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The Meaning of MOOC-topia

Thinking beyond the technology.

By David J. Siegel and Daniel M. Carchidi

What does the “MOOC moment” reveal about the state of the higher education enterprise? If, as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has observed, “our utopias tell us more about our lived lives, and their privations, than about our wished-for lives,” what do our techno-utopian reveries suggest that we lack in present arrangements? What are the conditions that have made MOOCs and their variants necessary or desirable?

A prominent narrative has it that the surge in online offerings is an outgrowth of the academic community’s congenitally belated recognition that it must radically alter its “business model” to deliver more value, more cheaply, to ever-greater numbers of customers, also known occasionally as students. According to this calculus, external demands have finally stimulated the desired response.

But what if that’s not quite right? What if the impulse to innovate is kindled by a conviction that the academy has done too much already to respond to special interests, that a creeping bureaucracy is less interested in the life of the mind than in demonstrating good faith to accreditors, legislators, employers, funders, parents, watchdog organizations, and other constituents of a vast accountability regime? If reforms are meant to address an absence or longing, as Adam Phillips proposes, perhaps the untold tale of the digital revolution is substantially about a return to paradise lost, a pristine ideal learning community stripped clean of institutional accoutrements and encumbrances that often have the effect of subverting rather than celebrating the cause of learning. Perhaps the academy has strayed too far from its original purposes and is in search of a path back, a deinstitutionalized route, with the digital sphere functioning as a sort of “silicon Eden” (as the self-

described digital heretic Evgeny Morozov has put it) in which an age-old vision of higher learning might flourish yet again.

If it is difficult to imagine such a startlingly simple (some would say “hopelessly sentimental”) status for higher education as a no-frills learning community, this may be testament to the bewitchment of institutionalization: we can scarcely conceive of a legitimate form of higher learning taking root outside the systems and structures that were initially designed to support it but that have over time come to stand (in) for it, like a simulacrum. The ideal of a community of scholars emblemizing the academy has become a quaint notion, replaced by the imagery of a machine operating with Taylorist precision, predictability, and efficiency. Chaucer’s Oxford Clerk—“Gladly would he learn and gladly teach”—would not recognize the elaborate armature of the modern university, where every last shred of experience is increasingly managed and monitored. Nor, if present trends continue, will the academy recognize the Oxford Clerk, who will be—along with the humanities disciplines—a casualty of devaluation, marginalization, disinvestment, and the elevation of science and technology.

Is there still room for the cultivation of a visionary imagination in a culture that increasingly stresses pragmatism, scientism, materialism, solutionism? Do MOOCs, somewhat paradoxically, have something to offer the cause? Such a suggestion, however fanciful, invites us to think about the symbolic and interpretive possibilities of what is ostensibly a technical or technological phenomenon, to reimagine MOOCs as sanctuaries for what matters most in academe.

The “Poetry Problem,” or Waning Poetic

Consider the case of poetry, that most beleaguered of humanities subdisciplines, constantly fighting for its place at the academic table. Poetry’s precarious position could be described this way, with support from Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, and John Keats:

Here lies poetry.
 What to make of her condition?
 Dead already, “Safe in . . . alabaster chambers”?
 Declining, “Like a patient etherized upon a table”?
 Dispirited perhaps, wearied by “the wakeful anguish of the soul”?

There is a pervasive (though hardly unanimous) sense that all is not well for poetry in the academy or in American culture and consciousness more generally. In his book *Beautiful and Pointless*, David Orr catalogs titles on poetry’s passing, including Joseph Epstein’s 1988 essay “Who Killed Poetry?,” Vernon Shetley’s 1993 book *After the Death of Poetry*, J. S. Salemi’s 2001 essay “Why Poetry Is Dying,” and Bruce Wexler’s 2003 article “Poetry Is Dead: Does Anybody Really Care?”

The primary evidence of poetry’s death or at least its decline is to be found, so we are told, in its already paltry and steadily diminishing audience, which is—depending on the argument—either the cause or the consequence of low public regard for poetry, its lack of influence in and among contemporary cultural institutions, and the inadequate flow of resources directed to it. “Who will bankroll poetry?” is the question posed by Tad Friend in a 2010 *New Yorker* article, one subsequently adopted as the centerpiece of Cary Nelson’s 2012 *Academe* article “[Fighting for the Humanities](#),” and it points to the perennial anxiety that poetry programs will fall victim to budget cuts in an era of escalating privatization.

