

MOOCs as a Professional Development Tool for Librarians

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Abstract

This article explores how reference and instructional librarians taking over new areas of subject responsibility can develop professional expertise using new eLearning tools called MOOCs. MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses – are a new online learning model that offers free higher education courses to anyone with an Internet connection and a keen interest to learn. As MOOCs proliferate, librarians have the opportunity to leverage this technology to improve their professional skills.

Keywords

professional development; continuing education; online learning; eLearning; MOOCs

Introduction

As librarians know, the face of education is changing rapidly – and the nature of continuing education is no exception. Technological developments in the delivery of virtual learning combined with the pervasiveness of Internet connectivity have created a perfect storm for changing how we learn. But despite the seemingly infinite potential for online learning, librarians seeking professional development opportunities are faced with the ever-present challenge of how to maintain and enhance their professional skills while balancing work demands and limited funds.

Since my career has generally clustered around reference and instructional librarianship, I became interested in a particular type of continuing education pertinent to my area of work. How do librarians cope with taking over new areas of subject responsibility with which they have no previous professional or scholarly experience? Despite hiring efforts to match librarians' academic background with their subject areas, in practice, subject responsibilities are switched around and redistributed to accommodate staffing shortages. And despite these shifting areas of responsibility, there doesn't seem to be a lot in the way of training or discussion on how to develop subject expertise on the job.

With that question in mind, how can eLearning tools better support librarians looking for a quick but effective way of building knowledge in a new subject?

How can we leverage these new technologies to develop a sufficient understanding of a new subject area – including its various fields of research, domain-specific terminology, and core methodologies – using online tools that are affordable and accessible?

What are MOOCs?

I began to give this topic more thought as MOOC offerings were emerging within the world of higher education. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are a new model of learning that builds on the virtual course – long offered by way of online and distance learning efforts within educational institutions – but allows courses to be taken for free by anyone, anywhere. All that is required of students is an Internet connection and a keen interest to learn (Becker).

Higher education MOOC providers offer university-level courses online with no application process and no required fees. The result is a massive number of participants around the world signing up for each course. How massive? [Udacity](#), an educational startup out of Stanford University, offered an introductory computer science class that saw over 265,000 students register last year (Evans). The number of participants is staggering.

I explored the potential for MOOCs as course offerings began gaining greater traction in early 2013. I was interested in the hype but was also curious about how effective the MOOC model was for learning and what impacts there might be for librarians. To date, I have signed up for three separate courses via [Coursera](#), one of the major players on the MOOC landscape – and another initiative by educators from Stanford University (Waters 22).

My Experience with MOOCs

Having participated in *Passion-Driven Statistics* from Wesleyan University, *Principles of Macroeconomics* from the University of Melbourne, and *Introduction to Finance* from the University of Michigan, I can now count myself among an illustrious – albeit not exclusive – group of people. This includes American author and editor John Warner, Canadian journalist Jesse Brown, and tens of thousands of others (Warner; Brown). What is our common bond? We have all dropped out of our MOOCs. Along with class sizes, MOOC dropout rates are also significant. The number of students signing up versus the number who complete a given course can be as high as 90% (Rivard).

Despite being a MOOC dropout, I still managed to get quite a bit out of the courses I took. Thanks to the partial work I put in, I am now able to:

- Load a library data file in SAS, create basic PROC statements and develop secondary data sets
- Describe the role of the Taylor rule in understanding the relationship between inflation and real interest rates and calculate its value

- Understand the time value of money and calculate future value both for lump sum amounts and for annuities

Were I a librarian pursuing better subject expertise in economics or finance, or tasked with helping students use data sets effectively for their research, I'd be much better off for having done (or at least, begun) these courses. I'd be confident in my ability to speak with faculty about their instructional needs, present information literacy sessions to students, and assist with research. The introductory nature of the courses, which assumed no prior knowledge of the field, allowed me to take a survey-level view of the major concepts within a subject. I learned about the key concepts, scholars, and terminology that define the field. I was able to follow the course content at my own pace, re-watch sections of the lectures that covered tricky concepts, interact with an enormous number of engaged students from around the world, and demonstrate what I'd learned through some rather well-designed online quizzes and assessment tools.

