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The Learner Who Took Advantage of the Openness in MOOCs

Mary and her demanding Pomeranian, Becca, live deep in the heart of Texas. Exclaiming “I have a passion for the law!” when I called her on her landline, the 34-year-old Austin resident told us she had once seriously considered going to law school and had even aced her LSAT, the law school entrance exam used by universities in the United States. But after finishing four intense years earning a bachelor’s degree, she had decided to wait a bit. “Law school just didn’t seem like a good choice at the time,” she reflected. Five years later, Mary had settled into her work as a business consultant. Although her interest in the law was still keen and she’d never completely given up the dream of law school, it had been tempered with a bit of realism. “I don’t know if I can afford to spend another three years in the classroom,” she confided, and “I don’t know if I still have the same passion for the legal industry as I did five years ago.”

Mary had first learned about MOOCs during a hot afternoon enjoying frozen mango margaritas with a friend and shortly thereafter signed up for a number of courses, dabbling in some

and promptly forgetting about others. One day, an ad for ContractsX, a course on contract law taught by a Harvard professor, popped up on her screen and she decided to “give it a shot.” What did she have to lose? “It’s a free class, taught at one of the more well-respected institutions—why not?” she added with a laugh.

The course was flexible and fit into her busy life. On Saturday mornings, she told us, she would sit in her office with Becca by her side and a warm cup of dark roast coffee in her hand and watch the Harvard law lectures on her trusted iPad. These weren’t just any lectures, however; Professor Fried was an engaging storyteller, a master of his trade who used short, interesting, and memorable stories to teach concepts related to contract law. “I can’t believe that I’m sitting here,” Mary recalled thinking, “learning this material from Harvard Law!” The fast-paced content made the course challenging, Mary acknowledged, and she didn’t always do as well as she would have liked on the quizzes. But because she was able to go back to review the answers and re-watch the videos, this didn’t worry her too much, and she ended up passing the course with flying colors. Proud of her certificate of accomplishment, Mary reported that her success in the course “makes me want to keep coming back for more!”

Even though it was a personal rather than professional interest in the law that led Mary to sign up for this course, she found what she learned in the course was helpful when dealing with contracts in her own job and had enthusiastically recommended the course to coworkers and friends. She was currently taking a number of other open courses and was anxiously awaiting the second version of the contracts course. As a result of the course, Mary’s self-confidence had increased: “I never thought of applying to Harvard. There was no way I

would be getting in. But then, five years later, I'm taking a course from Harvard. I wouldn't say that I'm a Harvard law student, but at least now I could sit across from a Harvard law student and have a clear conversation with them. It's very rewarding to know that."

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Mary's passion for the law came through loud and clear in her story. But even though she would have loved to pursue a law degree, she considered the cost and time required prohibitive and worried that even with stellar LSAT scores, she might not get into the law school of her choice. The openness of MOOCs allowed her to study a subject she was passionate about without these risks, costs, and commitments. But what, exactly, does "open" mean in this context, and how did it allow Mary to pursue her interest in the law?

MOOC providers most commonly use the term "open" in the acronym to mean that MOOCs are free of the cost and entrance requirements typical of university courses. Yet this understanding falls somewhat short of the ideals of the open education movement, which is based on the belief that open access, open educational resources, and open scholarship will allow "individuals who might otherwise never have the opportunity to experience post-secondary learning a free and open chance to participate" (Wiley and Green 2012, 88). The open education movement has a "strong ideological basis rooted in an ethical pursuit for democratization, fundamental human rights, equality, and justice" (Veletsianos and Kimmons 2012, 172) and views openness as a means of achieving democratic and socially valuable ends. In 2001, MIT took a step toward fulfilling such aims with their OpenCourseWare initiative, which made instructional materials from a number of courses freely available online. Khan Academy, which Siemens (2013)

describes as a “quasi-MOOC,” took this yet a step further by adding a course-like structure to its collection of open access videos, activities, and assessments. MOOCs, having evolved from these two initiatives, brought together freely available materials from universities and bundled them into a format resembling traditional university courses.