For the moment, let us stipulate that the society of poetry-loving people is small, specialized, a subculture of sorts. It may or may not be contracting, depending on whose statistics we believe. What sort of problem does this represent? No problem at all, we might postulate; it simply indicates a preference that some people have for poetry, a preference not shared by others. It is made to be a problem, however, in (or by) a market-oriented system that registers the worth, prestige, or legitimacy of something in terms of its ability to vie successfully for resources, claim the public's attention, compete for market share or social status, demonstrate its indispensability, or otherwise garner the approval and affirmation of key stakeholders. Thus do we problematize poetry's situation.

To the extent that there exists a "poetry problem" or predicament, we have attempted to solve it through the usual institutional channels and protocols. We— admirers, appreciators, and allies alike—have mounted passionate defenses of poetry, an enterprise that often ends in embarrassingly hyperbolic claims that fail to satisfy the skeptics. We have tried to tie the study of poetry, along with the humanities in general, to various economic and civic outcomes: the latest high-profile example of this effort is a 2013 report issued by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences with the subtitle *The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation*. We have made a case for poetry's centrality to the larger project of liberal education, painted dire pictures of what an academy or a culture without poetry would look like, and appealed to resource providers to increase their support for it. In short, we have framed the problem and its corresponding solutions in the customary academic fashion, using scripts that are well rehearsed.

The so-called crisis persists. The university, historically one of society's most reliable and hospitable institutions for preserving and transmitting the culture, increasingly appears hostile—or at least indifferent—to that function. What the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott once called the "voice of poetry" has been crowded out by the more commanding voices of practical affairs and science. Just as Plato banished poets from his utopian republic as irrelevant to matters of state, it often seems that higher education is on the brink of exiling poetry because it isn't so readily harnessed to state economic goals and other public priorities. The zealous development of "twenty-first-century competencies" has left little room or reverence for the cultivation of "negative capability," Keats's nineteenth-century term for our capacity to exist in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts."

At stake is more than the health of poetry programs. The fate of poetic *engagement* as a particular way of experiencing and understanding the world is what hangs in the balance, a project of immense significance at a time when the public evinces little patience for whatever cannot be easily observed, measured, and evaluated.

Ironically, when it comes to addressing the poetry problem, we are not applying the very resources of imagination and creativity that we argue are stimulated by poetic engagement. In our sclerotic framing, we have consigned ourselves to an institutional matrix that admits of only two options: either we labor and lobby to strengthen the position of poetry within the academy (and according to terms of justification sanctioned by the academy) or poetry as we know it will vanish.

There is, of course, a third way, one that has to do with pursuing avenues beyond the ivory tower to cultivate poetic interest. If we seek society for the encouragement of our enthusiasm for poetry, we may be more likely to find it outside traditional academic structures. Inside, we are more likely to encounter endless discussions

of credit hours, distribution requirements, value propositions, and so on—the framework that surrounds the offering of poetry but distracts us from its essence.

The Simplicity of Learning Communities

Poetry is required to play by institutional rules of engagement that are rigged against it. Such a problem is sometimes easier to *dissolve* than solve. When we recast the issue confronting academic poetry programs as one of involving people in meaningful conversations about poetry, we can seek and find answers outside the traditional classroom setting, eliminating countless institutional problems.

Learning communities, in contrast with conventional classes, do not need the infrastructure or the imprimatur of institutions to form or flourish. What would a focus on the learning experience, unbundled from an institutional superstructure and conducted in an online community, look like in actual practice? We don't have to use our poetic imagination to summon a vision; "real life" provides us with a ready example.

In 2013, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* named Al Filreis, a University of Pennsylvania professor of English, one of its "Ten Tech Innovators" of the year for his efforts to "bring humanities courses to the masses." Filreis teaches a free, ungraded, noncredit MOOC called Modern and Contemporary American Poetry, one of the highest-rated offerings in the online world. Thirty-six thousand students registered for the course in fall 2012, with two thousand of them, or 5.5 percent, ultimately completing it. As the *Chronicle* profile correctly noted, higher education's chorus of critics would undoubtedly howl in protest at this meager completion rate, citing it as yet another example of the online education industry's lack of seriousness about student success. Filreis sees it another way entirely, saying, "This is outreach for poetry."

