

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses): Devil or Angel?

Sak Onkvisit & Howard Combs
Department of Marketing
San Jose State University
San Jose, California, USA

Online teaching is not new. What is new is MOOCs (massive open online courses), the next generation of online teaching. College administrators and politicians champion it. Faculty members oppose it. Is MOOCs a savior that will make college courses more accessible and less costly? Or is MOOCs a devil that will harm college education?

Efficiency vs. Effectiveness

MOOCs is relatively new and has been evolving. Problems and opportunities must be identified. At present, there is no definitive conclusion as to its value. While the pros and cons of MOOCs have been debated, two important issues are emerging: efficiency and effectiveness.

In terms of efficiency, proponents of MOOCs claim that online courses increase accessibility and affordability. Such courses are scalable to accommodate any number of students. While it is true that the cost of traditional classroom teaching is high due to the high costs of faculty, MOOCs itself has additional costs related to the infrastructure, support services, and bureaucracy.

In terms of effectiveness, this is an area of great debate. Both proponents and opponents, in spite of their opposing views, have made an identical claim. Each camp asserts that its preferred method of instruction is superior. Proponents of MOOCs believe that online courses are at least as effective as traditional courses. Opponents of MOOCs, on the other hand, believe that traditional courses are far more superior.

Research Criteria

Very limited data are available at the present time, and the data offer somewhat mixed results with regard to the efficiency and/or effectiveness of MOOCs. Criteria must be created to judge the efficiency and effectiveness of MOOCs. In addition to the viewpoints of administrators and faculty, students' needs and performance must be taken into account. It is necessary to assess the applicability of MOOCs, its pros and cons, and its potential and limitations. Research needs to address the issues of student motivation, distraction, learning outcomes, and cheating.

MOOCs easily renders itself to a true experimental design which can accommodate both an experimental group (online students) and a control group (traditional students). The treatment or independent variable is MOOCs (vs. classroom teaching), and the various learning outcomes serve as dependent variables. Hard data are needed to validate or disprove the alleged merits.

Marketing Implications

Colleges, faculty, and students have a lot at stake in the success of MOOCs. Strengths and limitations of MOOCs must be identified. It is critical to investigate the strengths and limitations of MOOCs and to identify potential improvements. Based on the available data, the managerial and marketing implications are discussed. Means must be found to resolve the conflicts among all stakeholders and to strive for mutual benefits.