Declaring 2012 the “Year of the MOOC” (Pappano 2012), the *New York Times* touted MOOCs as a means of providing greater access to learning opportunities (particularly to courses offered by highly ranked universities) and as a step toward broadening participation and access to education. When Coursera began in 2012, its website described its vision as providing the world with “access to the world-class education that has so far been available only to a select few.” For lifelong learners like Mary without the time or financial means to take more traditional courses, MOOCs allow access to world-renowned professors. For others, MOOCs may be their only access to higher education. In another headline-grabbing piece, the *New York Times* shared the inspirational story of Battushig Myanganbayar, a 15-year-old from Mongolia whose perfect score in MIT’s Circuits and Electronics MOOC earned him the opportunity to attend MIT in person (Pappano 2013). Similar stories continued to garner media interest: in 2015, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* interviewed Jima Ngei, who lived in Nigeria and had completed more than 250 MOOCs (Digital Campus 2015). All these aspirational stories align with the stated goal of the MOOC movement, which according to edX president Anant Agarwal, “is to educate a billion people around the world” (edX 2012) and make education “borderless, gender-blind, race-blind, class-blind, and bank account-blind” (Agarwal 2013).

Yet, while expanding learning opportunities to those without access is a laudable goal, the accomplishments of learners like Battushig and Jima are far from the norm. For the most part, the learners who take MOOCs are already well served by higher education. Studies have repeatedly shown that MOOC participants are, by and large, highly educated, gainfully employed residents of developed countries (see, e.g., Christensen et al. 2013; Ho et al. 2014; Hansen and Reich 2015). Online learning, no matter how open, cannot reach learners without a computer, access to the internet, support structures to aid their learning/studies, and enough leisure time to develop, let alone pursue, learning goals. As online learning expert John Daniel states, “It is a myth to think that providing not-for-credit open online learning from the USA will address the challenges of expanding higher education in the developing world” (2012, 15).

MOOCs may not live up to edX’s claim of making education “borderless,” but what of its claims of making it gender, race, class, and bank-account blind? When Hansen and Reich (2015) studied data from all the MOOCs run by Harvard and MIT over a two-year period, including demographic data on more than 160,000 participants, they found that the ratio of male to female participants was similar to those in traditional higher education settings. The implication of this finding is that MOOCs have not made education gender-blind but have rather replicated, or reflected, the inequities of higher education systems. Their study also found that MOOCs, rather than being class- or income-blind, tended to enroll students who lived in more affluent neighborhoods and had higher than average levels of education. This was particularly true for learners who completed the course and earned a certificate, something for which MOOCs are increasingly charging a fee.

Although Mary was happy to pay \$60 for the “verified certificate” that she proudly hung on her wall, even a nominal cost is prohibitive to many, and fees of any sort negate the premise that the “openness” in MOOCs means being free of charge.

Although Battushig remained a fan of MOOCs after becoming a student at MIT and still took them in his spare time, he also had some criticisms that point to some of their limitations (Young 2016). One of these was that being able to take a MOOC offered by one of the world’s leading universities is not the same as taking an actual course there, most importantly in the ability to meet with a professor. In MOOCs, access to a professor is generally limited to watching prerecorded lectures; although some MOOC professors interact with students via forums and a few offer office hours, rarely are they accessible in the same way they would be to a fee-paying student in a physical or online classroom. As we saw in chapter 7, interaction and community are central to effective online learning, and even though some learners feel like they learned a lot, the lack of interaction between learners and instructors may not only leave some learners behind but may also exclude the contributions that faculty members bring to interaction, such as scaffolding and correcting misconceptions. Another of Battushig’s observations revealed what may be a certain naïveté in the ideals and claims of both the MOOC and the open movement: “I think at the peak of the MOOC, everyone was excited about the opportunity to learn more. That’s an amazing thing. It’s the same as, you’re provided the free book, and you can just read it a lot of times. But in those books, no one teaches you how to solve problems in your community, and that itself will discourage underprivileged people from taking a MOOC. For the underprivileged people, the learning more

is almost like a punishment because it reminds you more about the resource restrictions.”

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- MOOCs are partially aligned with the open education movement.
- While some learners may be successful with MOOCs, for the most part these initiatives have not “democratized” education on a global scale as originally predicted and anticipated by proponents.
- Some research shows that MOOCs reflect and replicate existing inequities, lending support to the argument that technocentric solutions are rarely sufficient to address structural issues.

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