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Developing MOOCs to Narrow the College Readiness Gap: Challenges and Recommendations for a Writing Course

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Developing MOOCs to Narrow the College Readiness Gap:
Challenges and Recommendations for a Writing Course

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Abstract

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have demonstrated the potential to deliver quality and cost effective course materials to large numbers of students. Approximately 60% of first-year students at community colleges are underprepared for college-level coursework. One reason for low graduation rates is the lack of the overall college readiness. MOOCs offering "remedial" writing have the potential to better prepare high school graduates for college, thereby increasing their chances of completing a degree and reducing the cost of education for students, families, institutions, and taxpayers. However, MOOCs are typically more suitable for motivated and prepared students. Designing a MOOC on writing for a diverse group of students who lack basic academic writing skills requires thoughtful modifications. In this article, we examine the needs of basic writers and the challenges involved in providing personalized feedback on the content of student writings via a MOOC platform. We recommend some MOOC variations that would be suitable for college readiness writing courses: Limited MOOC (lMOOC), Hybrid MOOC (hMOOC), Flipped MOOC (fMOOC), Mini MOOC (mMOOC), MOOC Workshops (MOOCw).

Keywords: MOOC, basic writing, remedial writing, college readiness, college preparatory courses, developmental writing

Developing MOOCs to Narrow the College Readiness Gap:
Challenges and Recommendations for a Writing Course

Introduction

Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) has entered the educational space with a bang. The first MOOC was offered in 2008 by George Siemens and Stephen Downes in Canada to a couple thousand students (Downes, 2009). However, the media did not pick up on this trend until the fall of 2011 when some MOOC enrollments from Stanford University topped 100,000 participants (Pappano, 2012). MOOCs are now seen as a disruptive force in higher education (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014; Kelly, 2014). In fact, as of fall 2013, three major MOOC platforms alone, Udacity, Coursera, and edX, have already enrolled about 10 million users from many countries (Kelly, 2014). Needless to say, the rise of MOOCs has been phenomenal, in spite of their inherent low faculty and student contact and extremely low course completion rate, ranging between just under 1% to nearly 20% (Jordan, 2013).

Public and private academic institutions, as well as for-profit and not-for-profit organizations are investing in developing MOOC platforms. The increasing number of MOOCs has led to the creation of websites such as Class Central, which aggregate MOOC courses. As of September 2014, Class Central lists more than 2000 courses organized by subject area, course type, and provider.

The mass appeal of a MOOC is that it is free or affordably priced, the online course materials are often of very high quality and prepared by experienced faculty and professional course developers, and any person can enroll in the course and study from home at her convenience. A MOOC class can vary in size, ranging from a few hundred participants to

hundreds of thousands. Such an equalizing and democratizing system can be a big game changer in education. It is not surprising that *The New York Times* called 2012 “The Year of the MOOCs” (Pappano, 2012). Thomas Friedman goes so far as to suggest that MOOCs have the "potential to lift more people out of poverty" (2013). Equally bold, Clay Shirky draws a parallel between MOOCs and Napster in stating that "the public's understanding of how knowledge can be distributed has shifted in the same way that people's knowledge of how music can be distributed has . . ." (2012). Clearly, MOOCs are evolving, and people think that they have the potential to transform education as well as students (Daniel, 2012).

Currently, the lack of college readiness is one of the major contributors to low graduation rates among educationally and financially disadvantaged students. Research overwhelmingly confirms that better prepared high school graduates have higher chances of succeeding academically (Bahr, 2008; Shaughnessy, 1979). For instance, a study found that 40% of students who were not in any “remedial” course completed their two-year associate’s degree within eight years as opposed to only 25% of students who were in a college readiness course completed their associates within the same time period (Attewell et al., 2006). Skinner (2014) also found in his study that only six out of 275 students who were placed in a reading support group at Gordon College graduated within three years, demonstrating the importance of students having the requisite literacy skills for college study.

College readiness courses are an additional expense for students, often discouraging them from pursuing their education. Those receiving financial aid want to save their funds for future credit bearing courses. Since MOOCs are cost effective, they can play a vital role in providing college readiness courses in reading, writing, and math to low-income and underprepared high school graduates enrolled in a two-year college. However, one major issue is that the completion

rates on online courses for underprepared students have been low for a wide range of reasons; from students' lack of self-efficacy (Zajacova, 2005) to their inexperience in using technology (Head, 2013; Zavarella, 2008).