When we shift the conversation from completion and certification to "outreach for poetry," we open up a universe of possibilities. Attendance-taking, grading, testing, performance monitoring, outcomes reporting, and a multitude of other requirements become extraneous. A parallel universe full of meaningful absences can take root. Something more vital may grow in the place where course-related concerns masquerading as poetic concerns used to dwell, or the void may remain unfilled, functioning as a sort of negative space in which the object—poetry—is more sharply defined. Perhaps the most significant absence of all, the one on which so much else depends, is the absence of tuition.

A free MOOC is indubitably free—at liberty, that is—to self-actualize in ways simply not available to traditional courses. One of the paradoxes of tuition is that, although we may think of the revenue as freeing, as permitting a panoply of privileges we could not enjoy otherwise, it often places so many extra burdens on institutions that it becomes a prison by another name. To remove tuition from the conversation is to begin to dismantle some of the ways that money-consciousness structures the learning experience, where it often has no business.

We may observe a number of puzzlements if we let informal learning communities evolve and their value emerge, instead of superintending the experience as we do with conventional courses. The foremost of these is the open question of what motivates participants to join in the first place. What, in other words, is the void in people's lives that is filled by an online learning community organized around poetry? What is the need or the absence that is spoken to with the "voice of poetry"? As long as we see the MOOC audience as consisting solely of students in search of vocational education or credentialing, we will be utterly confounded by questions such as these.

A spare, “simple” version of education becomes more difficult to imagine as more and more special interests—those paying tuition not least among them—stake their claims and impose their preferences. What is not difficult to imagine is that some number of the students taking an online poetry course (it doesn’t matter how many) are doing so because they worship beauty, idolize poems, or seek transcendence or a sense of community—rationales that fail spectacularly in our usual mercantile schemes but matter mightily to individual participants.

Perhaps these MOOC participants grasp intuitively the truth-value of statements such as “The right reader of a good poem can tell the moment it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound—that he will never get over it” (Robert Frost), and “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there” (William Carlos Williams)—statements that legislators and other promoters of strictly vocational education might deride as saccharine fluff. For their part, accreditors would almost certainly ask for evidence of the “immortal wound”—its size and shape, its relation to stated course objectives, the percentage of students receiving it, and detailed plans to ensure that more students are similarly wounded in future administrations of the course.

In a MOOC-topian space, there might be a momentary reprieve from the incessant, exhausting justifications, the case-making, the compulsion to yoke the study of poetry to some superordinate purpose, as if the pleasures of poems and the consolations of community were not valid ends in themselves. David Orr’s refreshingly understated formulation might do: “I can’t tell you why you should bother to read poems, or to write them; I can only say that if you do choose to give your attention to poetry, as against all the other things you might turn to instead, that choice can be meaningful. There’s little grandeur in this, maybe, but out of such small, unnecessary devotions is the abundance of our lives sometimes made evident.”

Similarly, lost amid the welter of outsized claims for MOOCs is a modest one: they bring together people who share an interest, a passion, or a curiosity. What an online poetry experience can do is assemble and connect people who are drawn to poetry, and this number is bound to be far greater and infinitely more diverse than the number and variety we are able to pull together on any campus, where the audience will be necessarily restricted to what Philip Larkin called “the dutiful mob.” While the subject matter is presumably a shared source of delight for its participants, one of the overlooked benefits of the experience is that a community is built and fostered, one imbued with a particular character distinct from other communities. Students learn new ways to collaborate online, engage in peer instruction and peer review, assist one another in navigating technical problems, create study groups, and use social networking tools to develop relationships that cross linguistic, cultural, and geographical barriers. Indeed, maybe we’re not talking about a massive open online course so much as a massive open online *community*. *Learning* community might become something more like learning *community*, a lesson in organizing and nurturing group interest in fields of study neglected or rejected by the academy.

This is not to belittle the familiar course in the traditional brick-and-mortar institution. Nor is it to suggest the need for wholesale restructuring of the contemporary college or university. On the contrary, MOOCs have been made possible largely through the unique assemblage of people, ideas, and cultural resources found in higher education. Rather, the point is to vivify poetic engagement and other intellectual and aesthetic experiences that are being given short shrift in academic life today. If the higher education habitat is becoming less and less habitable for many of its inhabitants, owing in part to the proliferation of administrative tools and techniques supposedly required to maintain the institution, perhaps this notion of

stripping away infrastructure to focus on the quintessence of the enterprise—teaching and learning—is an exhilarating prospect.

