it emphasizes a unidirectional transfer of information and knowledge from teacher to student, and can encourage a superficial or passive participation from the student (Cheney, McMillan, Schwartzman). They do so by formalizing the transfer of knowledge from a central figure with the power to act (the rock star) to a passive student body (the adoring audience that listens but doesn't perform). Displaced them from their position as stakeholders in their own education, students "are encouraged to think of themselves as 'receivers' of a service, not as co-creators of a teaching-learning community." As such, it is "a metaphor that encourages students to be passive and detached rather than heavily engaged in the co-creation of education" (Newson 230). Ultimately, it's a pernicious narrative that conflates passive entertainment with active learning, knowledge production, and skill development and, in doing so, works against democratic educators' goals to facilitate the equanimous production of knowledge, both in classrooms and in MOOCs. (Finkel 3, 123, 131-33).

## When Economic Pressure and Educational Inequality Collide

These views of students and their relationship to universities construct institutions of higher learning as businesses whose central service is to attract student-consumers by offering job preparation, not deep or well-rounded learning (Marklein). The economic perspective taken by these articles shapes a conversation about education in which institutions of higher learning are de facto business enterprises. “Education model” is used as a stand in for “business model” throughout an entire discussion of the economic competitiveness of MOOCs’ monetization strategies (Weissmann, “Why”). Thus, remarking that MOOCs do not provide a better education model than brick-and-mortar universities carries a vastly different meaning for educators and for businessmen, as each bring their own heteroglossic understandings of those terms to bear on the discussion. Within popular discourse, meanings have been modified and replaced so that “education model” has come to mean a profit model within the education sector, not a mode of providing access to successful learning environments. That journalists can make this conflation without clarification or comment indicates a national lack of concern for the educational goals and standards that academics have long held to be the purpose and value of a liberal arts education. In a Bakhtinian sense, the marketplace gives us words that shape the services and behaviors we expect from universities—in this case, words that further blur the separation between public education and the private business sector. The easy interchangeability of business models and “educational models” suggests the

central meaning of this term has consolidated around the authoritative discourse of economics as the general public has internalized a view of education as business.

These concerns are consistent with the broader media response to MOOCs, which has focused primarily on their potential for economic success, while leaving the value of MOOCs' instruction is widely ignored. MOOCs' ability to ensure educational quality and maintain their stated humanitarian goals in the face of economic competition isn't considered, nor is there discussion of the MOOC model's ability to help students combine knowledge from diverse disciplines to create critically minded citizens able to participate in a democratic society. Even the most idealistic articles marry a humanitarian bent with MOOCs' ability to contribute to professional success as, "nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty — by providing them an affordable education to get a job or improve in the job they have" because "in a knowledge economy, getting a higher-education degree is more vital than ever" (Friedman, "Revolution;" Friedman, "Come"). It's an economic lens that prevails throughout these articles' discussions of education, precluding the traditional liberal arts perspective that education should engage in effective student learning for non-vocational purposes.

Under the terms of this economic competition, most universities and colleges may find themselves open to economic competition on the basis of efficiency rather than educational quality, which works against democratic goals. The end result is to weaken the ability of universities to insulate themselves and their mission from market forces that prioritize profits first and foremost. The persistent default to economic incentives is a

powerful social narrative and further suggests that without other significant social changes, MOOCs, like any other technological tool, will not be able to address the inequalities embedded in the current education system. Instead, they could be used in ways that further ghettoize some students if MOOCs replace the face-to-face resources that have served those students in the past. Another fear is that MOOCs lower students' and the public's expectation for high-quality education to involve meaningful interaction with instructors, a change in perspective that would make it easier for universities to further disempower cost-inefficient faculty.