There appears to be some promise for implementing introductory courses online (Vaughan, 2007; Willekens & Gibson, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2010, 2011). Specifically, Xu and Jaggars (2010, 2011) demonstrated that hybrid courses, where students meet online and face-to-face, have shown the same completion rates as face-to-face instruction among low-income and underserved college students. Such research lends hope for MOOCs if they can offer a chance for the instructor/tutors to meet students in the classroom. Translating courses in other languages such as Spanish would also assist innumerable learners such as those originally from Latin America but now residing in the United States (Perez-Hernandez, 2014). In effect, cost-effective MOOCs, with proper supports and supplements, have the potential to narrow the college readiness gap. If successfully deployed, they can potentially increase remedial learner graduation rates and, in the process, reduce the cost of an education for students, families, institutions, and taxpayers.

College Readiness Gap and the Role of Community Colleges

Community Colleges play a pivotal role in providing college readiness education to around 60% of economically and academically disadvantaged students. About 44% of undergraduate students in the United States enroll at a two-year junior or community college (Miner, 2012). Around 1,655 community colleges, both private and public, provide affordable education, flexible schedules, and a host of services such as tutoring, academic and career counseling, college readiness education (U. S. Department of Education, 2005). While more than

50% of the students complete college within six years, only 25% of low-income students complete college in the same amount of time (U. S. Department of Education, NCES, 2014).

Many two-year colleges require their incoming first-year students to take placement tests in reading, writing, and math using COMPASS, ACCUPLACER, or SAT. Those who do not pass the placement tests are required to get additional support before registering or while registered for credit courses. Community Colleges often offer college readiness education in one or more of the following ways:

1. Semester long non-credit face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses.
2. Mandated intensive tutoring while taking college-level courses.
3. Mandated pre-first-year summer enrichment session(s) offered prior to the Fall semester.
4. Cohort models where students with similar needs are placed together.
5. Short workshops that target specific topics.
6. Online self-paced modules that students are required to complete in specific problematic areas.

In addition to subject area enrichment, community colleges often provide students with a range of support services that include academic, career, health, and personal counseling, as well as academic skills workshops. These workshops include practical skills like note-taking techniques, time management seminars, study techniques, test taking skills, helpful memory techniques, working in study groups, effectively listening methods, and preparing for exams. Several studies have demonstrated that these non-academic services have helped colleges improve retention and graduation rates (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Muraskin, 1998).

Figure 1 about here

The college readiness gap is the largest at open access non selective two-year colleges (see Figure 1). Around 60% of high school graduates entering a community college are enrolled in one or more college readiness courses (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2013). Miner (2012) found that 55% of Hispanics and 50% of African Americans holding a degree in science or engineering have attended a community college. Clearly, community colleges play a pivotal role in providing college readiness to students to pursue and complete a degree. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education stresses the need for cost effective introductory or gateway courses to narrow the existing college readiness gap (Trombley & Sallo, 2012). Given such concerns combined with the confluence of trends in college affordability and budgetary cutbacks, new and improved approaches for designing, teaching, and assessing college readiness courses are needed.

Mt. San Jacinto College in California, partnering with Coursera, was among a few institutions to pilot a college readiness MOOC titled "Crafting an Effective Writer: Tools of the Trade," that was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Over 40,000 students enrolled in the course and around 30,000 were active participants. Fourteen staff members were assigned to respond to student queries on the discussion board. Of the 30,000 participants, over 3,500 completed the final peer-reviewed essay; however, only 2,700 students completed the course successfully -- about 6.7%. Due to the low completion rate, future offerings of the course were put on hold, as it is being reevaluated (Poulin, 2013; Whitmer, Schiorring, & James, 2014).

Several studies have found strong evidence for non-academic support services and "social presence" contributing to the success of at-risk, first-year college students (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Muraskin, 1998). Since the online implementation of social interaction

and support services has been discussed in various studies (Fowler, 2013; Grant-Vallone et al., 2003; Jaggars, 2011; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003), it is not the focus of this article. Instead, we focus on the challenges of responding to essays with personalized comments in MOOCs. In fact, we believe that such personalization and feedback issues are among the main challenges facing MOOCs that focus on basic writing or that contain extensive writing components. If the initial challenges experienced with the pilot MOOC on basic writing can be addressed, MOOCs will play a crucial role in helping thousands of low-income and underprepared high school graduates become college ready. Understanding these challenges is the first step toward designing a better MOOC on essay writing and narrowing the college readiness gap.

