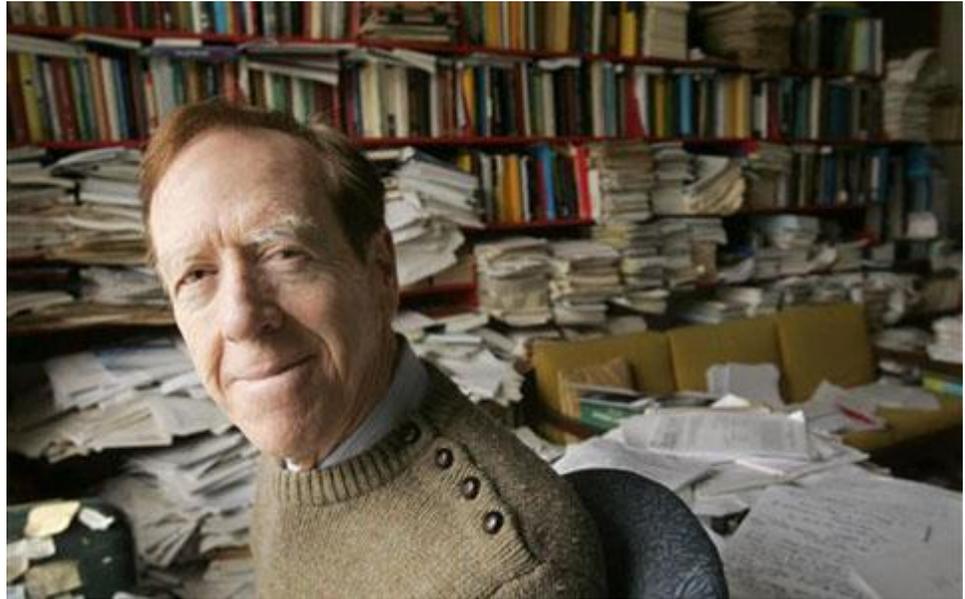


Getting a Free Education, in Huge Online Classes

AP
Math professor
Gilbert Strang at the
Massachusetts Institute
of Technology is among
educators involved in
massive open online
courses



This is the VOA
Special English
Education Report.

A class with tens or even hundreds of thousands of students might sound like a teacher's bad dream. But a big idea in higher education these days is the massive open online course, or MOOC.

Some universities offer free, non-credit MOOCs available to anyone in the world. Others charge for courses and provide credits. The idea is still developing.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently started its first MOOC. The school plans to offer many free, non-credit courses through a project called MITx.

So far, most massive open online courses are in computer science, technology, mechanics and engineering. For example, students around the world are taking a free course called "Building a Computer Search Engine." Two computer scientists, Sebastian Thrun and David Evans, are offering this course through udacity.com.

Mr. Evans is on leave from the University of Virginia, where he is an associate professor. Mr. Thrun is a Stanford research professor and a Google Fellow best known for his work on a driverless car.

There are no education requirements for the course. The students watch short videos. Then, says Mr. Evans, they take informal, ungraded quizzes after the videos each week for six weeks.

DAVID EVANS: "Quizzes are part of the lecture to keep students engaged and keep them thinking, for students to be able to check that they understood what we covered. Those are not graded and students try those as often as they want."

They can repeatedly watch the videos and take the quizzes whenever they want.

Students receive homework. They join online groups to exchange questions and answers about the course.

The teachers hold virtual office hours to answer questions that the students have voted to send them. They also present their own questions and observations.

The students take a final examination to show where they rate in the class. Everyone who finishes the course receives a grade and proof of completion. Top students get letters documenting their work.

Mr. Thrun started Udacity, which supports free MOOCs. Udacity hopes to make a profit in the future by connecting possible employers with interested students. On his Stanford homepage he says he wants to "democratize" education. Education, he says, should be free, accessible for all, everywhere and any time.

So how does David Evans compare the education in MOOCs to traditional teaching?

DAVID EVANS: "There are things that we can do better in the online format. We can certainly deliver high-quality education to so much more students at much lower cost ."

But he recognizes the limits.

DAVID EVANS: "Part of what I hope will happen as a result of this is that the best traditional universities will be able to focus on the things they can do really well that can't be done better through an online university."

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report, written by Jerilyn Watson. I'm Bob Doughty.