Chapter 1
A Typology of MOOCS

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ABSTRACT

Writing instruction MOOCs up until this point have tended to follow what has become expected of a MOOC in that they convey content first and foremost, or they have attempted to translate a traditional classroom space into an online space. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such practices, this chapter argues that there are opportunities for us to rethink the possibilities of an online space for writing instruction by considering what the benefits and drawbacks of three current MOOC models while also proposing two more. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future MOOC iterations.

INTRODUCTION

Massive Open Online Courses have generated a fair amount of both hype and critique. The narrative is familiar. As Steven Krause described in the 2014 epilogue to the edited collection *Invasion of the MOOCs*, in November 2012, Laura Pappano declared in The New York Times that it was the year of the MOOC, and by November 2013, MOOC guru and Udacity founder Sebastian Thrun in an interview with Fast Company stated, “I was realizing, we don’t educate people as others wished, or as I wished. We have a lousy product” (Chafkin, 2013). And just as quickly as a failed startup or disappointing Kickstarter campaign, MOOCs disruptive reign was over.

Or was it.

During that moment of promise and since, three notable composition MOOCs appeared:

- Georgia Tech (Coursera) First Year Composition 2.0.
- The Ohio State University (Coursera) Writing II: Rhetorical Composing.
- Duke University (Coursera) English Composition 1: Achieving Expertise.

At the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Karen Head, Rebecca Burnett, Kay Halasek, and Denise Comer spoke about their experiences designing and teaching these MOOCs, reflecting on how well (or not) each followed the CCCC position statement on online writing instruction.

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A Typology of MOOCS (CCCC, 2013), as well as tweaks to work through the constraints of the Coursera software. These courses used a model of direct instruction usually through videos, followed by discussion, writing practice, then peer review and peer grading (see Figure 1).

Many MOOCs convey content first and foremost, or, they have attempted to translate a traditional classroom space into an online space. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such practices, I argue that there are opportunities for us to rethink the possibilities of an online space for writing instruction by considering what the benefits and drawbacks of five MOOC models.

BACKGROUND

Georgia Tech’s, Ohio State’s, and Duke’s MOOCs are reasonable examples of how to structure delivery of online writing instruction. However, were they “good” writing courses? I’m not going to claim these MOOCs are or aren’t “good” because for the last ten years, I have taught over sixty sections of writing over 10 week terms to a relatively small number of students in face-to-face writing classes, with fairly challenging and play-tested assignments, pedagogically responsive scaffolding, and a combination of peer and instructor review and evaluation, culminating in a reflective portfolio assessment, and I could not say with any certainty whether the outcomes of student learning and retention come next year would be better or worse than those from these MOOCs. We like to think it is better, but the evidence is rarely conclusive. As Edward White (1989) states, “there is no replicated design in existence for demonstrating that any writing instructional program in fact improves student writing, if we define writing in a sophisticated way” (p. 198).

It is not for lack of trying, however. Many research methodologies have been enacted to get at what students learn about writing and how they learn it. Studies from the 1970s and 1980s looked at improvements in specific language features such t-units (Stewart, 1978) or errors (Maimon & Nodine, 1979), but these do not capture the “sophisticated ways” of writing that White (1989) refers to. In the 1990s, some longitudinal case studies of writers were conducted trying to capture the complexities of learning to write, such as Chiseri-Strater (1991)’s two case studies or Wolcott’s (1991) study of basic writers; however, these lack insight into instructional design beyond the individual cases and, frankly, case studies are