Implementing MOOC for College Readiness Writing: Challenges

Understanding Basic Writers and Basic Writing

Basic learners are a diverse group consisting of both traditional and non-traditional students—including high school graduates who are underprepared for college-level coursework, first generation college students or immigrants who have arrived in the US, and students whose education has been disrupted for various reasons such as wars or political situations. The group often includes students with learning difficulties and ESL learners who may lack skills in one or more subject areas. At times, students who did not take placement tests seriously and failed on it also find themselves in basic writing courses.

A majority of basic learners at community colleges are from low-income families (Terenzini et al., 1996) and require additional support. Miner found that 50% of the students are Hispanic, while 45% are African American and Asian (2013). Additionally, first-generation

college students are often different from traditional students in their preparation and motivation (Allen, 1999; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Terenzini et al., 1996). Specifically, they generally have lower GPAs and do not receive the same level and type of support for education from their families that students whose parents have pursued higher education do (Riehl, 1994).

Shaughnessy (1977) examined approximately four thousand essays written by community college first-year students at the City University of New York and analyzed the types of errors. Her research suggests that the errors students made were not arbitrary, as writing faculty had previously thought. Instead, the errors were based on students' lack of exposure to rules in academic writing and discourse. In effect, their writings were not in the discourse(s) expected in academia. Shaughnessy saw the writers as being intelligent, but found a serious disconnect between the knowledge and skills basic writers bring to class and the expectations of their teachers. Shaughnessy's (1977) pioneering work brought much needed attention to what has been termed "basic writing."

A variety of terms have been used to refer to the writings of students who are not college ready: remedial, developmental, fundamental, compensatory, introductory, preparatory, and academic upgrading. Several of these terms are misnomers; for instance, the term "remedial" implies deficiency (Bloom, 1995), whereas "developmental" suggests skills that have not yet been fully developed. Along these same lines, "limited" or "academic upgrading" conveys that the student is "stuck" at some level. These terms end up as labels that incoming first-year students have to confront. It is important, therefore, to examine and understand the writings of underprepared college students in an effort to avoid "oversimplifying" the diverse group of students who are often labeled as underprepared. Bloom (1995) emphasizes that names are

significant because of the connotations and power they carry to influence the way people perceive an entity on a normal to abnormal continuum.

Hence we prefer the term “basic writing” or “preparatory writing” to refer to the particular writing style of the diverse group of underprepared college first-year students. The term “basic writing” allows students to be perceived as “authentic members” at their academic institutions (Bartholomae, 1986; Bernstein, 2008; Bizzell, 1986; Shaughnessy, 1977).

Bartholomae (1985) and Shaughnessy (1976) advise teachers to read writings of basic learners as complex texts. And Rose (1998) urges teachers to engage their students with forms of writing that are more meaningful to the writers so that they can draw on their critical thinking skills.

The main purpose of basic writing instruction is to provide students with the "basic" understanding of written academic discourse. Rose suggests that the challenges that basic writers face have to do more with “limited opportunity to build up a rich network of discourse knowledge and strategy” than “some general difference or deficit in her ability to structure or analyze experience” (1988, p. 275). Bartholomae (1985) argues that this lack of experience with academic discourse limits basic writers from developing their voice in their writings because

[i]t is very hard for them to take on the role, the voice, the persona of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research. They slip, then, into a more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of a teacher giving a lesson or the voice of a parent lecturing at the dinner table. (p. 591)

Holbrook observed formulaic writing technique in GED essays and emphasizes the need for students to move away from being “writers as slaves to form” to being natural “communicators” with confidence (p. 16).

Unlike students who are fairly proficient in writing college-level essays, basic writers often struggle to satisfy the requirements set in the college composition classes. A common faux pas made in delivering instruction to basic writers is to employ the same approach used when teaching “remedial” writing. Such an approach often demoralizes the students and inhibits them from expressing their ideas freely and creatively in their writings (Shaughnessy, 1979). It is important to distinguish basic writing from remedial writing for reasons mentioned earlier. It is equally important to distinguish basic writing from English as a Second Language (ESL) writing. In fact, Benson et al., (1992) stress that “it is better that English as a Second Language students and basic writers be taught by trained personnel in each area and with materials appropriate to their needs.” Basic writers use a dialect of English effectively and in sophisticated ways. They mainly need exposure to formal written English, academic culture and discourse (Bartholomae, 1985; Rose, 1988). Adult ESL learners, on the other hand, have already developed essay writing skills in their first language, even though the writing style may differ based on cultural experiences. ESL learners require practice with the English language in areas such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, idioms, culture, etc. (Carson et al., 1990; Larsen-Freeman, 2007).

