Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and Your Library

by William Miller

It is becoming increasingly clear that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are going to assume an important place in American higher education, and in worldwide efforts to democratize education. The idea has gone from an experiment in free offerings to a commercial enterprise as well. The pace of experimentation is quickening, and it is now apparent that many governing boards and legislators would love to see such courses count for academic credit. We cannot know where the move to MOOCs will end, but we may be sure that it is not just a passing fad, and that it will become more important as time goes by.

Though it might not be obvious at first glance, academic libraries and librarians can make an important contribution to the success of most MOOCs. Most students enrolled in these courses will reside far from your campus and will not be entering your physical libraries. The students are, for the most part, not regular students at your institution, and will not have access to your school's proprietary resources. Academic libraries have been turning their attention for years to distance learners, and much of what they do and have learned will be easily applied to an institution's MOOC offerings.

A Role for Libraries

Do students enrolled in a MOOC need access to primary and secondary resources, beyond what an instructor puts on a slide? In some cases, they do not, but unless a MOOC is remedial or based purely on transmission of basic information, most instructors would want their students to do some level of investigation, discovery, and

synthesis; for this, the skills of your librarians are highly valuable, and anyone planning a MOOC would do well to seek a librarian as a partner in planning the course. This person can help make a variety of resources available to the class and guide them through the morass that they would find using only Google and unvetted websites.

Librarians can help instructors do the legwork of identifying materials relevant for a particular course, and linking them to the online lessons. They are already involved in building collections of both printed and online resources for your library, and they have increasingly turned their attention to forms of online instruction, such as creation of tutorial instructional videos, even as they now spend less time worrying about simple factual questions that are ever-easier for students to answer on their own, online.

A growing trend is to "embed" librarians in Learning Management Systems online courses, to serve as resource people for enrolled students. In this role, librarians are available to answer a wide variety of questions, participate in grading, and teach people how to sift through Internet resources, discerning the valuable from the misleading. It is common now for librarians to create online companions to a course, such as LibGuides (http://springshare.com/libguides/), leading people to optimal resources specific to the course. Such targeted guides can spell the dif-

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ference between choosing the first item that comes up in a Google search regardless of quality and relevance, depending on inferior material and flailing hopelessly in a sea of undifferentiated resources, and being guided efficiently to trustworthy and relevant resources. Such resource guides, tailored to specific MOOCs, could be crucial for students who are "independent" and do not have access to your institution's more traditional resources.

In addition to customizing a guide for your MOOC with online links to the resources an instructor recommends, the guide will also provide links to style guides and software which can format references, and guides to the writing process itself, along with the instructor's expectations for any products which the students are expected to produce. A librarian will know which style guides and standard resources are appropriate in a given discipline. Combining subject expertise with instructional background makes them a valuable addition in any online course setting.

Copyright Considerations

In recent years, librarians have frequently come to be recognized for their expertise in copyright, and can help instructors navigate the tricky waters of copyright and fair use. No one would want to be in the position of realizing that material incorporated into a course offered to thousands of people worldwide turns out to have been used in violation of contract or copyright law.

Most of the traditional electronic content academic libraries subscribe to at the moment is governed by contract law; libraries sign licensing agreements and agree to pay a certain amount of money in return for access to the resources for authorized students and faculty members; in this circumstance, libraries (and their institutions) have not licensed access for the entire world, something which many have difficulty understanding, and libraries continually struggle to explain

to people who are not students or faculty members that they cannot legally have access to proprietary resources the library has contracted for the use of its own students and faculty, regardless of how meritorious these outside users and their scholarly needs may be.

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In a MOOC environment, the same constraints still apply. As much as an instructor might like to offer access to an institution's proprietary resources, it is unlikely that any school would care to license and pay for access to a database or journal for 100,000 additional people, all of whom are paying little or nothing to take the course, and 90 percent of whom will not even persevere through to complete the course. Any serious attempt to cover such costs would require the library's budget for electronic resources to double or triple. At the moment, at least one of the commercial MOOC companies is accommodating faculty desire to teach with the proprietary materials they have been using in their traditional classes, by systematically clearing and paying for the rights to use these materials, but such an effort is enormously time-consuming and expensive, and could never scale up to the number of MOOC courses which will soon be offered.