Although these are legitimate concerns, MOOCs themselves are not solely responsible. As Cathy Davidson has rather notoriously declared in her challenge to professors to “reform higher education,” “If we (Profs) can be replaced by a computer screen, we should be!” On an institutional level, if universities go into decline because they cannot value faculty, research and teaching, it will be a tremendous loss, but it won't be MOOCs to blame; universities will have crumbled their own walls by chasing short-term gains in response to economic pressures. The blame then, may belong most firmly on the public who is content to apply a capitalist, efficiency-based valuation to education rather than providing the funding needed to maintain a university system that is insulated from short-term economic pressures. It is an issue much more deeply rooted in higher education than the introduction of MOOCs: it's a continued trend that reorganizes higher education around the bottom line.

## Conclusion

MOOCs have the capacity to fill multiple roles, depending on the decisions made by administrators, instructors, and students who choose to enroll. Whether undertaken as hobbies or résumé builders, as aids in preparation for college or as a replacement for college altogether, MOOCs may not merely replicate a four-walled classroom in a digital space, but act to fill educational gaps. However, just as the big MOOC players are defining what a “MOOC” is, how these courses are now viewed may shape their future uses and purposes.

In the discourse surrounding MOOCs, the same language is repeated by multiple authors: “revolutionary,” “disruptive,” “democratizing,” but the use of these powerful words varies significantly depending on the contexts in which they are deployed. For educators, these words are often used to discuss fundamental changes to the way we teach on a daily basis in the classroom and specifically suggest movement away from a transmission model. MOOCs’ instructional formats, detailed in chapter one, are largely unexplored in the broader conversation about MOOCs in news sources and, to a lesser extent, amongst MOOC providers, who are paying attention to online teaching strategies and best practices for student retention.

One might also expect to see a national conversation about MOOCs that tackles the issue of educational access, globally and locally, in ways more substantive than, admittedly inspiring, anecdotes. “Revolutionary” and “democratic,” for MOOC

providers, tends to refer to these issues of access. Increasing educational accessibility is the stated mission of Coursera and, like Udacity, it proposes to create new routes to better employment without the financial burden or potential to be taken advantage of that comes with other for-profit institutions' degrees-for-pay. The increased accessibility offered by these courses has already had a real and meaningful impact on some students' lives, and in many popular media articles, one sees uncomplicatedly rosy views of increased access framing the stories on MOOCs. And yet, the democratizing aspects of MOOCs are complicated by existing social inequalities that are not erased by simply putting Ivy League courses online. The "revolution" is further hindered by the repeated description of MOOCs as primarily valuable for those who are already academically successful, "self-motivated" and degree-holding while simultaneously good enough for those that lack other avenues for educational fulfillment.

Within these constructions the course's value is still based on the selectivity ascribed to certain "elite" people and "elite" institutions. If MOOCs are revolutionary because of the participation of these universities, the question remains: if a local community college instructor runs the MOOC, is it still "revolutionary"? The reverence these articles show for big name universities like Stanford and Harvard does nothing to topple this system of valuation; it legitimizes it. In noting these partnerships, MOOCs are often shown in ways that act in the interest of elite universities' public relations: they describe their product as highly desirable, increase global awareness that can bring in lucrative international students, and non-Ivy Leagues reap the benefit of being grouped

with Ivy Leagues as “elite” universities. While these articles continue to value online and in-person learning experiences differently, they simultaneously diminish MOOCs’ impact on elite universities through their construction of MOOCs’ students and purposes. When combined with a construction that normalizes an economic approach to education as a whole, these inequalities may be carried over into public and private universities in potentially harmful ways.

Not only do these articles propose a revolution that doesn’t challenge on the levels expected by educators, the view that surfaces of who MOOCs are for has the potential to actively work against democratic educational goals. Issues concerning MOOCs, even those central to expanding access, are approached from a market standpoint. The question of importance, under the influence of these dominant narrative forces, becomes who will be most successful at attracting student-consumers. Transforming education, from the worldview assumed by these national media sources, does not mean transforming the activity of the classroom or revolutionizing a system where the same learning is more valued in some contexts and for some people; rather, it means challenging the market dominance of four-year universities as businesses. The result is economic competition valorized as revolution and a passive acceptance of educational institutions’ missions left vulnerable to market forces.