Awareness of this distinction between basic writing and ESL writing is especially important when using a MOOC platform where anyone can register for the course and make comments. For instance, in the pilot study conducted at Mt. San Jacinto College in California, Hanz found that a higher than expected number of ESL learners (about 65%) enrolled in the MOOC titled "Crafting an Effective Writer: Tools of the Trade" (Poulin, 2013). Given such findings, it is important to point out that ESL learners and basic writers have distinct linguistic needs. Because basic writers are learning to use the academic discourse, they typically require

more personalized feedback on their writings delivered in a step-by-step and a structured manner (Schunk & Rice, 1993).

Providing Personalized Feedback in MOOCs

MOOC platforms initially began offering courses in the sciences. The quantitative nature of responses in the sciences lend themselves favorably to machine grading that MOOCs depend on since they enroll large numbers of students. However, MOOCs in the humanities and the social sciences have steadily increased. David Koller and Andrew Ng, co-founders of Coursera, acknowledge that in the humanities, when the response to a question is open to interpretation, automated grading systems, in their current form, have limitations (Reichard, 2013).

The qualitative nature of essay writing presents unique challenges for MOOC implementers. Based on her experience of offering a MOOC on college composition at Georgia Institute of Technology, Karen Head (2013) stated:

For now, the technology is lacking for courses in subjects like writing, which have such strong qualitative evaluation requirements. Too often we found our pedagogical choices hindered by the course-delivery platform we were required to use, when we felt that the platform should serve the pedagogical requirements. (par. 6)

Pat James Hanz, Dean of Instruction, Library, and Technology at Mt. San Jacinto College, cautions faculty about the impossibility of grading thousands of essays without an automated essay grading system or a workable peer-assessment system (Poulin, 2013).

Two major MOOC platforms, namely edX (MIT and Harvard's non-profit organization) and Coursera (Stanford's MOOC startup), use two distinct approaches to assess essays. edX makes use of an Automated Essay Scoring (AES) application, while Coursera uses a Calibrated

Peer Review (CPR) system. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages for evaluating essays, but not practical for basic writing.

In order for edX's scoring system to function effectively, an instructor must first score 100 student essays on one particular topic using a defined set of criteria. The machine learning algorithms then learn from the instructors' scoring patterns and use characteristics—the average length of the word, discourse element, essay, the number of words in the essay, frequency of words that are not common, scores assigned to essays with similar vocabulary—to assign a score to the essay (Balfour, 2013). One major advantage of using an AES system for a MOOC writing course, is that thousands of essays can be graded in a short span of time, and students receive a score and some feedback immediately. Another advantage is that studies have shown a high correlation between essays graded by humans and AES systems for short essays on a focused topic (Attali, 2007). Shermis et al. (2010) also found that machines graded essays were more consistent in their scoring than human graders.

Even though machine grading systems seem practical, they have come under criticism for their limitations. For instance, Yang et al. (2002) stress that AES systems rely too heavily on surface features such as word, sentence, and essay length, than on the content of the essay and the creativity of the writer. Further, AES systems are unable to assess idioms, metaphors, humor, and words or phrases from a different dialect (Graesser & McNamera, 2012). Another limitation is that AES system has to be trained for each essay topic, which is an investment in time, as an instructor has to grade around 100 essays (Balfour, 2013). In addition to such problems, Ben-Simon and Benette (2007) found that psychologically, students' motivational level decreased when they learned that their writings were scored by a machine.

Coursera uses a Calibrated Peer Review (CPR) system to grade essays. Students in the MOOC writing class are trained to score essays using a multiple-choice rubric, and learn the "critical points" of an essay. Next, they calibrate to an instructor's expectations on a second set of essays. Based on how well they match the instructor's score, each student receives a Reviewer Complexity Index (RCI) rating. If the RCI is very low, then students retake the test again. Each student's essay is assigned three peers to review the essay. The CPR system has a Web-based application that assigns and monitors the flow of student essays in the MOOC class. Students not only score their peers' essays, but they also evaluate their own essay. The system takes the weighted averages of all the scores and provides one final score for the essay. If there is a discrepancy between two peer reviewers, the CPR system takes the score from the student with the higher RCI (Balfour, 2013).

