

# Bringing MOOCs *Back to Life*

BY LARA WALSH

To incorporate MOOCs into learning strategies, increase employee engagement with a different approach to incentives and measuring success.



**M**assive open online courses were once said to be the wave of the future in higher education — hundreds of free online courses with an unlimited capacity for student registration that would leave traditional institutions in the dust.

Esteemed universities like Princeton, Stanford, Harvard and MIT jumped on the bandwagon with new MOOCs while many students prematurely celebrated the end of college loans and the ability to watch a lecture anywhere, anytime wearing their pajamas. That was before the naysayers came out, asking about the lost “college experience,” and, most importantly, if students would take these courses seriously.

It turns out their fears were justified.

Stanford University reported last year that the completion rate for MOOCs is as low as 5 to 10 percent. Students sign up, excited that the courses are free, and then drift off when faced with actual work. Or they sign up but never finish courses.

The problem of how to engage students in MOOCs is mirrored in the corporate world. While the percentage of completion is estimated to be higher, issues around organizational cost and benefit remain.



## ON THE WEB

How can learning leaders make sure employees stick with a MOOC and treat it as importantly as any other corporate learning offering? Join the *Chief Learning Officer* LinkedIn group to discuss: [tinyurl.com/MOOClearning](http://tinyurl.com/MOOClearning).



Carol Sladek, a partner and work life consulting leader at Aon Hewitt, said many employers offer additional learning opportunities to attract the best talent — especially new graduates who may be looking to take graduate school classes on the side. Then there are job-specific learnings meant to bridge a skills gap in evolving fields such as social media, marketing and technology — beneficial skills to use in the workplace.

While new graduates may be happy to take subsidized graduate-level courses without paying a dime, companies are looking for a two-way street. Chief learning officers often struggle to justify these learning costs to higher-ups while ensuring that employees treat job-related, skill-specific MOOCs with the same gravity as other corporate-friendly learning offerings.

In an attempt to measure exactly what companies are getting by subsidizing MOOCs, efforts to monitor student progress in these courses have increased, spurred by technological advances.

Verified signature programs, screen-sharing, a signature track and even a biometrics webcam can analyze users' faces to make sure there is no cheating when students take assessments. These new technologies have cropped up in response to emerging companies that offer to take online courses and assessments for students, catering to employees who have limited time or who don't see the value in a MOOC course or certification.

As a result, organizations are unsure if their employees are actually certified in a skill set and are expending more effort to monitor and control this type of learning. (See "Use Technology to Fight Online Cheating," pg. 29)

### Making MOOCs Appealing

In the age of information overload and limited time inside and outside the office, it is possible to back away from the Big Brother tactic and make MOOCs more appealing to employees with a different approach to incentives and measuring engagement.

"We take a decidedly different view than the idea of the Orwellian Big Brother watching your eyeballs to see if you are watching the course. That is about the worst idea that we could imagine," said Paul Sebastien, vice president and general manager for MOOC provider Udemy for Business. "That just sounds painful. Anyone who is put in that kind of context will look at courses like work and almost like punishment."

To reassess engagement, Sebastien recommends first removing instinctual assumptions about progress, which means eliminating completion rates as the most important factor. "Completion rates are definitely a lot higher in the business setting than in the academic world. There are still challenges with completion, but that's not what we should be focused on," Sebastien said.

Instead, learning leaders should focus on making sure employees actually learn and retain skills from these courses that can benefit them on the job. For instance, forgo completion-based thinking and instead assess, "What is the shortest path for employees to get from point A to point B so they can learn that skill?"

Depending on the course, employees may be able to deconstruct a course and skip around, getting what they need pretty quickly. Another course might need their full attention the entire time.

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CLOs have shied away from this kind of thinking given considerable pressure from chief financial officers and CEOs to justify results from their learning efforts, which can seem difficult to quantify when moving past completion rates.

While completion is one metric, other methods to measure engagement such as badges and certifications can better demonstrate how a person is going through a course. These other methods can highlight if the employee is retaining knowledge, and a person's proficiency level in a particular skill can be tested during and after the course.

### Getting Employees on Board

Sladek said employees are more likely to complete courses if they are consumer friendly. Integrating MOOCs into an employee's everyday schedule also can increase participation and engagement.