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And beyond just subject specialization for reference librarians, there are other potential uses of MOOCs for librarian professional development. I've mentioned the value of the *Passion-Driven Statistics* course I took – one example of opportunities librarians have for gaining hands-on experience with particular technologies that can help improve their reference and instructional services delivery. There is a broad range of course offerings in areas of computer science (specifically, learning new coding languages) for librarians with an interest in developing technological expertise. There are also several business and management courses that may satiate the need for librarians in managerial positions who desire a more theoretical approach to human resources management, organizational behavior, or strategic thinking.

Schools of library and information science themselves are beginning to roll out MOOCs, as well. San José State University School of Library and Information Science will be offering a course called [The Hyperlinked Library MOOC](#) in fall 2013, which explores the use of emerging technologies to serve library user communities (Hyperlinked Library MOOC, 2013). The School of Information Studies at Syracuse University is offering a MOOC called [New Librarianship Master Class](#) that will “examine librarianship and library practice using the fundamental concept that knowledge is created through conversation” (Ross, 2013). Courses like these can help librarians build on their LIS training and explore new areas of the profession.

However, in some ways a typical MOOC is not optimized for the development of greater professional expertise for librarians. Their curricular design tends not to depend heavily on the literature for a particular field since readings and assignment materials must be freely available online (Becker, 136). This can prevent students from interacting with key texts in an area of research, diminishing the potential for subject specialization. In this same vein, with a focus on freely available materials, there is no opportunity for formalized research using established (fee-based) library resources – a skill that is core to effective library service delivery. Of course both these points create a compelling

argument for support of open access... but that's another article for another day (Becker, 136).

Drawbacks

Other possible drawbacks are their length and time commitment – MOOCs vary in length, but the courses I chose ran from 6 to 12 weeks. Each week requires about 5-8 hours of commitment to watching lectures and participating in online discussions, quizzes, and assignments. Sustaining that level of engagement can be tricky for anyone – librarian or not. I certainly lost steam as the weeks progressed, and, since so little hinged on me staying in the courses, eventually I quit.

And despite the accolades from many circles, there are also challenges to this new educational model – MOOCs have not been without controversy. There have been technological mishaps that have hampered course success (Kolowich, 2013), challenges from members of the academic community on several fronts (Rees; Lewin), and outright rejection of the model by prestigious institutions arguing that it is “pedagogical outsourcing” (Daly).

That said, there is benefit to exploring and using MOOCs, if only because so little is lost in signing up: simply create a user account, find a course that interests you, and dive in. Gain exposure to course content that would usually cost thousands of dollars in enrollment fees, and benefit from the convenience of accessing your classes wherever an Internet connection is available. Along the way, develop your own critical perspectives on the technology as the debate about MOOCs continues to percolate in the educational community.

MOOC Resources

Aside from [Coursera](#) and [Udacity](#), there are other key players worth checking out: [EdX](#) is a nonprofit joint venture from M.I.T. and Harvard that also offers higher education courses from instructors across the scholarly spectrum. In addition to M.I.T. and Harvard, participating institutions include University of California Berkeley and the University of Texas System, with the University of Toronto and McGill recently joining their ranks (Mallon; Bradshaw). [Khan Academy](#), though geared towards younger students, is also a useful and free tool for developing your expertise. Learning modules are offered in short, accessible videos that work through concepts in math, science, and the humanities. If you are looking specifically to improve your computer programming skills, there is also a free, interactive curriculum focused on teaching a handful of major coding languages via [Codecademy](#).

Conclusion

Whatever MOOC you choose, there is the potential to learn valuable new skills online at virtually no cost. If you can muster some personal initiative and an Internet connection, the opportunities are vast and will no doubt proliferate over time. You may see your

course through to a successful end or you may only make your way through a portion of it. Whatever the outcome though, remember: If you flunk out...you're in great company.

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