The advantages of using the peer-review system are that more creative pieces of writing can be evaluated and students can comment on the content of essay. Additionally, the writer feels better when she knows that the essay will be read by a person. Research studies indicate that students like the peer-review approach, as they feel they improve not only their own writing, but also gain meta-awareness about writing skills by reading peers' essays from the perspective of a reader or evaluator (Russell, 2004). Handling essays from thousands of students in a good-sized MOOC class requires a larger server for the CPR system. Since the evaluation of one essay is dependent on three other students in class, the consistency of student participation and submission of assignments has an effect on how essays are assigned for peer review. For instance, Balfour (2013) points out that an essay may be evaluated by all three students with low RCIs. Another drawback of CPR is that essays longer than 750 words can become time-consuming.

Neither AES nor CPR are suitable for basic writers because they cannot provide the kind of qualitative feedback that basic writers need. For instance, the AES system is unable to judge the quality of the essay content unless it is a highly structured “cookie cutter” five-paragraph essay. Assessment should not compromise on the creativity skills of the writer. Donald Murray states, “We have to respect the student, not for his product, not for the paper we call literature by giving it a grade, but for the search of truth in which he is engaged” (1972 p. 5). In addition to respecting the exploratory or creative nature of the writing process, basic writers also need to learn to write across the curriculum. By writing in different disciplines and for varying purposes, their writing skills are strengthened.

The CPR system is also not adequate to narrow the gap in college readiness because basic writers are still in the process of familiarizing themselves to the formal writing style in an academic essay. Stated another way, they are not yet in a position to provide constructive feedback to their peers even with the help of a detailed rubric. For instance, Witte and Faigley (1981) find that basic writers experience difficulty in elaborating and extending the concepts they introduce. Therefore, personalized and encouraging comments are helpful in moving the basic writer to the next level; for example, “I like your idea of using pets as a way to deal with loneliness. Earlier in your essay, you mentioned your grandfather who cannot go outside because of his physical disability. Is there a way you can connect the two and expand on the central connection?” and “Provide as much details as you can.” Such constructive comments help basic writers think more critically about writing as they learn to revise their essays. Learning a new way to write takes time because writing is a process (Elbow, 1987).

Therefore, MOOCs for basic writers would require a large number of trained tutors to read, evaluate, conference, comment, and grade essays. Such requirements can not only add to

the cost of the MOOC, but also add to the challenge of hiring and training large numbers of writing tutors. However, some institutions have already addressed these challenges. For instance, the City University of New York (CUNY)—one of the largest urban campuses in the United States, consisting of 23 colleges, 11 of which are community colleges—has opted to use trained writing faculty to grade placement essays. If incoming freshmen at CUNY do not have the required passing score on the Regents or the TOEFL, they are required to complete a writing placement test, the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) that measures the ability to read a passage and respond in writing at the college level. Around 35,000 placement tests are administered each year (Maiz, 2014). As of May 2014, CUNY has already trained 539 CATW certified readers since 2010 (Maiz, 2014). Although training, norming, and certifying faculty can be a daunting endeavor, the benefits are far reaching.

Using trained instructors allows room for basic writers to express creativity in their writings using rich rhetorical modes, including narration, and not be restricted to highly structured essay formats. This simple shift renders writing task into more relatable, meaningful, and “authentic tasks” that provide learning opportunities from which students can benefit (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010). Further, since the test is not machine graded, there is no limit to the number of essay prompts used, thereby protecting the quality of learning.

Implementing MOOCs for Basic Writing: Recommendations

Implementing a MOOC on writing for college underprepared students presents some challenges. But in these challenges, we also see opportunities for a variety of hybrid-type MOOCs for teaching basic writing, where students interface with faculty from time to time. Below we detail five types of MOOCs that educators may want to consider, including the

Limited MOOC (lMOOC), Hybrid MOOC (hMOOC), Flipped MOOC (fMOOC), Mini MOOC (mMOOC), and MOOC Workshop (MOOCw).

