

Educating Rita, in the Time of MOOC

Mohamed Gad-el-Hak

Are massive open online courses and other online innovations helping or hindering the goal of teaching students how to learn?

The Movie

In the award-winning film *Educating Rita*, a hairdresser decides to find herself by taking an Open University course. Her English literature tutor is in a failing marriage, is alcoholic, and is aspiring to be a poet. The Cambridge don is saddened when Rita replaces her warm impulsive reactions by the sort of pretentious analytical approach he so much despises. The teacher ends up learning as much from his pupil as she learns from him. The story is an inspiring tale of self-discovery and of the power of choice that come through education. The subtext in the screenplay is the now unfashionable one-on-one tutoring.

In the time of massive open online courses (MOOCs), is the education system ripe for a revolutionary change? One-on-one tutoring has existed since the beginning of civilization. Lecture-based instruction commenced before the invention of the printing press. Correspondence education is about a century old, and MOOC blasted off during the 2000s.

The Lost Tools of Learning

In an influential lecture delivered in 1947, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, Oxford-educated Dorothy L. Sayers advocated a return to the medieval university where the syllabus was divided into two subsequent parts: the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music). She eloquently wrote, “We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all tasks.” Sayers suggested that we ‘presently’ teach our children everything but how to learn.

The question today is, are the Internet, online courses beamed to millions around the world, lack of proximity, and other modern realizations helping or hindering the quest for teaching how to learn? Despite the MOOC’s deluge—even Harvard is jumping into the fray, and the president of the University of Virginia nearly lost her job because she was not adapting Internet learning fast enough—this contrarian believes the new pedagogic paradigm is, in the long run, a setback for the ability to learn and for honing critical thinking skills, in both the sciences and the humanities. Here is why.

Technology enabled MOOC, but the prohibitive cost and extreme selectivity of top universities allowed it to mushroom. There are several journals devoted to online learning, teaching, and administration; for example, *MOOCs Forum*, *Hybrid Pedagogy*, and *The Internet and Higher Education*.

MOOC’s outreach is enormous; it is free and no admission standards are applied, but in return no college credits are awarded. The few students admitted to the offering college may take the same course and earn credits but they have to pay.

The Trouble With Online Education

Humans are social beings and learning is a social process. Both require interaction and connection to flourish. These factors undermine the effectiveness of an online class. In our digital, mobile society, on-site discussion forums are still the most effective tools for student–student and student–teacher interactions.

Even in a large lecture hall, a good teacher is able to sense the students’ mood and receptivity, and instantly adapt to them. In a good course, there are rich spontaneous interactions that can take place amongst all. In a 2012 *New York Times* op/ed, Mark Edmundson, professor of English at the University of Virginia, likened a memorable non-virtual course to a jazz composition: there is a basic melody that you work with—as defined by the syllabus—but there is also a considerable measure of improvisation against the disciplining background.

Acquiring knowledge is not the same as knowing what to do with it. Learning to analyze, evaluate, synthesize, collaborate, innovate, and use the unlimited information available is what education is all about. In my opinion, MOOC does not offer much beyond a do-it-yourself learning from the vast information available on the Internet.

There are of course the fortunate few who have superior discipline, motivation, and intellect to self-learn and make sense of the boundless information out there, but the majority does not possess these gifts. MOOC and the Internet are no different from having a library at your disposal. Both offer monologues not dialogues. Dialogues are individual, labor-intensive, and expensive, but they nurture learning and critical thinking. Monologues are the polar opposite.

Mooc’s panic, mania, and tsunami are some of the recently coined phrases. Lecture-based instruction could undoubtedly be improved, but MOOC is far from being a panacea to our real or perceived pedagogical shortcomings. Would anyone want a physician or an esquire who is taught the fundamentals of medicine or law via MOOC courses? Believing that MOOC would improve the learning process is in the same dreamland as wishing that incessant texting and tweeting could produce the next Tennessee Williams.

In the stage musical *The King and I*, Anna the British schoolteacher poetically recites/sings during her first encounter with the Siamese pupils, “It’s a very ancient saying/But a true and honest thought/That if you become a teacher/By your pupils you’ll be taught ... Getting to know you/Getting to know all about you ...”. How could one even come close to this magic in an online course?

The Internet changed our world, to the better for the most part. But when it comes to education, teachers—whether lecturing or tutoring—should not be replaced by machines. Dehumanizing education the way factories were dehumanized won’t improve the institution’s productivity. This teacher is unabashedly *laudator temporis acti*.

Mohamed Gad-el-Hak is the Inez Caudill Eminent Professor of mechanical and nuclear engineering at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. Contact him at gadelhak@vcu.edu.

Appeared in VCU *Across the Spectrum* (18 November 2013; <http://www.spectrum.vcu.edu/insight/educating-rita-in-the-time-of-mooc/#.Uqi5KI2FfgQ>), *The Free Lance-Star* (8 December 2013; <http://www.freelancestar.com/2013-12-08/articles/24233/commentary-will-moocs-provide-an-advanced-education/>), *Physics Today* (17 January 2014; <http://scitation.aip.org/content/aip/magazine/physicstoday/news/10.1063/PT.5.2008>), *Mechanical Engineering* (February 2014; http://www.memagazinedigital.org/memagazine/february_2014#pg10), the *International Journal of Engineering Education* (February 2014; <http://www.ijee.ie/educatingrita.pdf>), and ASEE's *Prism* (May 2014; <http://www.asee-prism.org/last-word-3/>).

Also appeared under the title “Monologues of Learning”, *Academic Questions*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 310–312, 2014.

