



MOOCs, High Technology, and Higher Learning

Rhoads, Robert A.

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Book Review

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Stephen Downes, cofounder of the first Massively Open Online Course, or MOOC, once asked how many ways society actually needs to teach trigonometry (2001). Each instructor who teaches the subject must teach it anew every time. But what if there is an optimal way to teach the subject? Shouldn't that be developed as a pedagogical artifact and made available to everyone? The MOOC promises the possibility that anyone with an internet connection can access quality instruction.

Rhoads' book, *MOOCs: High Technology and Higher Learning* is a critical examination of the MOOC movement. The first half of the book outlines the history of MOOCs as growing out of the Open Educational Resource movement, as well as the institutions which stepped in to take advantage of MOOCs to expand educational brands and even make open courses profitable. It also outlines the split between the Connectivist-MOOC (cMOOC), which relies on individual motivation for self-study, and the xMOOC, which represents the scalable online arm of institutions of higher education and which often offers certificates of completion.

The book really shines in its critique of the current state of the MOOC movement. Rhoads argues that rather than being a democratizing force delivering free education to all, MOOCs have largely replicated inequalities in society. The MOOC movement has the ideals of democratization of education, but it has been dominated by a hegemony of elite schools such as "Columbia, Harvard, MIT, Penn, Yale, and Stanford" (104). He illustrates this problem using the example of a popular political philosophy course called "Justice" offered by Harvard's Michael Sandel. When San Jose State University proposed offering a MOOC version of this course with Sandel delivering his lectures via video, the SJSU Philosophy Department objected. Their concern was that this created a two-tiered system in which students at elite universities

interact with “rock star” (105) instructors, while students at public institutions watch canned lectures and whose work was supervised by faculty who were reduced to “glorified teaching assistants” (106). The scalability of MOOCs means that faculty may never interact with students, or at best may just serve as graders. Uncritical adoption of MOOCs also exacerbates problems of diversity in higher education, especially when one recognizes that the institutions creating MOOCs are less diverse than the presumptive adopting institutions. And finally, there is a false epistemological assumption that there is one right, best way to teach a subject, rather than allowing that there may be many different ways to teach a subject, each responsive to a particular social and cultural context.

Rhoads’ goal is not to suggest that higher education should abandon MOOCs entirely. He is aware of the potential in MOOCs for making quality education more broadly available. But he recommends a number of reforms in the way MOOCs are developed and implemented. Digital online learning may benefit from a combination of recorded lectures and publicly accessible online documents as well as intensive faculty support embedded within particular institutional contexts. This approach to MOOCs yields a hybrid model he dubs an “xsMOOC,” a “MOOC with extra support” (130). Contrary to the view that online learning should be pedagogically efficient, Rhoads argues that the best educational resource is one that is grounded in the context of the learners who will use it. In this way can MOOCs best fulfill their promise.

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