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Michael Simonson

Nova Southeastern University, simsmich@nova.edu

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MOOC Madness

Michael Simonson

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't"

—Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii, line 211, Shakespeare

Massive open online courses, or MOOCs, pronounced interestingly enough as mooooks as in cow sounds, are the "talk of the town." The October 5, 2012 Section B of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* dedicated its entire issue to the topic of MOOCs. The *New York Times* has written about MOOCs, and even South

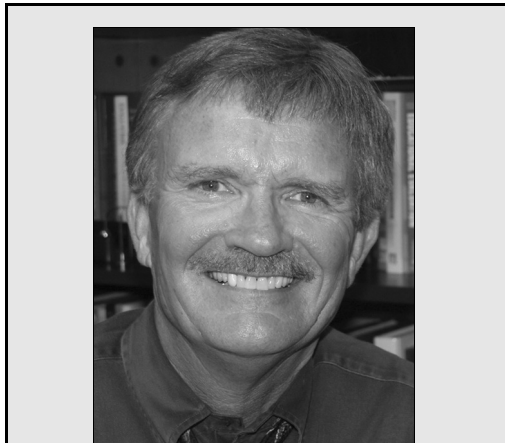
Florida's own *Sun Sentinel* has opined on the topic of MOOCs.

Just what are MOOCs and what do they offer to the field of distance education? Simply, the name tells it all. MOOC courses are massive, often with enrollments in the tens of thousands. Next, they are open, meaning open access courseware is used to deliver the course, and enrollment is open to anyone who is interested. Next, MOOCs are online, fully online and asynchronous. And last, they are courses, often a digitized version of a traditional lecture class with sessions recorded in video, audio, and posted online.

But, are MOOCs distance education, as many think? First, one needs to define distance education. *Distance Learning* journal has regularly applied this definition: "Institutionally-based formal education, where the learning group is separated, and where interactive communications technologies are used to connect the instructor, learners and resources" (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

At first glance this definition does seem to include MOOCs as they are most often configured. MOOCs are institutionally-based; at least originally they were. The great universities of the United States, such

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Michael Simonson, Editor, *Distance Learning*, and Program Professor, Programs in Instructional Technology and Distance Education, Fischler School of Education, Nova Southeastern University, 1750 NE 167 St., North Miami Beach, FL 33162. Telephone: (954) 262-8563. E-mail: simsmich@nsu.nova.edu

as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Stanford, offer MOOCs. Interestingly, many of the instigators of MOOCs initiatives have left their universities to offer massive online courses via private corporations.

Next, it is obvious that the learning group is separated; at least the learners and resources are geographically separated. But what about the instructors? Certainly MOOC designers and the talent featured in the videos can be considered instructors, but are these individuals actually involved in the use of the MOOC or are they “just talent?” Instructor involvement in the teaching and learning process is unclear.

Most definitely, communications technologies are used to deliver content and make the content available to learners; most often content is digitized content via the Web. Often, class presentations are video recorded, documents are digitized, and self-test quizzes and exams are written and programmed, often with self-scoring. Great stuff, but ...?

So, are MOOCs distance education? A closer examination of the definition of dis-

tance education may be helpful. Distance education consists of distance teaching AND distance learning—two components of the education process. Do MOOCs provide both teaching and learning? Some say no, since the instructional aspects of MOOCs are programmed and offered but only as a prepackaged self-study system.

MOOCs are usually loaded with outstanding content, and well-delivered presentations, but those who would claim that MOOCs are the future of higher education need only review the instructional films and instructional video phenomena of the 1960s and 1970s. Excellent self-study, but not education.

And finally, there is much to be learned from the study of MOOCs. As Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet, “there is method in’t.”

REFERENCES

- Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii, line 211
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2012). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance Education* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.