# In Defence of Teacher Learning



By Annie Peshkam , Associate Director, INSEAD Initiative for Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence (iLITE)

**Students are not the only ones who grow and learn in the classroom. The MOOC conversation needs to be refocused to include the benefits to teachers.**

"INSEAD hasn't launched any MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) yet," I relayed in an informal conversation over the break at the recent Coursera Partners' Conference in London. "Oh, so you must be a dissenter then," my interlocutor assured himself with a smile and a faint nod.

Not long after during another break, the same statement was followed by a genuinely concerned question, "But isn't your institution afraid of being left behind?"

Among the global crowd of provosts, professors, instructional designers, and teaching support staff – 450+ people from up to 100 partner institutions – the enthusiasm was truly buzzing just before the opening session, and continued all throughout as partners eagerly shared tips for creating and disseminating MOOCs. Yet, the two sentiments above, I later reflected on, flowed too easily. The media frenzy had imposed an unproductive rhetoric for MOOC adopters and non-adopters to proffer one another. Either you're

with MOOCs or you're against them.

Except there is an alternative, equally crucial conversation to be had outside this forced narrow discourse. MOOCs are, undoubtedly, exciting conversations, challenging the frontiers of education, expanding the boundaries of learning. The real question is why? What gap are they exposing and trying to fill in learning?

Not those of the students in remote villages of developing nations used (without shame) as token recipients of a "great" education.

They are exposing and filling a gap in learning inside universities: teacher learning and growth.

Except, no one is really talking about it because we have trouble breaking away from education's most misleading dichotomy: teachers only teach, and students only learn.

Whereas adopters at the Coursera Partners' conference readily recognised that students also teach one another and their professors in global cohorts online, the concept of teacher learning was left as tiny shards, up to audience members to piece together and form an unclear, jagged image at the end.

## Teachers on the sidelines

The conference was divided into many panels and workshops, each of which addressed topics such as, "Advice and Tips for Running Your First Courses," "Innovative MOOC Design and Execution," and "Blended Learning and Beyond." All of which addressed a valuable component of teaching a MOOC. Three to four panellists each offered insights, many audience members learned from and with them during extended Q&As.

During these panels and workshops, valued conversations were around video length and quality, completion rates, attrition numbers, community building, leveraging culture, and revenue models. All crucial points that time and again had me asking, "so what?" MOOC co-founders, and the new CEO – the best they could do is motivate MOOCs as a "crusade" for helping others around the world.

In higher education, the culture of outrightly ignoring teacher learning is so deep that even teachers themselves only expressed their learning process

during coffee breaks or over lunch.

During my informal conversations, four different professors felt that creating a MOOC was for the first time an opportunity to thoughtfully choose the most relevant and core ideas of their subject, and to break them down into concise learning blocks. In another series of informal conversations, six different professors remarked that seeing themselves teach for the first time was eye opening.

All commented that the combination of rethinking and simplifying content, and viewing their delivery, notably improved their in-person teaching on campus, as well as in the next iterations of their MOOCs.

## Where we should be focused

We were having these conversations about the basics of teaching because none of the sessions focused solely on how the tool changed content choices; in what ways the tool altered a course's conceptual sequence; where in the online course exercises, activities, questions could or could not be inserted; and how the medium modified their delivery style. Nor did they address how these changes were improving teaching, both online and offline.

The inherent value of MOOCs would have been far more clear if several sessions had discussed the MOOC experience within existing pedagogical decisions teachers have to make every day, framed within the process of teacher's learning journey – first attempts, stumbles, reflections, iterations, reattempts, results, conclusions.

For instance, one panel could have asked several professors teaching in different domains to offer a narrative of their course design journey, and detail the pedagogical rationale behind their design decisions, such as why they chose to include or omit certain concepts (beyond just time or tool constraints), compared to their in-person course, and explain the results.

Another panel could have called on professors teaching in the same domain to share, in detail, the best ways they represented two key concepts in their MOOC. What educators call sharing **_pedagogical content knowledge_** or the images, examples, demonstrations, analogies that elicit the deepest learning from students. The advantage of the MOOC forum is that professors could illustrate student comprehension through the responses linked to those lessons.

Yet in another panel several professors could have shared one short excerpt from a MOOC video that compared practices in delivery. For instance, excerpts showing a professor speaking with a lot of energy and vocal fluctuations, or a professor who opens with a powerful story that contains the inherent logic of the rest of the lesson, compared to contrasting moments, and their comparative outcomes.

One of the wrap-up points in a final panel, "The Future Trajectories of MOOCs in Higher Ed," Edward Rock, director of open course initiatives at the University of Pennsylvania said that, in the end, "partners want to serve their core constituents." He echoed an important concern for MOOC adopters: institutional costs, the benefits to enrolled university students. Even at the end, the audience still seemed dangerously complacent that the benefits to teachers and their learning journeys were formally sidelined.

We continue to assume, particularly in higher education, that the leaders who fashion learning, the designers and constructors of learning environments who guide the learning process, do not learn themselves. Their learning is merely the hobby to their academic work, the after thought to the institution's goals.

Whatever turn Coursera and the MOOC world takes, however institutions adopt new technologies, all parties need to fully focus, support, research, and value teachers' learning, and professional development, and stop regarding teaching as a by-product of education. If we placed teaching as a learning process front and center, it wouldn't take more than two years to scramble and figure out how big changes in education are valuable.

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