## PROJECT CONCLUSION

While the value of a technology-based future for education is often debated, there is little cause to doubt the likelihood of the prospect. The start of a networked, digital learning culture traces back to a much earlier moment than this one. Currently, enrollment rates for credit-granting online courses are growing “even as overall higher education enrollments have shown a decline” (Jeff Seaman qtd. in Sloan). It’s a change that impacts every level of our discipline from online classroom spaces, writing centers, and administrative and instructional tools to student communication, participation and assignments facilitated through LMS’s, to blogs, wikis and the writing process itself. Word processors are now the undisputed medium for writing and revising, despite marking a technological change that also impacted the way we write. And, as Alex Reid recently proclaimed, “‘The’ writing process begins with Google.” What were once digital literacy skills are becoming simply literacy skills.

It’s important to recognize the trajectories impacting higher education. There are currently strong pressures moving education towards increased involvement in online spaces, and MOOCs are only one possible manifestation of online learning. Amidst the slew of predictions about MOOCs’ influence, I have tried to avoid speculation about their future and impact, but MOOCs’ developing relationship with universities will largely determine the circumstances in which writing instructors may be tasked with teaching these courses. Few courses in writing have been offered thus far, but experiments with writing MOOCs are emerging with “First-Year Composition 2.0” on Coursera.

Next to other disciplines, writing instructors will also face additional difficulties making these course structures fit the learning we want to see in our classrooms. The relative absence of writing courses thus far can largely be seen as the result of their origins in and continued focus on the STEM fields as well as the practical restraints for writing assessment posed by the massive scale of these courses. The latter issue is, of necessity, one that writing instructors will have to consider if they attempt to bring writing instruction to a mass scale through these courses. Automated essay scoring is a possible solution, but it is widely unpopular and problematic, leaving much to be desired for creating authentic writing situations with real readers (Haswell).

The constraints imposed by the technology and the discipline suggest there will be much need for a continued advocacy for community along with content, for systemic social justice as well as equality within our classrooms and, ultimately, for a mainstream conception of online learning that makes space for socially constructed knowledge and decentered learning practices.

For most current instructors, the “MOOC” experiment underway at SJSU will likely have the most immediate impact, particularly for those teaching at state universities. Although the trial is currently limited to “remedial” math courses, if these trials are eventually deemed successful, writing courses are likely to follow. California Governor Jerry Brown, who pushed for the SJSU initiative, has talked indiscriminately about using the MOOC format for a range of remediation courses including “bonehead English”—an unfortunate moniker for many basic writing courses (San). If the SJSU press conference is any indication, retention rates and increasingly lenient admission

policies will be the key points of expediency that encourage MOOC models in the California State University system. As one of the most widely taught general education courses, beginning writing courses are likely to be intricately involved in any attempt to outsource remedial and introductory courses to MOOC-like online formats.

Admittedly, MOOCs do not equalize access to elite universities. I am confident in asserting that the experience of taking a Coursera class is significantly different from attending the parallel class at Princeton, much less the experience of attending Princeton for four years. I cannot, however, make a personal comparison because I, like most people, have never had the good fortune to attend an Ivy League school, nor is it likely that I ever will. I have, on the other hand, been homeschooled—a point in my education where advanced material structured and guided by a professional educator would have been more valuable to me than an entire library. And I've attended a large, well-respected state university and sat with 200 other students to copy notes from slides. I've attended an incredibly personal small university and spoken with students about their frustration over the (increasingly) narrow range of course offerings. And I've known people who do not have the opportunity to attend an institution in an official capacity but who value the learning experiences they have found online. None of these comparisons suggest that MOOCs are a superior alternative to a well-funded institution of higher education or an ideal vision of education's future, and it isn't acceptable to cede some students' in-person institutional support structures in favor of MOOCs. But they do imply MOOCs have real value for some people in various ways at different times.

