

# My [2013] Take On MOOCs

By Marc Prensky

Everyone these days is talking about MOOCs, and they're worth talking about. But it's important to situate them in a context, and that context is experimentation.

This is a time of great possibilities for expanding the learning opportunities of traditional classrooms to a much broader audience. Today we see MOOCs—but in only a few years we will likely see something that looks much different.

In these times of accelerating change, experimenting is clearly the right thing to do. Parents who tell educators “don't experiment on my kid” need to be reminded that since we do not yet know how to educate for our future (or even our current) world, we *have* to try new ways. It's the kids we're not experimenting with who are receiving the outdated, and too often inferior, education.

It is by experimenting that we uncover unmet needs and things we can do better. Today, for example, the M in MOOC (which stands for “massive”) might just as well stand for “motivated-only.” That's because, These courses, in their current form, are effective almost exclusively for students who are high self-disciplined self-starters who are strongly motivated to finish. That's the reason most of today's MOOCs have dropout rates of over 80 percent.

I am one of those dropouts. I was personally hooked by an email promoting a free MOOC on a subject of interest to me, and I registered right away, eagerly downloading the instructor's free (as well), online textbook. But once I was asked to actually do assignments, my excitement, and participation, totally faded. After reading a couple of the book chapters I felt I understood the perspective of the course, which was really all I wanted.

To my disappointment, the professor's attitude toward his massive number of students was extremely condescending. Rather than “I am going to introduce you to a new and fascinating world” his oft-stated view was “This is *college* [subject deleted]. Everything you learned beforehand about this subject is not applicable.” The professor's huge ego—which came through loud and clear in his memos, book and lectures—got very much in the way of my learning. If, as predicted, some professors do become “stars” in the new educational world, reaching (if not actually “teaching”) perhaps millions of students, I hope that their example will model intellectual humility and not intellectual hubris.

Related, no doubt, to the above is a far more important issue. The current crop of MOOCs, which certainly change and broaden the *distribution system* for courses, don't change *at all* the concept of how teaching has been done in colleges for the past hundred years. Today's MOOCs typically consist of a textbook to read, lectures to watch, exercises (or “problem sets”) to do, and tests to take. Many MOOCs also try to encourage various sorts of discussions online— if not directly with the professor, at least with peers and assistants. This is “old education” online, and for some, as noted, it's OK.

But it is not the real step forward we need for broadening education. With the exception of a relatively small group—many of whom are already attending our best schools—for most students today our old system works poorly or not at all. Many would-be students have enormous motivation and stick-to-it-

iveness problems in that system—*although, importantly, not with everything*—and the huge dropout rates for the current MOOCs ought to come as no surprise.

It will be relatively easy, with imagination, to fix some of the issues and defects of today's first generation of MOOCs — including little or no contact with the lecturing professor, difficulties in correcting work, problems in administering and evaluating tests and, as noted, the big egos. I'm sure the schools offering MOOCs will put in much effort to make these iterations, and a student who takes the successors to today's MOOCs in a couple of years' time will no doubt see many improvements.

But designing these courses to bring in and retain the unmotivated will be harder, because just fixing up the old ways won't work for many, or even most, of today's students. We need, as part of our process of experimentation, a much more fundamental rethinking—a reevaluation not just of HOW to deliver today's education more widely using technology, but of what education is, and of how, by using technology, we can make it a more successful experience at all levels for all.

Part of this involves becoming clearer about the real goals of our educational experiences. Most would say the goal of education is "learning"—it's what we try to produce, and it's what we try to measure. However true education is NOT about learning—it's about BECOMING. It's about becoming a better, more capable person in life. Learning is not the *goal*, it is only a means.

So the key to reinventing online education for the future is not whether it —via MOOCs or anything else— can get more students to somehow learn or even be certified. It is, rather, whether via the educational experiences we create, we can help all students become better and more capable people than they were before those experiences.

It is not until we make it clear to all (to employers, parents and especially to students) that the online education we provide truly makes people who receive it better people—*in ways they, and we, all want*— that our new, far more widely-distributable education opportunities will really take off.