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What the death of MOOCs has taught us.

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Regional

What the death of MOOCs has taught us

One of the loudest hypes in the history of higher education has been all the chat about MOOCs. The idea of Massive Open Online Courses was launched five years ago when Stanford University announced that by using Internet-based technologies they would be able to offer college classes for free.

Imagine, a world-class university offering a free education from the comfort of your home, one that didn't require any admission tests or high school transcripts. The possibilities were so exciting that immediately there was talk about the final revolution in higher education – the end of colleges and universities as we know them.

People associated with these initiatives founded companies aimed at capitalizing on this concept. Some at Stanford established Udacity and Coursera, while the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard joined forces to create edX.

Excitement over MOOCs spread among leaders in higher education. After all, many thought, if the big names like Harvard and Stanford were involved then it had to be a great idea. Besides, what could be wrong with something that was free? And what could be wrong with an initiative that fed into that part of the American psyche that believes that for all problems there is always a technological solution?

But questions started to arise. To begin with, although thousands registered for these courses, the completion rates were abysmal. In most cases less than 2 percent of enrollees actually finished

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the courses. Further, virtually all of that miniscule minority who completed the courses were people who already had a college degree, were financially well off and were technologically savvy.

A number of scholarly studies were conducted confirming not only the fact that these courses worked well for only a small elite, but also that they failed the people who were supposed to be helped the most, including low income, rural and first-generation college students

To make things worse, many faculty members balked at the idea of MOOCs. For them, this was not the way to prepare students for a comprehensive education that required, among other things, discussions employing critical thinking (not vulgar blogging) and hands-on experiences. Logistical problems were also identified. How could you determine that the person taking the exams online, sometimes thousands of miles away, was actually the person enrolled in the course?

This is not surprising. These are among the very same problems that have faced distance education since its inception in 1728 when Caleb Phillips created the first correspondence course aimed at teaching students short hand through weekly mailed lessons.

The business model of the MOOCs also came

into question. After all, how do you make money off something being offered for free? That is when some of the providers began charging registration fees for the courses, and even promising a degree by taking a determined number of courses. As the writer Michael Shea put it, "By offering courses that are near-impossible to fail and charging up-front fees for worthless certificates, Coursera is simply running a high-tech version of the kind of scams that have been run by correspondence colleges for decades."

With this new money making agenda firmly in place, the very people who started these companies moved elsewhere to other initiatives ranging from researching human aging to developing flying cars (no, I am not making up the last one). Even the companies they created have moved into other businesses. Udacity has now shifted its focus to job-skills training. And while Coursera and edX remain in the business of education, they are still searching for ways to make money from MOOCs.

Even politicians who were pushing MOOCs as an alternative to funding higher education with state money have mostly abandoned their attempts to legislate the use of those courses for public education.

Although some may argue that what we have learned from the failure of MOOCs is not surprising given the similar failures of distance education in the past, there is a much more profound lesson that we have failed to grasp. That lesson is that education is a human activity, one that requires personal interaction.

There will always, of course, be a handful of people who for a number of different circumstances are capable of learning by themselves. But they are usually an elite group who grew up in a family environment that prized that kind of entrepreneurship. They are also much more likely to have access to and be competent with technological resources.

This description does not match the majority of people, and certainly not the kind of people who need higher education the most. These people need experienced educators capable of guiding them through the difficulties of grasping complex ideas and developing high-level skills.

For years Japan, an industrialized nation with a large population of older people who require high levels of medical services, has tried to overcome their shortage of health providers by developing robots that are supposed to act as nurses. Just Google "robot nurses" and you will find a plethora of videos portraying these robots. Have they worked? Certainly not. People in pain need the kind of attention that can only exist among human beings.

The same can be said about education. After all, when we teach we are not just downloading the memory of one computer into another. We are helping to form that most complex of systems – the human being.

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