Limited MOOC or lMOOC

The juxtaposition of the terms "limited" and "massive" may seem like an oxymoron, but from the perspective of a first-year composition class, 2,000 to 4,000 students in one course is massive. At many colleges, a traditional basic writing class is generally limited to 20 to 25 students per section; which is small in comparison to the large lecture classes in other fields with hundreds of students.

The enrollment in a lMOOC is limited by a preset number and to individual institutions for two reasons: (1) in order to have a manageable number of trained writing tutors who can conference with students individually, address specific needs more effectively, and provide appropriate feedback on the students writings; and (2) to ensure that only basic writers are enrolled in the course. Many two-year colleges have in place some sort of criteria that channels ESL students into ESL writing courses and basic writers into "remedial" or "developmental" writing courses.

In a lMOOC course, students watch video lectures online, read selected texts/essays, discuss them online with their peers in small and/or large groups, complete reading comprehension tasks/exercises, etc. As students draft their own essays, each writer meets with her tutor to discuss and receive feedback. The tutor and the student could conference face-to-face or online via Skype or Google+ Hangouts for synchronous sessions. Applications such as

screencast-o-matic or track changes on Word could also be used for asynchronous feedback. We recommend synchronous sessions for initial drafts and the asynchronous for later drafts. Writing drafts, receiving personalized feedback and encouraging comments are essential to the basic writing class because they help guide basic writers through the expectations of academic writing. Given that the course materials are online, students have the flexibility to study anytime, anywhere, making it convenient for working students or a stay-at-home parent with kids. Before the course begins, we encourage institutions to provide workshops for students to become familiar with the various features of the online platform.

Since the IMOOC requires a large number of tutors (between 50 and 80 tutors for a course with 2000 students), there will be additional costs for training tutors and for having individual sessions with students. Each tutor would work with 25 to 40 students a semester. This cost could be covered by having students pay a minimal fee for the personalized feedback they receive on three to four essays during the semester. Institutions can also find ways to subsidize or waive the fees for students who need financial assistance. Although there is a small cost, IMOOCs will still be less expensive than what students would pay for a typical semester-long course.

Hybrid MOOC or hMOOC

A hMOOC is another way to implement semester-long basic writing course. Instead of meeting regularly in the classroom, students work mostly online, but also meet with the faculty face-to-face from time-to-time in the classroom. A hMOOC can be limited to the regular basic writing class-size (namely 20-25 students) or to several sections of basic writing classes grouped together. In a large hMOOC, however, several instructors are needed to meet with small groups

of students in person on campus or at learning hubs. Coursera, for instance, is currently partnering with the New York City Public Library on a pilot study using libraries as a "learning hub," where trained facilitators meet small groups of students face-to-face several times during the semester (Coursera Blog, 2014).

As in IMOOCs, students in the hMOOC also view video lectures, read articles/essays, and discuss with classmates online. However, in the hMOOC, students do not have tutors to provide one-on-one help as they draft and write their essays. Instead, students meet with a faculty in small groups a few times during the semester on campus. Activities may include peer-reviewing a student-essay as a group where the facilitator guides students as they review and revise the essay. Students then apply these skills to revise and edit their own essays at home.

Most community colleges require their students to take two English composition courses in their freshman year. The hMOOC would ideal for basic writers taking their second English composition course; that is for students who have had some prior experience in writing an academic college essay or students who have completed their first English composition course, in-class, a fMOOC or a IMOOC. Although the hMOOC provides flexibility for community college students who hold jobs, we recommend it for students who are highly motivated as a lot of the online course work has to be done independently. We also recommend that institutions provide adequate training to students to use the online platform efficiently.

Blended classrooms provide a nice balance between online and face-to-face discussions. Meeting small groups in person are helpful as basic writers rely heavily on "verbal and nonverbal communication techniques" from the teacher and peers to gain assurance in their work (Balmuth, 1986). Additionally, personal contact from time to time encourages students to stay on course and complete it.

We recommend that hMOOCs implement collaborative activities and ensure a good social presence online. Bonk and Khoo (2014), in their book, *Adding some TEC-VARIETY: 100+ Activities for Motivating and Retaining Learners Online*, provide several tips and suggestions for enhancing teaching and learning to motivate students and teachers and increase retention in the online courses.

Flipped MOOC or fMOOC

In the fMOOC, basic writers meet with their instructor regularly in class during its scheduled hours. However, instead of listening to lectures in class, students watch the video lectures online as part of their homework. The class time, instead, is used for students to discuss and conference with their instructor.