That's mirrored in what Sebastien saw when Udemy took its courses mobile and experienced a 46 percent increase in user engagement. "Viewing and completing a course and doing all that via an iPad or an iPhone or an Android device is really magical, and it really feels like you are doing it for fun. People don't expect the consumer experience to be them watching a fun video on YouTube for example or playing a game," he said.

MOOC providers, like other media consumption-based organizations before them, are finding peo-

## Use Technology to Fight Online Cheating

While massive open online courses can reach a wide audience and offer convenient access to a variety of courses online, they are often plagued by rampant cheating. The problem is only becoming worse, thanks to an increase in for-credit course offerings and student enrollment rates.

With mass course consumption in an online setting, companies and educational institutions often find it difficult to monitor student activity and to validate that the person taking the course is the same person going through the material.

Students can look up answers while they work on quizzes, and some have gone so far as to hire others to take their coursework for them. Companies offering to take online courses for students also exist. Further, company expectations for employees to take and pass skills-based courses — thus increasing their competitive edge in the workplace — also has increased the pressure to cheat.

Companies and educational institutions have risen to action via new technologies that ensure when a student passes a MOOC course, the company and school can trust that person is completely certified and ready to perform.

For example, MOOC providers like Coursera and Udacity have employed webcam proctors who, in a Skype-like setting, monitor students — and their screens — and take note of suspicious behavior such as wandering eyes. However, this has been difficult to replicate on a mass scale, especially with growing enrollment rates. In-person tests at a center present their own problems via difficult logistics and costs that MOOC companies have been unable to cover.

Verified signature programs and biometrics webcams, which analyze users' faces to verify identity, have been used, but these technologies come with their own pitfalls. For example, the biometrics webcam can be fooled by someone who looks similar to the purported user.

That doesn't mean companies should give up on catching cheaters. A promising technology is the BioSig-ID, which tracks the way a user moves his or her mouse, fingers or stylus when logging in from any computer, phone or tablet device. Also, increasing student engagement with a convenient MOOCs experience and incentives program is another often-overlooked solution to lower cheating rates.

—Lara Walsh

ple love the mobile experience and the ability to take courses anywhere — on a train going home or on a plane during a business trip.

“We’re finding that more and more companies are doing it this way and love that their employees can actually find time to take these courses outside of their normal busy workday,” Sebastien said. “There was pent-up demand for that, and it makes sense because these days we live on our mobile devices and tablets outside of the workplace.”

Another way to engage employees is to show them how these skills-based courses benefit them.

Judah Kurtz, a senior manager and executive coach at global management and HR consulting firm BPI group, said a simple conversation about the benefits of developing industry-essential skills beyond an employee’s current job can rouse the apathetic to action.

“In the changing world of work, people don’t stay in their jobs as long. Employees need to be able to grow and develop their personal skills so if they do move on, they are desirable candidates and have the capabilities to move forward in their careers,” Kurtz said.

Keeping knowledge and ability up-to-date is an almost impossible feat in a modern workforce where technology can make certain skills obsolete seemingly in a blink of the eye, while others are pushed to the forefront as essential — for the time being.

Aware employees are taking note. Amy Rouse, director of learning architecture and design solutions at AT&T Learning Services, said “take” rates are high to begin with as employees recognize they are in declining areas of the business. “People who are very concerned about their own careers are not only engaged in courses, but are proactively asking, ‘When’s the next one coming?’” she said.

Voluntary courses outside of mandatory training might have an initial drop rate as employees find the course is not their cup of tea, or that it is more challenging than anticipated, but financial incentives keep students chugging along.

“When you get outside of the mandatory corporation training and you have the voluntary MOOCs, what we’re calling the ‘Skills Transformation Initiative.’ You might think they have a lower completion rate because they are voluntary,” Rouse said. “But the policy for tuition aid reimbursement states you need to complete the course to be reimbursed, so we do experience a much higher completion rate.”

A rewards system with full organization backing also can drive results. Kurtz said having results built into employee performance management, additional pay or a promotion based on acquiring certain results is a possibility. But learning has to be important to the organization — no half-hearted approaches — and a structure to reward employees must exist.

