

# Three Trends Shaping Learning

BY MICHAEL PLATER

MOOCs, digital badges and competency-based learning are changing the way learning leaders think about and create learning.

Picture this. At one time, 10,000 individuals take a free, high-demand course from an accredited university around the globe. It offers digital representations of accomplishments that carry real power in the workplace, and students earn credentials for concepts they've already mastered.

Welcome to the future of education and learning. We are at a major turning point in education today. New concepts have disrupted traditional modes of instruction, and they have changed the way businesses hire and train workers.

But while learning leaders need to be open to incorporating these dynamic shifts into programs and interventions for the workplace, it would be wise not to embrace every twist and turn from innovation without question. A critical eye is key to evaluate and implement the latest educational developments to their best advantage.

## A Trio of Trends

Three top “disruptive innovations” have steadily gained traction and been popularized to varying degrees in the education marketplace. They are: massive open online courses, or MOOCs; digital badges denoting a skill mastered or an accomplishment; and competency-based learning, which evaluates and awards individuals for knowledge and skills amassed outside the classroom or learning environment.

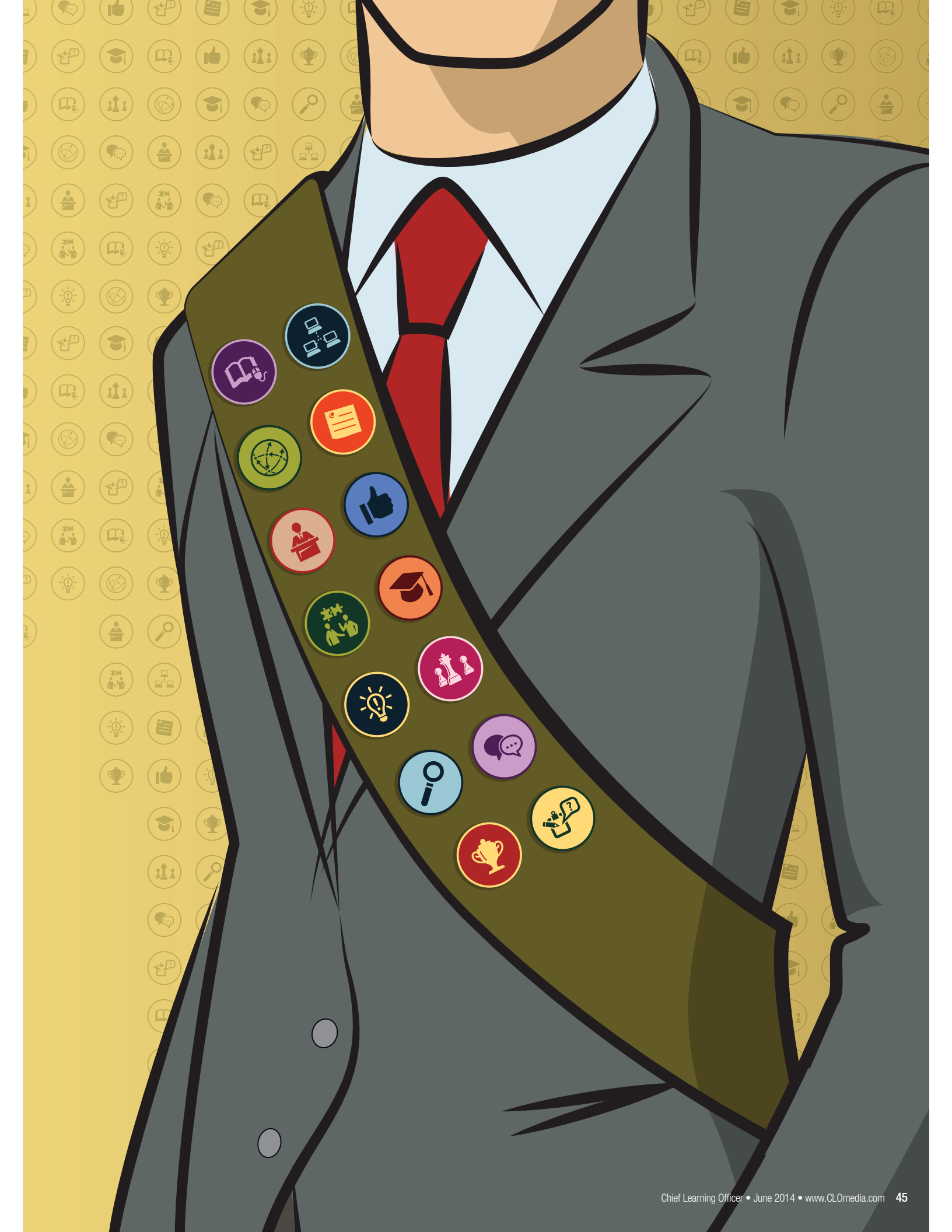
MOOCs, one of the most buzzed about innovations in higher education, are free online courses that can take several forms. Some run for a set time period and feature moderated and evaluated work. Others are more static, allowing students to participate at any time and in any way that meets their learning goals and styles.

MOOCs were lauded as a way for the masses to access skill-building courses, instructors and ideas that would have been closed to them otherwise. Led by providers such as Udacity, Coursera, Udemy and others, they have been revolutionary in expanding the reach of knowledge for free or at low cost. However, some fear their promise has yet to be fully realized, with average completion rates as low as 7 percent.

