Online Courses: A Public Good or a Disruptive Model for Higher Education?

A review of

Unlocking the Gates: How and Why Leading Universities Are Opening Up Access to Their Courses
by Taylor Walsh

Reviewed by
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Fifteen years ago I said to my then college president, “American universities will never adopt ‘distance learning’ on a grand scale.” When he asked how I could be so sure, I said, “Two words: sex and violence.”

Not surprisingly, he asked to hear more. “Sure. First, students need the traditional campus as a locus for assortative mating to take place. And second, if the typical adolescent college student tries to do college online while working from home, his parents will kill him.” Smart-aleck assertions, to be sure, but I thought at the time that both points had merit.

Now I’m not so positive. On the one hand, social media probably provide a more efficient and effective meeting space than does the student union, and, on the other, millions of college students today are “nontraditional” such that nearly one in four is 30 years of age
or older, and fully 40 percent are 24 years old or older. (Who Are the Undergraduates?, 2010).

For many of them, the Sturm und Drang of adolescence is no longer the defining characteristic of their lives. They want to get on with adulthood and positioning themselves in the job market. Too, online—or at least hybrid—courses have increasingly penetrated many institutions of higher education to a remarkable extent: One in four students took at least one course online in 2008 (Online Learning, 2010).

This is a fast-growing “delivery system,” one that many students are quite comfortable with—more so than most faculties realize, I would guess. How come, then, we can’t sign up for an online degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) or University of California–Berkeley?

More generally, what’s been going on, and what might the future hold in this dynamic and developing movement? In Unlocking the Gates: How and Why Leading Universities Are Opening Up Access to Their Courses, Taylor Walsh focuses on the open educational resources (OER) movement. She capably reviews seven ambitious attempts to develop online courseware by elite universities or by consortia of elite institutions.

In each case, she summarizes the origin and development of the project, describes its content and organization, discusses its impact (to the extent that data exist—and she appropriately worries about the difficulty and paucity of assessment), and examines the sustainability of the project. Her sources include published materials, technical and foundation reports, and a considerable number of interviews she conducted with major players associated with the seven initiatives and the foundations that helped fund some of them.

The result is a highly informative and thought-provoking summary. Though familiar with some of the projects, I learned much—including where to find some terrific online materials (both in psychology and in other disciplines) that have been developed by our colleagues.

The seven projects have in common that the “unit of production,” as it were, is the university course. In each case, though, one can use the course as a study guide but not as a source of credit. That is, none of these elite institutions is prepared to offer online course credit, let alone an online degree, even though some of them (e.g., Berkeley) have hundreds of courses openly available on the Internet—including streaming video of lectures.

As Walsh reports, faculty and administrators at these institutions do not believe that the online experience is (or even can be) equivalent to being on the campus. Lingering behind this belief is a concern that online courseware may threaten, as she puts it, the “central value propositions” (p. 120) of the parent university. Thus, even if, say, Yale were to hire capable individuals to provide informative, online human interaction with people who would like to take a course via the Open Yale Courses (OYC) website, Yale is not prepared to offer them course credit.
That is true even though Taylor quotes one of the developers as saying that OYC was designed “to have available for free something as close to the entire [Yale classroom] experience you could have” (p. 132). The OYC offerings do, indeed, exemplify a high-definition attempt to put the viewer in the class. Nevertheless, a face-to-face Yale course is a costly one; the opportunity to get credit for one on the cheap might sully the brand.

With two exceptions, the motivation behind the projects has been a laudable effort to “give away” the information provided by the course materials. The originators saw themselves as providing a public good on a global scale, and I agree that they were and are. The exceptions tried to charge viewers for access (and both failed to cover their costs and were abandoned). But even those projects did not provide an opportunity to earn course credit. Walsh points out that MIT, and other early adopters of OER, also got substantial positive press, which led to an additional burnishing of their brands.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, the most interesting and possibly transformative effort is the one launched at Carnegie Mellon University, the Open Learning Initiative (OLI). It aims to provide introductory courses that lead to the same learning outcomes as those obtained by students enrolled in the equivalent courses in a face-to-face setting.

An OLI course is the result of collaboration between a faculty member and a design team. Each course is redesigned such that it is informed by the best, evidence-based work in cognition and learning. The student gets lots of computer-based interaction as well as regular and substantial feedback and assessment. Early research suggests that OLI courses are meeting Carnegie Mellon’s high standards for success.

The OLI courses are ferociously expensive to develop, though, and it is not clear how the university can afford to launch a full complement of even introductory lecture courses. Walsh describes some efforts to fund them by “franchising” to other universities, but income is still slim. Other efforts (e.g., MIT, Berkeley) produce fewer materials and do not provide the learning aids that one can see in action at the OLI site. The Berkeley courses are cheaper to produce, but in the current fiscal environment, and without a secure income stream, even their fates are not uniformly clear.

Suppose that a national effort were launched to develop many courses on the OLI model. As a percentage of the federal budget, the cost would be way to the right of the decimal point. Suppose further that outcome studies showed these courses to be as effective as face-to-face learning in most, if not all, of the thousands of university classrooms around the country. Would we not want to see that model adopted and extended—especially when the alternative might be fewer students educated and lower average learning outcomes?

Many people are made uneasy by that prospect. The temptation to violence now might come not from parents but from those of us trained in and comfortable with the traditional log model: student on one end, professor on the other.
Walsh’s book stimulates reflection about these matters. Too, it provides substantial reality testing with respect to the large number of practical issues spawned by the OER movement.

References