Flipping classwork and homework allows basic writers to have quality time to interact with the instructor in the classroom. Although fMOOC seems like an ideal platform for basic writers, we recommend fMOOC for basic writers who are mature, disciplined and motivated as the success of the course depends on students doing their homework regularly and coming prepared to class.

Since the size of the fMOOC is limited to the usual class size at the community college, it is not any more cost effective than the regular classes. The advantage, however, is that students can get more one-on-one quality time and feedback from their classroom instructor.

Mini MOOC or mMOOC

A mMOOC is short course lasting anywhere between three and six weeks. mMOOC addresses one or two specific aspects of basic writing. Basic writers tend to learn new

information better when it is presented in small manageable chunks (Bandi-Rao, 2013). In a mMOOC course, basic learners are exposed to well-written student essays that serve as authentic models of college writing, academic discourse, and culture. Reading of each sample essay is followed by multiple choice questions that direct the student's attention to various aspects of expository writing—audience, ideas, organization, arguments, evidence, transitions, coherence, formal language, vocabulary, etc. These sample essays progress from simple narratives to more complex rhetorical modes. A similar course can be offered on critical reading and critical thinking.

Since the exercises are mostly multiple-choice, they can be machine graded, which in turn, allows any number of writers, not just basic writers, across community colleges in the United States to enroll. Students are more engaged when they receive immediate feedback on their exercises and tests.

The short duration of a mMOOC has the potential to decrease the drop-out rates that semester-long MOOCs currently experience. In addition to giving students a sense of accomplishment, they also provide basic learners an idea of what a semester-long MOOC entails. As in the previous MOOCs mentioned, the mMOOC is also limited to basic writers. However, in the mMOOC, basic writers from other two-year colleges can also enroll in the course.

MOOC Workshops or MOOCw

MOOCw is a weekend workshop that covers one or two peripheral components of writing (e.g., avoiding plagiarism, overcoming writer's block, using common punctuations correctly, MLA format, etc.). Addressing peripheral topics separately allows the classroom instructor to maintain focus on essay writing as basic writers can work on these writing

components at their own convenience. Since these peripheral components are general, anyone can enroll in this workshop.

As in the mMOOC, students watch video lectures, read examples, work on practice exercises, discuss on a group forum, and take a test at the end. Since the responses to questions are quantitative in nature, students receive immediate feedback as the tests are machine graded.

Students enroll in a specific MOOCw on a need basis or on the recommendation of the instructor from a semester long MOOC. Because MOOCw is a short workshop, students would be more likely to commit to it. As students learn new information in small steps, they gain confidence by mastering one step at a time.

Below is a table that presents the key distinguishing features each of the five variations of MOOCs discussed above.

Table 1 about here

Conclusion

Many high-school graduates are underprepared for college, and MOOCs offer one avenue to help close the college readiness gap. President Barak Obama, in his 2009 American Graduation Initiative, draws attention to the significant role community colleges will play in educating and preparing students for future jobs; "Earning a post-secondary degree or credential is no longer just a pathway to opportunity for a talented few; rather, it is a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy" ("Higher Education. The White House," n.d.). President Obama's goal is to increase graduation rates at community colleges by 5 million by 2020 ("Higher Education. The White House," n.d.). Without a doubt, new and improved approaches

for designing, teaching, and assessing college readiness courses have become the need of the hour. Community colleges now have to face the challenge of providing access while maintaining the quality of learning (Perin, 2006).

Arguably, MOOCs are successful at providing free (or low cost) education. However, they are not well suited for courses that require personalized feedback, such as a course for basic writers. Given what we have learned about MOOC education in the past few years, we are starting to see changes taking place that address specific learner needs. For instance, Auh Yoon-il (2014) proposed the “one culture MOOC” or ocMOOC in Korea, in an attempt to have a more homogenous student population—so the course content can be fine-tuned and made more meaningful to the students. An ocMOOC, in turn, may increase the retention and completion rates for students. Similarly, we proposed five unique MOOCs that could be valuable for basic writers—lMOOC, hMOOC, fMOOC, mMOOC, and MOOCw.

Given the unique needs of the basic writers, current MOOCs are not beneficial in developing their writing skills. However, the specialized MOOCs that we propose (lMOOC, hMOOC, fMOOC, mMOOC, and MOOCw), offer the frameworks and support that basic writers need. Overall, past literature and data on basic writing offer a strong foundation on how to design and operate MOOCs that meet the needs of specific populations or groups of learners.

