



Higher education and the digital revolution: About MOOCs, SPOCs, social media, and the Cookie Monster

Andreas M. Kaplan^{*}, Michael Haenlein

ESCP Europe, 79 Avenue de la République, F-75011 Paris, France

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Abstract Distance learning—that is, providing education to students who are separated by distance and in which the pedagogical material is planned and prepared by educational institutions—is a topic of regular interest in the popular and business press. In particular, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), which are open-access online courses that allow for unlimited participation, as well as SPOCs (Small Private Online Courses), are said to have revolutionized universities and the corporate education landscape. In this article we provide a nuanced analysis of the phenomenon of online distance learning. We first provide an overview of its historical evolution, and subsequently define and classify key concepts. We further discuss in detail the optimal target group in terms of participating students and teaching professors and propose corresponding frameworks for driving intrinsic student motivation and for choosing a successful online teacher. We also outline the benefits that institutions can achieve by offering online distance learning. Finally, we speak about the specific connection between online distance learning and social media by focusing on the difference between MOOCs based on traditional lecture formats (xMOOCs) and connectivist cMOOCs.

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1. Course objective

“Just because you haven’t found your talent yet, doesn’t mean you don’t have one.”

— Kermit the Frog

Those of us born in the ‘70s or later share a set of childhood friends. You may not always think about them, but Kermit the Frog, Bert and Ernie, and the Cookie Monster—to name just a few of the Muppets living on Sesame Street—have shaped the lives of millions of children. They taught us how to spell (think of the ABC-DEF-GHI song), how to count (remember the frightening Count von Count), how to sing (such as the Grouch Anthem, *Grouches of the world, unite. . . or was it Users of the world, unite?*),

^{*} Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: kaplan@escpeurope.eu (A.M. Kaplan), haenlein@escpeurope.eu (M. Haenlein)

and other important things in life (“Stoplights and love can be cruel”). What might be less known is that behind these entertaining lessons was a rigorous pedagogical curriculum. Sesame Street, supported by the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation, was designed as a preschool educational program tailored specifically for TV, a program that would help to fight against the violent and commercial television content that was much more prevalent at the time. Looking back, we can say that it indeed achieved this goal, particularly for children living in economically disadvantaged areas (Kearney & Levine, 2015). In this sense, Elmo may have been the first teacher—other than your parents—you ever encountered.

When most of us were growing up, few people talked about the disruption of the education sector, and even those who did most likely considered the idea as hypothetical, something that might happen “in the distant future.” Yet, over the past 15 years or so, the situation has changed. Industries such as music and travel have already been fundamentally altered by the Internet. Now the emergence of online distance learning for business schools and universities at large—learning in which the pedagogical material is planned and prepared by educational institutions but students are not physically present at those institutions—seems to be doing the same to the domain of education, a process that is facilitated by firms such as Coursera and Udacity. Clayton Christensen from the Harvard Business School, who coined the term ‘disruptive innovation’ in 1995, believes that the emergence of new educational formats such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and SPOCs (Small Private Online Courses) will fundamentally shake up business schools and other higher education institutions in the next decade and lead to bankruptcy for many of them—an assessment that has also been supported by other researchers (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013). And, given that the influence of the higher education sector extends to numerous aspects of society and government (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016), innovation in this sector is likely to indirectly affect other industries as well. In fact, new educational formats may even have a direct effect on all companies and organizations; for example, a MOOC developed by a top-tier university could easily be integrated into any in-house executive training or corporate university free of charge. The combination of cost effectiveness combined with the flexibility it gives to executives to fit training into their busy schedule—since they no longer have to attend traditional face-to-face sessions—makes it likely that more and more corporations will prefer digital over traditional solutions.

In this article we provide a more detailed analysis of online distance learning. And to stay within the spirit of the theme, our article is structured like a traditional syllabus: We start by providing a brief overview of the *course content* (i.e., the history of distance learning) before providing definitions and classifications of the key terms. We then look into the *target audience*, or the types of students for whom online distance learning might be particularly relevant, as well as the type of professors suited for developing the content for these courses. We continue by outlining the *learning goals*—key benefits that business schools and universities can achieve by developing an offering in this field—and we identify the factors to which they need to pay particular attention if they decide to do so. Our article concludes with some thoughts on the *evaluation* of the various facets of online distance learning and the specific challenges that arise when combining online distance learning with social media applications.

2. Course content

2.1. History of distance learning

The history of higher education can be traced back to ancient Greece, where Plato founded his academy roughly 2,400 years ago. At that time, however, and for the next 1,400 years or so, higher education was limited to a precious few. Only in the Middle Ages did larger scale universities begin to appear in Bologna (1088) and in Paris, where the Sorbonne was founded in 1150. However, despite the change in scale, these universities worked in nearly the same manner as the first academies did: Students met in a physical space in order to listen to a professor, who usually spent his time lecturing—that is, reading a predefined text—to transmit knowledge. Although such settings can still be observed today (just think of some of your undergraduate courses), the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1439 disrupted the higher education sector for the first time by making books cheaper and more widely available. In this sense, printed books can be seen as the very first precursor of distance learning, although the earliest printed books lacked a crucial component: the involvement of a pedagogical institution in the preparation and planning of content.

In fact, the historical evolution of distance learning can be divided into three main periods corresponding to the media used: printed materials, television, and the Internet, respectively. Distance learning in its true sense first appeared in 1728 when the *Boston Gazette* featured an advertisement for a distance stenography course through weekly classes

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