



Here Come the MOOCs

BY FRANK KALMAN

Massive open online courses have been labeled a potential disrupter to higher education. But how will MOOCs influence corporate learning?

Massive open online courses, or MOOCs, are a hot topic in education and learning. Since bursting onto the scene a few years ago, the medium allowing anyone to take high-quality online courses for free has called into question the viability of traditional higher education.

With students seeking cheaper ways to earn a college degree, tuition costs rising and student debt piling up, proponents say MOOCs could be a building block for more efficient postsecondary education.

MOOCs also have a potential role in corporate learning and development — an industry reliant on technology and always in search of greater quality and efficiencies. To date, most developments in the traditional MOOC space have been in academia. The three most visible MOOC providers — Coursera, Udacity and edX — have partnered with colleges and universities. Likewise, most of the courses they offer are adaptations from those typically found on college campuses — courses such as robotics, chemistry and basic statistics.

One reason MOOCs and corporate learning haven't entirely found common ground has to do with divergent target audiences. "There's always been disconnect between the recruiting process and the education process," said Chris Davia, chief technology officer at ConnectEDU, an educational technology firm. He said learning professionals focus on reaching employees inside the organization; MOOCs, meanwhile, appear intent on changing the way people prepare to enter the workforce.

In some instances, that gap is closing. In September, The Wall Street Journal reported that companies such as AT&T Inc. and Google Inc. partnered with Udacity to form the Open Education Alliance. The alliance aims to allow students to earn a free certificate based on a set of online courses created with input from the different companies.

ON THE WEB

Blogger Tammara Combs says MOOCs are chaotic, unruly, produce totally unexpected outcomes and involve people you didn't invite and have never heard of. But if your company is looking to become a thought leader, MOOCs are key: blog.CLOmedia.com/?p=1710.

EdX, in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has started a similar course series — XSeries — with plans to ask for input from companies such as Procter & Gamble Co. and UPS, the Journal report said. Yahoo Inc. has even gone as far as to reimburse employees who take verified certificate courses from Coursera.

What's to Learn?

Although traditional MOOCs have yet to veer directly into the internal corporate learning and development sphere, there are lessons learning leaders can glean from the medium. Start by looking at core MOOC principles. M stands for massive. For instance, rather than teach 20 people in a classroom or 100 people in a webinar, how can companies teach 10,000, 100,000 or 1 million? “That’s an important topic for every CLO to look at,” said Elliott Masie, CEO and founder of The Masie Center, a learning and development advisory.

Masie said MOOCs’ first O, for open, is another core principle, and could mean a few different things to learning executives. It could mean open in the sense that everything is free; there is no monetization of the learning transaction. Open also could call into question whether corporate learning content in a video or virtual course is reusable and, more important, global. Perhaps a video course for employees at Allstate Insurance is also available for those at Farmers Insurance, Masie said.

The second O in MOOC, for online, is something Masie said learning professionals should already be taking advantage of. It’s an area where corporate learning has largely outpaced higher education.

The last letter, C, is one of the most intriguing. Once corporate learning becomes massive, open and online, is it still a course? “You can go to a lot of organizations that have massive, open, online resources for people ... but they don’t necessarily enroll them in a course and give them credit at the end,” Masie said.

These principles can be applied to any organization’s learning and development function, but Masie questioned the extent to which MOOCs are a form of experimentation, both in academia and in the corporate world.

Others say corporate learning departments should already be applying MOOC concepts, and that MOOC providers bring little in terms of corporate learning innovation. “If you’re an organization that’s savvy enough, you’ve been doing this for years,” said Dan Pontefract, the senior director and head of learning and collaboration at telecommunications firm Telus Inc. To him, MOOC is just a fancy term for creating a pedagogical, holistic learning experience, through the blended use of formal instruction, video and online chats.

In terms of using large MOOC providers in inter-

nal corporate learning and development, Pontefract said he has no problem with employees going off on their own and participating; it’s an additional education outlet. But he said he’s probably not going to weave MOOC courses from the major providers into his formal learning programs anytime soon. “We’ve got to see how this plays out,” he said.

Mimicking the MOOC

Some smaller MOOC-like providers are beginning to tailor their platforms for corporate learning. Online learning platform Udemy launched in 2010. It allows individuals to build courses that are available for anyone on any topic. But unlike Coursera, Udacity and edX, Udemy operates under what Dennis Yang, the company’s president and chief operating officer, calls the marketplace model.

While most courses found on the websites of the major MOOC providers are the work of college professors and are associated with their respective institutions, anyone can create courses on Udemy — college professors, individual experts or corporate learning professionals.

