MOOCs and Asian Studies

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A typical university lecture course. MOOC enrollment is often measured in the thousands, with one of the largest—"Learning How to Learn" by University of San Diego and Coursera—even breaking the million mark. Whether down the street or across an ocean, students can access the course if they have an internet connection. Global reach means not just connecting with more students, but dramatically increases the viability of specialized courses, for example, on kunqu opera (p. 59). It also removes age constraints, making advanced courses more readily available to everyone from high school students to retirees. MOOCs are also flexible in terms of scheduling. Students do not have to be present in class at the same time and can complete their work at different paces. Personally, I even prefer archived courses that have already concluded, which allows the time pressure to evaporate entirely.

Second, MOOCs are a powerful counterargument to the technophobia of some well-intentioned educators. Rather than lambasting phones or laptops as distractions, MOOCs demonstrate how young people's interest in technology is something we can engage rather than fight. At five to seven minutes, video presentations are broken down into shorter lengths than one might find in a typical university lecture. While still varied, production values of MOOC videos have, as a whole, improved considerably. Most students can expect to encounter audio and visual content from a range of sources that can better illustrate and amplify the message of the instructor, rather than simply seeing a talking head on screen. And after many lessons, students take short quizzes that evaluate comprehension of key points, which are more likely to reinforce understanding through the instant feedback available through the MOOC platform.

What Are Their Limitations?

Neither high school nor college educators should worry about MOOCs replacing traditional schooling anytime soon. While access is one of the key selling points of MOOCs, it has also meant that dropout rates are staggering. EdX itself reported in 2016 that only 5.5 percent of those who register complete their courses. On one hand, this is discouraging news and reinforces the belief that there is no getting around the hard work of learning; on the other hand, this pattern also shows how easy it is to try out different offerings before committing to that hard work. Among those who stay, 80 percent already held bachelor degrees in 2015, according to The Harvard Business Review, meaning that at least at present, MOOCs are more likely to serve as a form of continuing education for the highly educated than a full-fledged alternative to the university system.

Perhaps more troubling is the varied experience for students. Like traditional courses, quality can vary considerably. Just because a course has been MOOC-ified does not mean it is necessarily more engaging than its real-world counterpart. Indeed, the absence of the physical presence of an instructor and other students might strip away important social dimensions of learning. Likewise, scalability can also lead to weakened feedback resulting in the same, dry, and impersonal experience.

What Would an Asian Studies Educator Care about MOOCs?

MOOCs are powerful tools for expanding access and increasing engagement in the learning process. First, their reach is many times greater than

"Given that education has been calcified for 500 years, we really have to completely reimagine it. It's like going from ox carts to the airplane." This was the challenge laid out to a TED audience in January 2014 by Anant Agarwal, CEO of EdX. In his talk, Agarwal promised nothing less than to revolutionize education through MOOCs (or massively open online courses). By the end of the year, an article in the MIT Technology Review hit back, suggesting that "For all the hype, MOOCs are really just content—the latest iteration of the textbook. And just like a book on a library shelf, they can be useful to a curious passerby thumbing through a few pages—or they can be the centerpiece to a well-taught course. On their own, MOOCs are hardly more likely than textbooks to recreate a quality college education in all its dimensions." Now, four years on, I hope to work through both the opportunities and limitations of MOOCs from the perspective of Asian studies educators.

What Are MOOCs, and Where Can I Find Them?
The name "MOOC" is a good starting point for explaining how they work. MOOCs are massive, meaning they can be many times larger than the largest university lectures. They are open, meaning anyone can access their content for free. They are also online, though major providers now have apps for iOS and Android that allow prospective students to download content on the go when internet access is not available. They are courses, and much like traditional high school and university courses, they are broken down into units and lessons, with a particular content or skill explained, and then a student's ability to comprehend or apply assessed. Unlike traditional courses, content is chiefly conveyed in video format, with readings sometimes offered as supplements. They mark an evolution from content accessed through iTunes U, YouTube, and the Great Courses, making it easy to browse, but without growth in number of interactive activities.

The two main platforms home to Asian studies MOOCs are Coursera (coursera.org) and EdX (edx.org). Both were founded in 2012, offer 1,000 to 2,000 courses, claim student enrollment in the tens of millions, and partner with colleges and universities for much of their content. While Coursera is run for-profit and EdX is nonprofit (it is a partnership of Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT]), both are pursuing a sustainable revenue source by offering paid certificates and bonus content.

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Highlighted Courses

Below, I have provided a sampling of the types of MOOCs currently available through Coursera and EdX. Since these change over time, the best way to see current and upcoming offerings is to search directly on their websites.

“The Beauty of Kunqu Opera” from Chinese University of Hong Kong and Coursera (https://goo.gl/PkJ2tw) is a seven-week course that uses stunning visuals to explore the history, aesthetics, and performance of one of the oldest forms of traditional Chinese opera. Available in Chinese with English subtitles.

“Buddhism and Modern Psychology” from Princeton University and Coursera (https://goo.gl/Ubmnly) asks the question “What happens when religion meets science?” Robert Wright from Princeton University aims to find out in this six-week course.

ChinaX from Harvard University and EdX (https://goo.gl/337VdW) has evolved into a ten-part look at Chinese history, with parts one through five taught by Peter Bol as “China: Civilization and Empire” and parts six through ten taught by William Kirby as “China and the Modern World.”

“Chinese Thought: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science” from The University of British Columbia and EdX (https://goo.gl/VYXVY) is a two-part course that builds on Edward Slingerland’s 2014 book Trying Not to Try and digs deep into the key elements of classical Chinese philosophy while providing fresh perspective with connections to social psychology.

“The Importance of India” from Ohio State University and Coursera (https://goo.gl/6CET6u) is a six-week introduction to India focusing on the themes of influence, diversity, complexity, creativity, and opportunity.

“Jewish Diaspora in Modern China” from Nanjing University and Coursera (https://goo.gl/EApbzc) is a cinematic look at Jewish history in China from the Tang Era (618–907) to the present.

“The Search for Vernacular Architecture of Asia” (https://goo.gl/ogGyd2) and “Vernacular Architecture of Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Cultural Sustainability” (https://goo.gl/EoBX6) from University of Hong Kong and EdX are courses, each five weeks long, offering a transnational look at the built human environment in Asia.

“Visualizing Japan (1850s–1930s): Westernization, Protest, Modernity” (https://goo.gl/SWjWJG) from Harvard University, MIT, and EdX transforms the fascinating MIT’s Visualizing Cultures (https://goo.gl/jNYB7x) project into a four-module MOOC.

JARED HALL is an Instructor in History at the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut, where his elective courses explore themes related to China and the Asia-Pacific. Previously, he was based in Kunming and Beijing from 2006 to 2015, serving most recently as a Teacher and Administrator at Peking University High School–Dalton Academy. You can follow his work on his website, Discovering History (www.discoveringhistory.org), and on Twitter (@jaredhhall).