The practical effect of these contractual arrangements is that your MOOC students, if they are not regularly enrolled in your institution, will not legally be able to use these proprietary resources, unless separate arrangements for this are made, and will be limited, for the most part, to resources freely available online, in one way or another. If the MOOC is without charge,

then information governed by a Creative Commons license will be available to the students. However, if the students are paying even a modest amount of money for the course, issues of "fair use" will come into play, and these are much less clear for a MOOC than they are for a traditional class, which assumes one instructor and a very limited number of students.

The jury is still out, almost literally, on fair use in a MOOC context, and court cases will probably be required, ultimately, to settle what rights students in such courses will have to use copyrighted items which could be placed on reserve in a more traditional course. It would be nice to assume that fair use, coupled with good intentions, would cover all circumstances, but that would be wishful thinking. More than one commercial publisher has made it clear that their publications are not to be used without compensation. Your librarians will be familiar with the *Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for OpenCourseWare*, along with other guides to fair use and best practices which can help your instructors steer clear of legal issues.

Open Access

Librarians, along with many faculty members, have been advocating open access publishing, in which the products of scholarly inquiry are made freely available to anyone, either immediately or after an embargo period (see my recent *Library Issues* article, "Let's Take Back Scholarly Journal Publishing and End the Wasted Spending," vol. 33, no. 3, January, 2013). Much of the material generated through federal funding support is now in this category. Commercial publishers are also offering open-access alternatives, though these unfortunately usually require the author, granting agency, or academic institution/library to make a payment of thousands of dollars to liberate a single article. The fact remains, however, that there is a considerable body of open-access scholarly material at this point, and

MOOCs would benefit greatly from the ability to refer students to open access resources, many of which may be sought for in the *Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).*

Another avenue which would facilitate MOOC students' access to quality resources is the institutional repositories which many libraries maintain. Libraries have been engaged in an extended effort to digitize a wide variety of materials and make these freely available on their web sites. These repositories of material such as faculty members' publications, if they have retained copyright, and other items such as exhibits, concerts, and student publications which the library has digitized, can easily be included in the resources available to all students of a MOOC, regardless of their registration status.

Potential New Roles for Libraries

The advent of MOOCs opens the door for new roles for academic libraries, or perhaps just intensification of trends which are already occurring. Taken together, these have the potential to rearrange the priorities of academic libraries nationwide, if they were to become widely adopted.

Publishing. The first trend is that of libraries as publishers of scholarly materials. As mentioned above, most academic libraries already maintain an institutional repository of digitized material, consisting of everything from institutional archives to faculty publications. Libraries are also increasingly serving as publication venues for the open-access journals which faculty edit and need technical expertise to mount. These libraries are now experienced in creation and editing of such resources.

There is little reason why the textbooks needed for MOOCs, along with supplementary materials, cannot be mounted as open-access resources in the repository. If a textbook is not written explicitly for a particular course, either by the faculty member teaching the course

or someone else who gives copyright permission to use the materials, the librarians can work in consultation with the instructor to assemble the materials necessary for an equivalent purpose. If proprietary resources are essential, then the librarians can work with the publisher involved to secure rights and negotiate payments if necessary, after which these resources can be added to the totality of support resources for a particular course.

Media Production. Libraries are already making instructional videos using Camtasia and similar resources to teach students how to negotiate the library's systems and collections. Many libraries are also providing media production labs for students, and offering assistance in the use of the hardware and software involved. MOOCs provide a field for potentially broader involvement in media production, assisting faculty in the production of the MOOC itself. In most situations this would also involve collaboration with the institution's audiovisual, digital production, and computer services areas.

Publisher Contract Negotiation. Libraries are already involved in extensive negotiation with publishers on an ongoing basis, and have considerable expertise at this point. To the extent that MOOC instructors must use proprietary, non-open-access materials, libraries probably have a relationship with the publisher involved already, and it would probably be much easier for them to negotiate these additional uses than it would be for another area of the institution to initiate such negotiation from scratch.

Copyright Consultation. Most librarians are not attorneys, but they are nevertheless much more aware of fair use and copyright restrictions than the average faculty member is. In circumstances where institutional attorneys cannot handle the workload, librarians could be on call to consult regarding the use of problematic resources.

Instructional Origination. While MOOCs may not require traditional classroom space, they must originate from somewhere. It will make sense, in some circumstances, for them to originate from a library's instructional lab facility, especially if that facility is well equipped with the requisite audiovisual resources.

