



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

June 26, 2013

If I were in this business as a business, I wouldn't be in this business.

Morris Philipson, director of the University of Chicago Press from 1967 to 2000, on discussing university publishing.

An Avalanche is Coming: While the quote above applies equally well to public universities, it is nonetheless the case that we need to keep seeking funds in order to be able to deliver on our mission. How that mission is changing is discussed in [the report from the Institute for Public Policy Research](#), which identifies potential game changers for higher education: 1) The global economy is changing, 2) The global economy is suffering, 3) The cost of higher education is increasing faster than inflation, 4) Meanwhile, the value of a degree is falling, 5) Content is ubiquitous, and finally 6) The competition is heating up.

To “seize the future,” the report proposes that universities attend to the following themes: 1) Relevance is not everything, 2) Distinctiveness matters, 3) It’s hard to please all of the students all of the time, 4) Much of the value added won’t be content, 5) Close the theory/practice gap, 6) The three- or four-year, full-time degree course is no longer standard, 7) Relationships with the city or region are becoming increasingly important, and 8) As the monopoly over awarding degrees breaks down, universities need to consider their true value.

Feedback on a MOOC by One of Our Own: One of our UNM faculty colleagues sent me the following message:

I am currently enrolled in a [Massive Open Online Course] titled, "Systems Biology," which is taught by a very prominent member of the field at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, and offered through Coursera. I enrolled in the course for two reasons: First, I had negative feelings about MOOCs, primarily because of my fear that they would result in the "outsourcing" of my job as a professor; however, I wanted to gain an educated view of the process before forming a final opinion. Second, I am quite interested in the subject, which lies on the perimeter of my own field, which is molecular cell biology. I have to say that my view has been totally changed by the experience. The quality of the course is quite good, and is well organized. If a student of my department was to complete all of the assignments and exams, I would be very confident that she/he had a good introductory level of knowledge in the field—not ready to do research, but certainly ready to take a graduate course in the subject. However, one very important thing that I have gained from the MOOC is a new perspective of what it is like to be a student, and to have to listen to a lecturer who is disseminating material for which I will be responsible in an exam setting. This is much different from the seminars and conference lectures that I attend. While my attention span may be somewhat affected by my age, about 15 minutes is the length I can attentively listen to the lecturer before I start tuning out—something that experts in the education field have been saying now for a number of years, while I still continue to give 50 minute and 75 minute lectures. While I try to break things up with iclickers, personal stories, asking the students questions, etc., the MOOC format of the course I am taking where all lectures are 8-15 minutes in length is extremely powerful. At the end of the 15 minutes, I can take a 2-5 minute break, and come back totally refreshed to go on. This has led to a much higher engagement for the next 15 minute segment and a much greater level of comprehension. A key difference here is that unlike many of the students in my lectures, who are on their computers or other devices while listening to me in the lecture hall, I am sitting at my computer and listening to the lecturer while taking notes in preparation for the quiz that I know is coming up at the end of the section. Thus, I am going to institute such a feedback system into my own lectures to increase the engagement process, while also instituting 15-minute maximum length to my lectures segments, broken up 3-4 minute breaks.

Thus, by engaging in the process myself, my entire view of the MOOC as a learning tool has been changed, but I have also learned a lot about how to become a better teacher (and learner) from the process. There are many other issues still to consider, not the least of which is the issue of intellectual property and who owns one's MOOC—the University or the faculty member. But as far as the issue of the MOOC as a useful tool is concerned, I would strongly consider teaching a course where the students enrolled in the MOOC while taking my course and I then had the freedom to augment and extend the material in the MOOC to fit my own course objectives.

MOOCs and the Humanities: I can hear the loud objections already: MOOCs might work for the sciences but what about the arts and humanities? [Here are similar concerns](#). In fact, the humanities may feel under attack everywhere and not just because of online education and the constant drumbeat about the need for STEM majors. [The report from a Harvard committee](#) maps the current challenges but also a path forward for the arts and humanities. More importantly however, employers want critical thinkers, and more than technical skills, as discussed in [the survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities](#).

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