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More realism about MOOCs and the transformation of higher education?

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Quad 136

More Realism about MOOCs and the Transformation of Higher Education?

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More Realism about MOOCs and the Transformation of Higher Education?

An [interesting blog](#) post by Walter Russell Mead entitled “Is the MOOC Hype Dying?” links to a profile of Udacity founder and Stanford professor [Sebastian Thurn](#).

The profile and blog commentary make some observations about online or distance learning (in the form of massively open online courses—MOOCs) that are not all that surprising to those of us in the traditional, bricks and mortar liberal arts world:

1. Online learning works better for some subjects than others; math and business are easier to teach online than the humanities, to say nothing of the lab sciences.
2. Online learning lends itself to a more focused, vocational training than to a classic, broad based, liberal arts education.
3. Completion rates for online courses often fall below 10%, suggesting there is something to the discipline of being in at least the proximity of a professor.

Thurn now believes that Udacity’s courses will augment traditional education, not replace it. “We’re not doing anything as rich and powerful as what a traditional liberal-arts education would offer you,” he says.

I would also note that this discussion focuses almost exclusively on the purely academic content of education, not on all the learning that takes place outside the classroom and the benefits of being part of a community of learners—something economists refer to as the cohort effect. As important as online learning will be for augmenting traditional pedagogies and offering many underprivileged and/or international students educational opportunities they don’t currently have, place and community still matter.

A residential, liberal arts experience will remain the best possible undergraduate education for the foreseeable future.

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