Embedded Ombudsman. It goes without saying that embedding a librarian in a MOOC as a reference librarian and bibliographic specialist would be highly desirable for the faculty and participants, and librarians are already playing this role in "traditional" online courses. A new role, however, could involve embedding the librarian also as a trouble-shooter and advocate. Anyone who has ever taken or taught an online course is aware of the multitude of technical problems, such as software incompatibility, sudden loss of access, and expiration of passwords, which can torpedo student participation and success—and how frustrating it can be to be thrown to the mercy of unknown offices within an unfamiliar entity, which often does not respond promptly. Librarians are inherently service-oriented, used to dealing with distance learners, and used to clearing the technological thicket for users; thus, they could resolve many of these problems. And beyond the merely technological, there may be a role for a knowledgeable professional other than the instructor as an identified ombudsman who is there to provide a speedy helping hand and transfer anything not immediately resolvable to the appropriate place within the institution, regardless of the situation. For example, those with writing problems could be referred to a Writing Center.

In many cases, adoption of these new roles will involve the library in collaborative activity with other areas of the institution, and raise the profile of the library as a key player in the instructional enterprise. To an extent, these new roles would supplant more traditional library activities, but most traditional activities will continue to be necessary

so additional resources will be required to optimize the library's ability to play these new roles.

Maximizing Your MOOC: Taking Advantage of a Library's Strengths

MOOCs have created a new channel to enhance the institution's public service mission, through provision of instruction to individuals who are not students of the institution, although participation in a MOOC can improve academic performance for on-campus (and distance learning, enrolled) students also. What may be a flipped classroom for an enrolled student may be the only classroom someone in a Third World country has, and the only venue for that person's education. MOOCs can also be an important public relations and recruiting tool.

Serving the general public is a new role for academic institutions, in the classroom realm. Academic libraries, on the other hand, are generally used to fulfilling this public service mission, and do not normally discriminate between students and non-students in the provision of library services. Therefore, they make good potential partners for other areas of the institution engaged in any area of MOOC creation, from the faculty member planning the course to the specialists assisting with the production values. Librarians are already predisposed to serve any inquirer, something that other areas of the campus may not be used to handling.

On the other hand, institutions may not be well positioned to take advantage of their library's potential. If instruction and attendant support services are in separate silos which cannot be broken down, the culture of the institution would tend to prevent the library's possible increased involvement from being recognized and taken advantage of. Possible ways to ameliorate this problem would be temporary reassignments, job sharing arrangements, or recombination of entire units with an eye toward MOOC support.

Of course, not every librarian will instantly welcome the job expansion that would come with a new role as MOOC supporter, especially if additional resources are not made available to help maintain existing programs that are still necessary and valuable, while adding a major new initiative. Librarians and the skills they have can potentially add great value to the MOOC offerings of an institution, but the institutions need to rethink priorities if libraries are to be given a major new role. Meanwhile, librarians need to be encouraged to enroll in MOOCs and experience them from a student's viewpoint. Enthusiasm and understanding will do much to create support and buy-in.

MOOCS: a New Animal and a New Opportunity

In some ways a MOOC is a natural extension of a regular distance learning course, but in other ways, it is potentially much more than just a distance learning course on steroids. It is the presentation of a new face of the institution to the world at large, literally, and it has the potential to enhance education while dramatically cutting costs. MOOCs may be part of a much-needed answer to the collision course between ever-growing higher education costs and the tuition burden and student debt which have become all but unbearable.

MOOCs can allow academic institutions, for the first time, to address the needs of lifelong learners and unaffiliated students in a significant way; importantly, this includes those in the Third World who have no other realistic avenue for higher education. This is a role that public libraries have embraced for more than one hundred years, but which academic institutions and their libraries have not previously had a mechanism to address in any serious way. The digitization of resources that libraries have been engaged in for years, coupled with the open-access and proprietary resources which academic libraries can potentially provide access to, can greatly enhance the quality of MOOC instruction, and provide independent learners with a level playing field for the first time in world history.

With great change, however, comes great challenge. If MOOCs become more than just an experiment, they will change the nature of an institution and challenge its organizational structure. Part of that challenge would be to take advantage of units like the library, which offer synergistic skills that could greatly enhance the enterprise. For an institution investing heavily in MOOC creation, it would be beneficial to leverage these strengths. *--miller@fau.edu*