Content is also different. Most courses on Udemy focus on skill development and career orientation, rather than personal enrichment or academia. Yang said this kind of content plays well to its typical user, the working professional.

Also, not all Udemy courses are free. Content creators can charge for a course, in which case Udemy then takes a cut. Yang likened the concept to the iTunes store.

Since the model Udemy consumer is a working professional, Yang said it seemed natural for the company to create a platform for skill building within companies. Its Udemy for Organizations platform enables firms to customize a branded portal of courses from the Udemy collection to offer to employees.

BloomNet, a subsidiary of 1-800-Flowers, has found value in the MOOC-like structure of Udemy for Organizations. Lisa Carmichael, BloomNet’s vice president of marketing and business development, said the platform helped bring learning to the company’s franchise owners spread across the U.S. The portal offers fundamental courses on management and finance, subjects in which Carmichael said most floral shop owners are not skilled.

In addition to pulling courses targeted for small business owners from the Udemy library, Carmichael said the company also created custom courses targeting skills related to the floral industry. In some instances, employees take courses on Udemy as a prerequisite before they move to the company’s in-person learning hub.

Carmichael said Udemy for Organizations was an easy-to-implement online learning option because the courses are relevant and easily accessible over the Inter-

READER REACTION

What elements of the MOOC model could a learning leader apply to learning or social collaboration?

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The flipped model and community of learning lend themselves to adoption.



@f3BK:

Skill acquisition and execution is the goal. MOOC makes that possible in a big way; will challenge corporate structure and culture.

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Steve Dineen: There is so much to learn here, and the interesting thing is that none of the MOOCs use a traditional LMS model. If MOOCs don't achieve a pull learning environment, they fail, unlike a corporate LMS. This complete 180-degree different focus on delivering primarily compliance versus systems focused on learning means a complete release of freedom to think about the online learner.



Emily Connelly: MOOCs' emphasis on connectivity is one element learning leaders might apply to corporate training environments.

User forums in MOOCs help facilitate social learning and a sense of community through collaboration. It may be difficult to apply these elements to more closed and structured corporate training courses, but adding online discussions to appropriate courses could be a small step toward borrowing some of what works in MOOCs.



William Brantley: The lesson that MOOCs provide is a negative one; education is more than just delivering content. In MOOCs I have attended, there are some innovative ways of delivering content — video, simulations and interactive quizzes. Even so, without meaningful engagement, information does not convert into knowledge. Conversation with fellow students and the teacher is how we create knowledge.



Mireille Lucas: You need a “human” process to make it work and provide measurable results.

There is no secret with learning. Most data or information sharing is not learning, especially when behavioral or value change are expected. If you build a road map that includes complementary human aspects, you enter true learning: learning by doing, mentoring, coaching, community sharing, simulations, tests.



Mark Reed: One of the constant challenges faced by myself and my team is our clients are requesting deep technical training. Besides leadership and management training, we depend on subject matter experts to participate in development, or we turn to expensive vendors to design courses and provide facilitation. A MOOC is another resource that provides somewhat technical instruction at a high level.

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net and through mobile devices.

Another online learning provider taking lessons from the mainstream MOOC space is CorpU. But unlike Udemy or most MOOCs, CorpU is not a consumer product; it's a business-to-business service that customizes learning for individual clients, said Alan Todd, the company's CEO.

Where CorpU does coincide with traditional MOOCs is in its partnerships with universities. CorpU has partnerships with faculty from Harvard, MIT, Wharton, University of Michigan, Georgia Tech and George Washington University, to name a few. Todd said CorpU aims to replicate the practice of sending one or two people to a program at one of these institutions by building the same program on CorpU, and then providing access to the same course content to thousands of employees in a given division or, in some cases, the company's entire employee population.

“We've completely redesigned the Harvard program on negotiation as a business MOOC,” Todd said as an example, “and packaged it in a way that a company can send its top people, let's say to Cambridge, Mass., but then they can come back and say, ‘OK, we sent three people but we would like to get this organizational capability going across our entire supply chain or procurement or sales or marketing — we need a thousand people to get that.’”

CorpU also operates like a MOOC in the way it designs the online learning experience. In addition to taking limited course content and making it available to a massive audience, CorpU preaches social collaboration, or cohort-style learning, which many MOOCs have come to embrace — a group of individuals follow the same path, interacting online and discussing the learning along the way. CorpU calls this connected learning.