One possible value that may come from MOOCs is their ability to highlight that “colleges aren’t the only ones who can offer college courses” (Burck Smith, qtd. in Lewin, “California”). While they work outside of institutionalized centers of learning, it’s an incomplete separation as the knowledge and expertise being offered through these courses comes from professors already ensconced in universities. But by using already-respected courses and instructors, MOOCs show that learning with previously acknowledged value can take place without a degree to show for it. Doing so may help normalize the idea of valuing other types of learning experiences, formal and informal, that take place outside the walls of the university. Further, MOOCs emphasize learning for its own sake, rather than for grades or degrees, although this emphasis is changing quickly. The media portrayal of MOOCs de-emphasizes these transgressive elements and, largely, seems to treat them as MOOCs’ weakness. MOOCs are heavily critiqued for their inability to adequately track and grade students work given the possibility of cheating, and MOOCs’ success is consistently connected with their ability to be replicative of universities, in large part, by offering credentials. These critiques are already being felt in MOOCs that emphasize completing work individually, required signed honor pledges, and promote other anti-cheating measures that simultaneously discourage collaboration and participation in ways that do not match standard linear course participation.

Moreover, to truly increase appreciation of individuals’ learning and experiences that are not sanctioned through a top-down process of legitimization, MOOCs need to improve access in meaningful ways. Although inequality in educational access is deeply

rooted in complicated systemic issues and not solvable through a single venture, MOOC providers could take steps to further work towards this goal. One such step is the need to establish a thriving and inclusive learning community that fosters respect for the learning, ideas and contributions of all learners. The openness of MOOCs is, in and of itself, a step towards this goal. Unfortunately, there will continue to be moments where someone questions the worthwhileness of acting in a learning space with unvetted classmates whose abilities can be second-guessed. But, as these courses continue to create new points of contact, they may act as digitally mediated borderlands to foster a more inclusive learning community. Such a community would engage students with a variety of learners but might also extend the educational reach of MOOCs to better serve students, overlooked in the academic success narratives that abound around MOOCs, who work better with increased interactivity and support. It is, I expect, a large group of students, and the last ten years have demonstrated how powerful, how connected and how supportive online communities can be, especially when they are grounded in shared interests. While one-on-one interaction with students has been a significant part of my teaching practice, and its lack marks a tremendous hurdle for MOOCs, I can't dismiss how valuable online communities can be as well. It is in the spontaneous practice of these communities popping up around MOOCs that I see the most to be optimistic about in regards to MOOCs.

The social systems that democratic educators work in and against do impact educational trends like MOOCs, including more direct economic incentives than those impacting state-funded and non-profit universities. However, as Newson writes, “a too

monolithic and premature assessment which equates technology-based pedagogic innovations and neoliberal economic projects may lead progressive educators to abandon the technology field as a site of resistance and renewal” (Newson 228). For technology to be used in socially responsible ways requires thoughtful, critical effort and no small measure of good timing as well. Currently, MOOCs are still growing and changing shape; their purposes have not yet been fixed. As a malleable interface, MOOCs are free to experiment and break away from the conventional notion of what a class should look like. Space is open for student-created MOOCs, for courses constructed by and for learning communities, for team-based and project-centered courses, for writing courses that remove the instructor as sole arbiter of “correct” writing through fully crowd-sourced grading, and for learners to select a course of study from a variety of universities to which they would otherwise never have access. These positive aspects of MOOCs need to be acknowledged, approached, and critiqued within the complicated social structures in which they exist. Idealism should not be grounded in naiveté, but nor should cynicism cause educators to cede the territory opened by MOOCs or stop them working towards the best possible futures afforded by these tools.

## APPENDIX



Figure 1. Multicultural Digital Classroom Receding into Facelessness. An instructor stands at a lectern speaking to multi-cultural faces displayed on computer screens lined up in rows as in a classroom.

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