“We’re primarily serving college-educated lifelong learners,” said Justin Reich, a HarvardX research fellow working on the university’s MOOC project. “We have to reconcile the fact that these courses are not doing the thing that we expected them to do. They’re opening

### ON THE WEB

According to blogger David Vance, to better forecast learning trends, we must gather all relevant information, look at trends and other factors, consider our own resources, talk to others and then make an educated guess: **blog.CLOmedia.com/?p=4115**.



access, but the majority of people walking through those doors are already college-educated and affluent.”

MOOCs are a great innovation in learning and in the world, and have a solid place among educational offerings, but learning leaders need to approach them with caution. Many providers have shifted to focus on corporate training. MOOCs potentially enable employees all over the globe to learn about a company’s desired values and skills with consistency, collaborate while they learn, work at all hours, and they can provide credentials, certifications or badges for credit.

For example, in partnership with Udemy and Skillsoft, the Jack Welch Management Institute at Strayer University offers online Welch Way training courses. (Editor’s note: The author works for Strayer). This allows companies of all sizes and employees at all levels to access the leadership principles and practices of former GE CEO Jack Welch.

Last year, a survey by executive development firm Future Workplace found that 70 percent of professionals involved in corporate education said they see an opportunity to integrate MOOCs into their offerings.

## Not Your Scout Badge

Another disruptive innovation has the potential to revamp the way businesses evaluate experiences for employees or prospective employees. The idea behind digital badges — which can be awarded for mastering a skill, achieving a certification or any number of accomplishments — is not new. But until recently, badges have been too unwieldy, not clearly defined and have not held strong enough recognition for the corporate world to use effectively. Badges were often contained within a specific company or higher education institution’s platform and could not be displayed outside of it. They were also unverifiable.

However, organizations have developed systems that allow individuals to earn badges for multiple learning activities and display them to employers. The Mozilla Foundation’s Open Badge Infrastructure, for example, allows badges awarded from various organizations to be embedded and grouped together in an individual’s personal profile. An employee or student can put the badges in a virtual backpack, take them to virtual job interviews and share them on social networking sites such as LinkedIn. With just a click on a digital badge, employers can learn information on the awarding organization, when the badge was given and if it is still current.

Frank Catalano, an analyst and consultant with Intrinsic Strategy, said the business world is a natural fit for digital badges. “The initial acceptance of this is likely to be in the corporate world and higher education because they’re used to using representation for accomplishing something,” he said. “What makes it valuable is there are things you can do with digital

## READER REACTION

What are the best tools and trends on the market, and what would you advise your peers to adopt?



@AlwynKlein:  
TDRp from Center for Talent Reporting.



@donnamurdoch:  
Social, immersive learning, ROI of learning delivered among others.



@staceyzimmy:  
Utilizing employees’ unique strengths to create employee engagement.



@craigdadoly:  
Smaller, visual, story-based learning, in context, pulled by the learner as time and need allows.

What do you think? Join the discussion at [tinyurl.com/learningtrends](http://tinyurl.com/learningtrends), follow us @CLOmedia or join our Chief Learning Officer LinkedIn group.

badges that you can’t do with paper.”

Catalano said there is real potential to change the way employees present their credentials, especially with the ability to chunk or group digital badges together. And organizations like Professional Examination Service, which provides professional licensing and certification services, are jumping on the trend.

Last year, ProExam announced it would design and issue badges after polling *Fortune* 500 senior hiring managers who said those distinctions would help them narrow down job applicants. The company now issues what it calls “micro-credential” badges to provide specific credentialing information, for example, for adept time management or to chart career advances.

“You can take the badges you’ve earned, combine them in a unique way and use them as part of your job application,” said Catalano, who was the chief marketing officer at ProExam. “They can represent a certain learning path and can be immediately verified when clicked on. There’s real power in that.”

## Personalized Learning Moves Ahead

Badges also can be used effectively in a competency-based learning environment, an idea based on breaking a course down into small learning chunks, and the last of three trends shaping learning. A student can move on once each concept is mastered through assessment, or the student can test out of a portion of a course based on knowledge and skills earned in the workforce.

This form of education allows adult learners and employees to focus on skills they need to improve while not sacrificing time or expense on those they

have already mastered. Further, most programs are self-paced, which allows busy executives to complete courses at their own pace and drill down into topics of particular interest. It can cut the amount of time a student needs to spend on a course and make a degree more relevant and connected to the corporate environment.

But again, executing competency-based learning effectively calls for a thoughtful approach. For example, a credit recovery lab that pushes students through uninspiring content to take a short multiple-choice quiz before moving on doesn't inspire deeper understanding. Performance-based learning needs to break down competencies into explicit and well-defined objectives. Assessments must be meaningful. Students must receive differentiated support based on their learning needs, and emphasis must be on the application and creation of knowledge.

Julia Freeland, an education research fellow at the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, said the "unbundling" of higher education and workplace education will continue to further remove students from traditional perceptions of what a univer-

sity means. "We'll be seeing more of a teasing apart of the different aspects of that experience that employers deem more important," she said. "It will be presented in a more modular manner in more immediate ways."

This unbundling will have major effects on how education is delivered, who it is delivered to, for what purpose and how employers can leverage the best of higher education for their employees.

The newest disruptive innovations may be hard to spot as they emerge. At first, they may look primitive compared with more established options. But it's the potential they have to extend opportunities for higher learning within academic and corporate settings that must be monitored. The innovation and excitement of this era in higher education will only continue to grow, and in a year, or perhaps several years from now, the continued higher education revolution will have led to improvements and advancements that are applicable to systems outside of the traditional structure. **CLO**

*Michael Plater is president of Strayer University. He can be reached at [editor@CLOmedia.com](mailto:editor@CLOmedia.com).*

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