The Spirit of Innovation

MOOCs can, of course, be considered discrete innovations, but they are perhaps better understood as part of a larger spirit of experimentation in an expanding education ecosystem whose parameters and possibilities are not yet known but whose purpose is to extend opportunities for engaged learning beyond our institutional geography. What Dana Gioia wrote of poetry in his 1992 book *Can Poetry Matter?* could just as easily be adopted as the mantra of MOOC enthusiasts: “It is time to experiment, time to leave the well-ordered but stuffy classroom, time to restore a vulgar vitality to poetry and unleash the energy now trapped in the subculture.” This proposal is a tough one for the many purists inclined to view digital learning as a vulgarized reproduction of the original, a pale facsimile that is irredeemably inferior in every way (from this perspective, MOOCs amount to “massive open online *coarsening*”) and will succeed only in diminishing the university as we know it.

One of the chief contributions of MOOCs so far has been the galvanization of a robust trade in veritable prose poems devoted to the unparalleled advantages of a residential collegiate learning experience. These claims tend to be every bit as fervid as the ones made by cyberutopians on behalf of MOOCs and other digital learning opportunities. Indeed, such defenses of the status quo have the aspect of “contrivances put on by an indigenous population to dramatize their lives for outsiders, usually in ways that represent not their actual life but a re-created, or imagined, past,” as Richard Todd once described tourist attractions in *The Thing Itself*. As always, we are performing, and the performance grows more animated with the intensification of the threat to our livelihood: we put on more makeup, we exaggerate our gestures, we enunciate more clearly.

We would like to believe that faculty-student interactions are characterized by the qualities we describe in our rhapsodic accounts, but it remains an open question whether those qualities are owed to the fact of face-to-face relationships or to something else. If MOOCs ultimately have no other effect than to force the whole higher education enterprise to reexamine and clarify its putative advantages, that alone will have been a significant contribution. In any case, the self-serving idea that the only valid arrangement for promoting “real” education is the present one (an illusion we cherish and nourish) demonstrates just how much we’ve bought into institutional—and institutionalized—assumptions about what is necessary for learning to thrive.

The academy will not go to rack and ruin because of MOOCs. In fact, the furor over them has died down considerably since they were hailed as the disruptive innovation for our time, the panacea for our most persistent problems of access and affordability. That talk was overblown from the start. A much more moderate agenda should have been, and may eventually be, on offer.

MOOCs would do well to become not the university of the future but something much more radical and contrarian: an *un-academy* that expands rather than echoes the form. If MOOCs merely mimic what universities do already, they will be co-opted by the same problems that bedevil the institutionalized academy, which will denude them of whatever innovative potential they might possess. Differentiation, not reproduction, is the proper course if the objective is to untether learning from the constraints of academic life.

The will to freedom, after all, is the locomotive principle behind the MOOC movement; the technology used to deliver the courses may well be the least interesting thing about them. In this respect, MOOCs can be understood as merely the latest in a long line of experimental (re)forms of postsecondary education that have arrived on the scene, often as alternatives to excessive state control, government censorship, or exclusionary policies. These include the “invisible college” of seventeenth-century England, Poland’s “Flying University,” the United Kingdom’s Open University, the informal “freedom schools” of the American civil rights movement, India’s self-organized learning environments, Georgia’s Freedom University, and numerous additional underground or clandestine initiatives. Note how many of them have adopted names that reference freedom, openness, or a situation outside the usual parameters of place—beyond the academy and its institutionalized (or “incarcerated”) notions of education.

Perhaps the MOOC moment has been made necessary by an academy that is fast becoming a panopticon, a place of increasing surveillance and steadily diminishing autonomy over the terms of academic work. For a certain class of academics who have grown weary of the rallying cry of institutional improvement and want to establish a space apart where some sense of spontaneity and joy—some poetry—might reinvigorate teaching and learning, MOOCs and similar innovations serve as a simple reminder that there are alternatives to our current situation, that it could be otherwise.

The spirit of experimentation can be understood as the indulgence of a fantasy about how much better things would be if we could suspend our lamentations over the parlous state of poetry or postsecondary education and focus instead on building communities where learning would have free rein. If this view sounds utopian, it’s with good cause. The cultural construction of utopias (cyberutopias among them) has always been about what Richard Rorty once called “an endless, proliferating realization of freedom.” More than ever, this is the sort of visionary, emancipatory, disestablishmentarian thinking we need as a corrective to the hypermanaged institution and its discontents.

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