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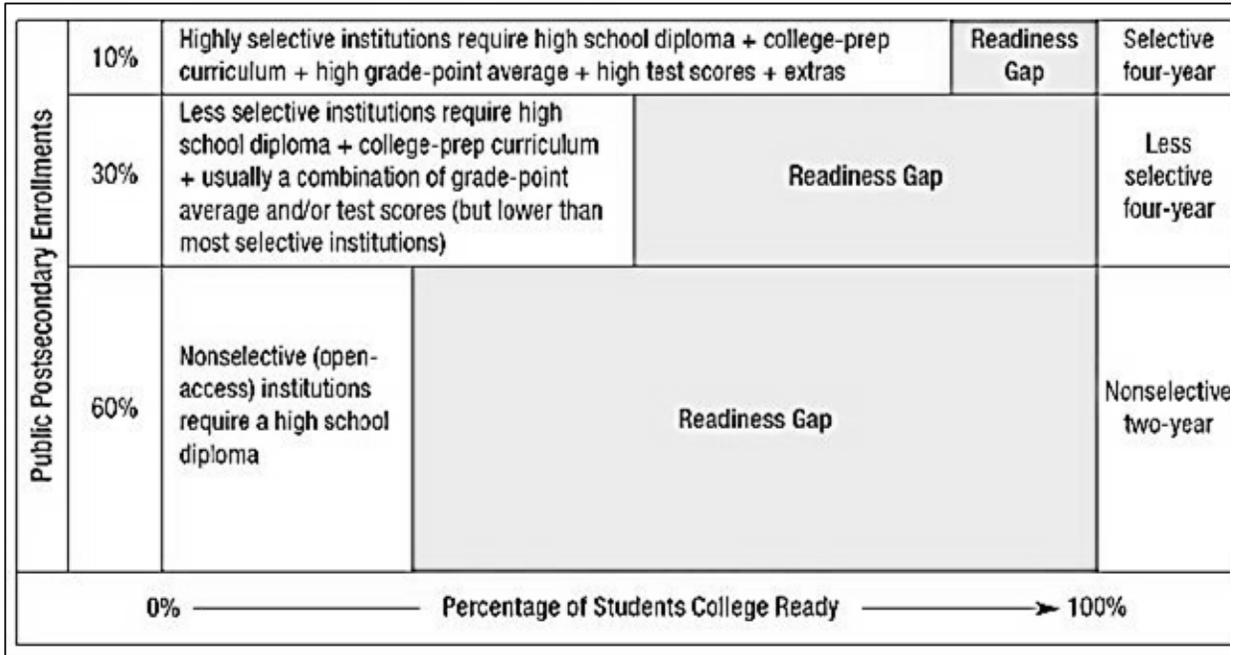


Figure 1. The readiness gap by institutional sector (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (U.S.), 2013).

	IMOOC (limited MOOC)	hMOOOC (hybrid MOOC)	fMOOC (flipped MOOC)	mMOOC (mini MOOC)	MOOCw (MOOC workshop)
Duration	semester	semester	semester	2 to 6 weeks	weekend
Online/Hybrid	hybrid	hybrid	hybrid	online	online
Class size	limited	limited	limited	limited	not limited
Content	academic essay writing for basic writers	academic essay writing for basic writers	academic essay writing for basic writers	academic literacy skills for basic writers (e.g., critical writing, reading, and thinking)	review topics about essay writing (e.g., plagiarism, overcoming writer's block, MLA format)
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ personalized feedback from trained tutors ▪ addresses needs of basic writers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ small group meetings with instructor in person ▪ addresses needs of basic writers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ personalized feedback from instructor ▪ quality time with instructor in class ▪ addresses needs of basic writers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ immediate feedback (computer graded) ▪ addresses needs of basic writers ▪ duration of course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ immediate feedback (computer graded) ▪ enrollment open for anyone ▪ duration of course
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ additional cost for a large number of tutors ▪ course limited to basic writers within individual colleges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ coordinate group meetings on campus or at learning hubs ▪ course limited to basic writers within individual colleges 	identifying basic writers who are mature, disciplined and motivated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ no personalized feedback ▪ course limited to basic writers from any two-year college 	no personalized feedback

Table 1. Comparison of the key features of the five MOOCs recommended for basic writers.