

Chapter 1

A (Critical) Distance: Contingent Labor, MOOCs, and Teaching Online

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ABSTRACT

The increase in demand for higher education has resulted in a surge of online courses and degree programs across the US and worldwide. Calls for open access learning options and more cost-effective higher educational opportunities have contributed to this rapid increase, especially in the form of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. For educators and scholars, the evolution of MOOCs and the enthusiastic rhetoric surrounding them necessitates a critical examination. One such area for examination is the relationship between MOOCs and the contingent faculty crisis, especially how the evolution of MOOCs could hurt or help online contingent faculty. Arguably, the concept of the MOOC as a mode of delivery may present opportunities to subvert instructional delivery methods and other elements of the online distance learning status quo that create challenges for contingent faculty online. Ultimately, this chapter offers insight into the issues faced by part-time instructors teaching online, especially in terms of the material realities of the work they do and how their experience is distinct from that of the face-to-face (f2f) contingent instructor. Important to this discussion is how a shift in our conception of MOOCs as an instructional approach may offer new perspectives for online contingent labor in higher education. Overall, the goal of this work is to raise awareness and to advance scholarly discussion of this topic, understanding MOOCs as one potential site of resistance and change.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in demand for higher education has resulted in a surge of online courses and degree programs across the US and worldwide. Calls for open access learning options and more cost-effective higher educational opportunities have contributed to this rapid increase, especially in the form of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. MOOCs offer hundreds, and even thousands, of students the opportunity to enroll in courses at institutions like Harvard, MIT, and Stanford—as well as many other prestigious

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institutions—for free. Students register, browse course offerings, and are able to take self-paced courses that may even lead to course credits recognized by “traditional” schools. Star professors often lead MOOCs, which is appealing to students, even though this instruction may be offered via videotaped lectures. A remarkable characteristic of the MOOC movement in higher education is its “bandwagon” appeal across academic and corporate spheres: universities across the world seem just as eager to offer MOOC learning opportunities as venture capitalists have been to invest in them. Companies such as Coursera, Udacity, and EdX, are primary players offering courses and the learning management software needed to support them under the management of venture capitalists and corporations who seek to profit from the higher education market.

For educators and scholars, the evolution of MOOCs and the enthusiastic rhetoric surrounding them in mainstream media necessitates a critical examination of their design, pedagogy, and delivery. Along these lines, important questions include: how do students learn effectively in such large courses? What challenges do they face? How can professors in these spaces deliver the best possible instruction to thousands of students at once? Questions such as these represent the student-centered perspective that underpins successful distance-learning in the first place and can help lead to more effective MOOC teaching and learning scenarios. However, there is another side to the MOOC discussion in higher education that is often overlooked, and that is the potential impact of MOOCs on the contingent labor workforce in higher education. According to the AAUP, more than 50% of all faculty appointments are contingent, meaning these educators’ institutions make no commitment to them (“Background Facts on Contingent Faculty”). With today’s push for universities to offer more online courses, the material realities of contingent online instruction become particularly important. An important question when exploring MOOCs is how might MOOCs put the already-exploited “class” of contingent faculty at risk. Conversely, what opportunities might the MOOC model offer to subvert or alleviate some of the most challenging aspects of contingency?

For part-time faculty, adjuncts, and contingent instructors—all terms used across institutions to refer to faculty teaching off the tenure track without a contract (I use them interchangeably here to reflect the variety of terms used to refer to this group)—MOOCs raise particular concerns. As Boldt (2013) argues, “Adjuncts—faculty—have become products for consumption in our new free market university economy that—like the free market business economy—stresses the bottom line above all else” (pg. A2). For Boldt and others who view the contingent crisis as one that puts the American higher education system and individuals at risk, the widespread expansion of MOOCs and the companies delivering them are suspect.

Before delving any deeper into this topic, one should consider the unique challenges faced by online contingent faculty, especially the ways these differ from the challenges faced by face-to-face (f2f) contingent faculty. Scholarship about online contingency is limited; in fact, much of what we may know about these teachers’ experiences as adjuncts in the online classroom is shared outside of scholarly spaces, on blogs, on social media, and in short articles. Some of this knowledge may come from watercooler chats within departments, and some of it may come from personal experience as an online adjunct. Significantly, many of the challenges and experiences faced by contingent faculty are never shared at all: online contingent faculty are often isolated without the opportunity to interact directly with other contingent faculty in their departments. They may not know who else teaches in their department, how many teach in their department, or how to get in touch with others who teach in their department. They are expected to interact with students and their direct supervisor only.

Understanding the extreme potential for the exploitation of contingent faculty in distance education scenarios requires a deeper understanding of the actual material conditions in which they work. With

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