Chapter 10
Developmental Writing and MOOCs:
Reconsidering Access, Remediation, and Development in Large-Scale Online Writing Instruction

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ABSTRACT
Online education has created a path for universities to expand their geographical and financial bases, per se, by creating virtual classrooms in which students can be present from anywhere, at virtually any time, and do not require the cost of housing facilities, dining, and other expenses that universities (and students) incur beyond the cost of their education itself. The effects of this geographical and financial expansion are far reaching—more so than we sometimes imagine. If we apply this expanse to the multifaceted concept of access, and narrow that focus to one of the most at-risk student populations—developmental writers—we can clearly map connections and complications between location, politics, and pedagogy, all of which have a direct effect on the students and faculty who occupy these online classroom spaces. Here, access becomes most complicated, because it represents in part a geographical and political open door into an education that was previously inaccessible; however, in examining the ways in which some online educational spaces have ultimately developed, the political and financial benefits of MOOCs and other online learning spaces for universities often directly contest disciplinary pedagogies and accepted methods of student support (i.e. small class sizes, individual attention), especially in the case of developmental writers and other at-risk student populations. Ultimately, the relationship of developmental writing and MOOCs in the field’s discussions of 21st century literacies, pedagogy, and student success, and in practice, serves to complicate or fully redefine our field’s concept of remediation and development, and in doing so, assists us re-thinking the development of large-scale online writing instruction at institutions that do not have the need or resources for creating a writing MOOC specifically.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1718-4.ch010
INTRODUCTION

The advent of online education has produced numerous intersections between concepts once limited to the context of the “traditional” or “seated” university environment. It has, effectively, redefined our understanding of learning, interaction, voice, access, and countless other pedagogical and disciplinary attributes. Furthermore, online education has created a path for universities to expand their geographical and financial bases, per se, by creating virtual classrooms in which students can be present from anywhere, at virtually any time, and do not require the cost of housing facilities, dining, and other expenses that universities (and students) incur beyond the cost of their education itself. The effects of this geographical and financial expansion are far reaching—more so than we sometimes imagine.

If we apply this expanse to the multifaceted concept of access, and narrow that focus to one of the most at-risk student populations—developmental writers—we can clearly map connections and complications between location, politics, and pedagogy, all of which have a direct effect on the students and faculty who occupy these online classroom spaces. Here, access becomes most complicated, because it represents in part a geographical and political open door into an education that was previously inaccessible; however, in examining the ways in which some online educational spaces have ultimately developed, the political and financial benefits of MOOCs and other online learning spaces for universities often directly contest disciplinary pedagogies and accepted methods of student support (i.e. small class sizes, individual attention), especially in the case of developmental writers and other at-risk student populations. In short, MOOCs were born from a desire for access, but the context of developmental writing specifically, the presence of MOOCs either in the field’s discussions of 21st century literacies, pedagogy, and student success, or in practice, serves to complicate or fully redefine our field’s concepts of access, remediation, and development. From this perspective, large-scale online writing instruction can be successful if it enhances and interacts with students’ extant 21st century literacies, is designed from the perspective of Thomas and Brown’s (2011) A New Culture of Learning, where “people belong in order to learn”, and takes into account the various ways that our students’ 21st century literacies serve to reconstruct and to complicate access, remediation, and development in the context of writing instruction, and in doing so, assists us re-thinking the development of large-scale online writing instruction at institutions that do not have the need or resources for creating a writing MOOC specifically.

Beginnings

When we consider the history of writing MOOCs, we can learn much about the concepts of access, development, and remediation from the experiences of Kay Halasek et al. (2014), and of Diane Comer (2014), who provided detailed accounts of the processes and experiences inherent to building and instructing writing MOOCs. Both projects took the approach of modified cMOOCs (based in active dialogue and interaction between participants), which tends to be the preferred modality for MOOCs and other large-scale online writing instruction (Halasek et al., 2014; Comer, 2014; Porter, 2014). Because those courses were predicated on the notion of connectivity and interaction, the experiences of both instructors and students in those learning environments ultimately challenged many presumptions about the teaching of writing that writing instructors hold. Halasek et al framed these presumptions in the Lyotardian concept of grand narratives—a framework that successfully highlights the authority that our field places on experiences. Halasek et al (2014) explain, “the intertwined professional narratives to which we subscribed—the Teacher Knows Best narrative and the Attentive Student narrative—were
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