“The connected learning model is about connecting people together in purpose-built cohorts to solve complex problems, generate and spread ideas, teach and learn, capture, codify and share knowledge,” Todd said. “If you can connect them together and get them to do those four things and build those into larger communities of practice, you can effect massive change on a business.”

Todd said the customized nature of CorpU makes it more efficient than a traditional MOOC. Also, CorpU's completion rates are near 80 percent, while most MOOCs hover around 4 percent.

Still, Todd said the corporate learning world and the traditional MOOC world have much to learn from each other. He predicts that sooner or later the major MOOC players are going to become directly involved in the corporate learning space.

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CLOs' most common predictions focused on learning results in several dimensions:

- **Training for results:** There will be more focus on learning results, including more social, mobile and gamification.
- **Action learning:** Job- and role-based development and learning paths will include on-the-job development and assignments.
- **Relevance:** It is increasingly important to make demonstrable contributions to the organization's bottom line.
- **Accountability:** More structured online programs will emerge with businesses requiring certain levels of accountability and testing in key areas of knowledge and skills.
- **Less waste:** The training industry will be more focused on business goals and will use shorter modules organized into larger learning themes. There will be more use of mobile technology to deliver learning and performance support.
- **Measurement:** The industry will look at how to better relate training to performance measures.

Other predictions focused on content and methods, especially the increased use of mobile. CLOs said the training industry needs to come to grips with anytime, anywhere training, allowing individual pace and differentiated learning. Mobile training will increase and mobility on smartphone use is key.

Technology use is always a hot area for predictions. Though some believe training costs will increase with technology use, most CLOs see it as a strong benefit. There will be:

- More use of e-learning such as webinars.
- Embedded augmentation of learning.
- Leaders embracing gamification as a method to educate and integrating gamification on mobile devices.
- Content development focused on bite-size learning pieces that are reusable, easily accessible and mobile, and cater to various audiences in multiple locations, providing more meaningful learning opportunities at point of use for the learner.
- New learning systems and methods introduced in 2014. The synergy of electronic, tablet and mobile learning will continue.
- Increased importance of performance support.

Finally, while some think changing modalities will cause live, face-to-face training events to increase as demand for dedicated group learning time increases, most believe social networking use also will increase. CLOs' general consensus appears to be that more social media and collaboration tools will be the basis for learning, with more YouTube-type formats within companies.

Overall, CLOs see an expanding role for, and impact from, employee development. Leadership development and competency management will have the most profound effect on organizational development. And while there is debate about the efficacy of mobile and social learning, CLOs believe increasing use of those technologies and others will continue, and that "as the U.S. economic conditions improve, employment will continue to trend up and training will again be in high demand." **CLO**

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Age of Disruption?

Evidence of that happening is starting to show with Udacity's Open Education Alliance, albeit on a small and limited scale.

AT&T's partnership with Udacity, for instance, started a little more than a year ago in response to the telecommunications firm wanting to pivot its computer programming skill base to being more software-driven. Scott Smith, the company's senior vice president of human resources operations, said Udacity initiated a conversation with the company related to its partnership with Georgia Tech University; a master's in computer science degree offered by the university had been adapted online and offered at a reduced price.

Smith said AT&T, excited at the prospect of gaining access to this degree program for employees, started talking to the MOOC provider about future opportunities to source training with its content and subject matter experts. AT&T was announced as an official partner for the Georgia Tech and Udacity degree in May.

"It's a two-way play for us: Our employees can go take that learning as part of their training," Smith said, "and other learners outside of AT&T — we can reach them ... if we're looking for external candidates." Smith said the alliance is a potential vehicle for collaboration on both internal and external training for AT&T.

In an emailed statement, Clarissa Shen, Udacity's vice president of strategic business and marketing, said: "Udacity has been working with companies from the earliest days. While not traditional 'corporate learning,' we care very much about developing the workforce of tomorrow."

Despite the prospect of a more direct partnership for internal learning with Udacity, Smith said he sees it more as a supplement to the customized learning already happening within the company. AT&T has the resources to build its own function and online offerings, especially when it comes to training on proprietary company skills and information. But Smith said tapping into external resources like Udacity is an economical way to expand knowledge in more complex subject areas such as software engineering and technology.

Raj Ramachandran, vice president of enterprise solutions at the University of Phoenix, said MOOCs have the potential to be a major disrupter for corporate learning. But he said the jury is still out on where the disruption will come from. It could come from employees maximizing the abundance of high-quality free content in lieu of corporate offerings, or the big MOOC providers could be tempted to find a greater return on investment by directly entering the \$150 billion corporate learning industry.

"It's very uncertain," Ramachandran said. "And I think no one has the answer." **CLO**