AT&T uses a support approach to let employees know the organization is backing their hard work. The company offers internal social networking sites for each certification as well as Q&A resources, FAQs and information about prerequisites needed to take MOOCs programs. Employees take it from there.

“Once they’re in the program, whichever program it is, be it data science or computer science, they form cohorts and forums within these communities of practice, and that has just taken on a life of its own,” Rouse said. “The students participate in these forums and ask and answer each other’s questions.”

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**Reframing:** Functional fixedness is another psychological bias that tends to limit how someone views use of an object for its traditional purpose. Because innovation is an iterative process, which often borrows concepts from other fields, the ability to reframe information in a productive manner is key to increase innovation fitness.

Pfeiffer runs an award-winning sales representative training program that also acts as an innovation lab for the sales culture at Major League Soccer. “When it comes to behaviors, we try to help our trainees become comfortable being uncomfortable,” he said.

To help trainees reframe discomfort and become more confident, nimble and innovative when serving customers, Pfeiffer borrows practices from fields outside of sales. “We have built very effective partnerships with improvisation experts and yoga practitioners who work with our trainees to expand their comfort zones.”

**Jumping in:** Psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer has dedicated his career to studying decision-making. His 2014 research — “Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education, and Professions: A Meta-Analysis” — shows that 50 percent of all decisions in a business are gut decisions, though publicly they are never named as such. He said the tendency to make decisions solely based on statistics and algorithms is sound when things are stable.

But in the highly unpredictable world we live in, intuition and smart heuristics are valuable tools to respond to quick changes and uncertainty. Managers already rely on their intuition but waste significant organizational time to defend those decisions with data in case they turn out to be wrong. The ability to take action or “jump in” is a key behavior for innovation, where uncertainty is a given.

To build a mindset and culture of innovation, increasing employees’ innovation fitness is necessary. As learning leaders help employees build out their practice, they too can embrace the five basic behaviors.

Leaders should listen to learners and their organizations evolving, personal needs; defer judgment on non-traditional ways to drive practice; declare the importance of practice to win leadership support; reframe the challenge associated with large geographically diverse workforces into opportunities to promote customization; and most importantly, jump in and begin piloting programs in the right places with the right people sooner rather than later. [CLO](#)

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And good news for CLOs: This type of engagement is quantifiable. Rouse said AT&T gets data from its MOOC provider on who participates and completes certifications. Certifications are broken down into a number of MOOC courses, typically two to six, and after completing the series, employees get a certification from the partner and from AT&T.

The company provides badges that are posted to its social networking profile and learning portal. Rouse said obtaining an industry-recognized certification from a MOOC company isn’t the only draw; if in-house badges take too long to appear, her phone will be ringing off the hook with impatient employees’ calls.

Certificates and badges arguably provide a better way to measure progress outside of completion and, although it’s not a formal academic accreditation, they can be great for CLOs trying to measure learning impact.

“CLOs have something tangible they can share and build a set of statistics around for the rest of the company,” Sebastien said. “They can put pressure on those who haven’t completed the training by saying, ‘Look, some of you have achieved the certificate level successfully, and that leaves four of you to go.’ Or when justifying to the CFO how well these programs are going, they can say, ‘Hey, we’ve had a 94 percent completion rate’ or ‘94 percent of our viewers have received a certificate.’”

Certificates and badges also bring certain social rewards and pressures, an engagement factor Sebastien said many companies currently overlook but that he’s seen in practice. “In our courses, you’ll see a lot of active discussion from course viewers around the topics. You’ll even see some interesting topics around debates when someone has viewed a course, and that’s the thing where people who are really getting something out of the MOOCs and becoming thought leaders can kind of show their stuff,” he said. “That breeds more and more incentive to kind of level up, if you will.”

Rouse said the future of MOOCs as a widely used and CFO-approved learning tool to fill in skill gaps is promising. But with companies investing a lot of resources and time into employee development, low engagement rates just aren’t acceptable.

“The low completion rates when they first came out were due to people like me who just wanted to check them out,” she said. “Yes, only 5 to 10 percent may be completing these courses, but unlike a class for a company, who was serious about finishing in the first place?” [CLO](#)

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