

Another Look at Massive Online Open Courses



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This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

Last week, we talked about Massive Open Online Courses, also called MOOCs. Tens of thousands, or even more, people can take these classes all at once. You can be anywhere in the world to take a MOOC. All you need is a computer and a network connection.

MOOCs add to a tradition of what is known as distance learning. For years, many colleges have offered classes that are taught partly or mostly online. MOOCs are available in subjects like computer science, engineering or mechanics. Can MOOCs in subjects like arts or the humanities be as effective?

Scott Anderson teaches philosophy at the University of British Columbia in Canada. He sees both good and bad sides to MOOCs.

SCOTT ANDERSON: "There are parts that will be fine, insofar as mostly when students listen to a lecture, there is no special reason why they need to be physically present to hear and get it. There is certainly no reason why they need to be physically present to get the readings and to think about these things."

Mr. Anderson says increased numbers of students in MOOCs can mean less communication between them and teachers. He says two ways to deal with this are by adding more teachers and setting up online discussion groups.

Lisa Jadwin teaches English and American literature and writing at St. John Fisher College in New York. She says online education has some weaknesses for her subjects.

LISA JADWIN: "What's lost in online education is face-to-face interaction. And the teaching of literature is an interactive face-to-face discipline. And that old-fashioned approach is not going to be unseated very quickly by computer-aided instruction."

Professor Jadwin says some students could learn very well from talks and reading assignments, blogs and discussion groups. But she believes that hybrid courses work best. She describes hybrids as mixing face-to-face course elements with computer-aided teaching and writing projects.

Bill Pogue teaches communications at the University of Houston-Downtown. He says that after leading classes for more than thirty years, he would not attempt to teach a MOOC. However, Mr. Pogue sees good value in online education. He noted a strong sense of community in an online course he once took. He said the students worked together on a project while living on four continents.

BILL POGUE: "I just thought that was really exciting, would hardly be able even to be replicated in a single, traditional classroom or face-to-face setting."

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report, written by Jerilyn Watson. For transcripts, MP3s and now PDFs of our programs for e-readers, go to voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Christopher Cruise.