# MOOC: Challenges or Opportunities for Traditional Classes in China's Higher Education?

**Yang Quan**
School of Foreign Languages,
China West Normal University,
No. 1 Shida Road, Shunqing District,
Nanchong, Sichuan, China
E-mail: yqzzw999@163.com

**Sponsoring organization:** Center For Teacher Education Research At Sichuan Province No. 2013-011

**Abstract**
*MOOC, massive open online course, becomes a buzzword in higher education. Due to its convenience, autonomy and diversity, MOOC arouses great interests of educators and draws widespread participation of college students all around the world. Some College teachers applaud the new platform of learning, for it provides students with open access to the courses from the world-famous universities and top professors. Others, however, are in a panic, fearing that the traditional pedagogy would be threatened by the interference of MOOC. Based on the debates from different sides, this paper states that MOOC creates more chances than challenges for both students as well as teachers. It will not be a substitute but a supplement to the traditional classes in China's higher education in the future.*

**Key words**: MOOC; challenges; opportunities; traditional classes; China's higher education

## 1. Introduction

With the development of information technology and the intellectualization of communication tools, people's life and ways of learning have been greatly changed. The traditional classes are no longer the only access to knowledge. Learners can take advantage of the electronic media to collect any information that they need. In recent years, many organizations have actively developed and implemented online learning programs which offer College students diversified subjects in different languages. The new learning approach may simply be called electronic learning or e-learning for short.

E-learning includes instruction delivered via all electronic media including the Internet, intranet, extranets, satellites broadcasts, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM (Govindasamy, 2001). E-learning is changing people's ways of sharing information and communication, creating new platforms of instruction. To some degree, new ways of learning pave the way to emergence of MOOC. Drawing support from Information and Communication Technology (ICT), MOOC appears and it makes a disruptive educational trend in these years and become a buzzword in the field of education.

In fact, MOOC has been around for a few years as collaborative techie learning events, but the year of 2012 is the year everyone wants in. EdX has 370,000 students in its first official courses. Coursera has reached more than 1.7 million participants in the same year, growing faster than Facebook (Pappano, 2012). Compared with the traditional online courses, MOOCs are usually free, credit-less and massive. Learners can take any available courses, only if they enroll with an Internet connection. That is why an increasing number of college students choose to take MOOCs. Another major reason for learners' craze may be the flexible, personalized and autonomous learning environment in MOOC, as is not easily created in the traditional classroom.

Main parts of MOOC's fans consist of college students, autonomous learners and some teachers, who take online courses in order to seek diversified and autonomous ways of learning. Students prefer to try different courses according to their own likes; teachers find abundant resources for teaching materials such as excellent lectures and video/audio recordings. What's more, it is a useful way for teachers to facilitate their professional abilities via MOOCs.

In China, increasingly numbers of College students take MOOCs these years. Many of them try different subjects in accordance with their interests, and feel satisfied with the autonomous learning experiences. MOOCs win a place as a new way of instruction and maybe will have a greater impact on modern higher education. Because of the increasing numbers of Chinese fans for MOOC, it is necessary to discuss the challenges and opportunities that MOOC brings about in China's higher education. The purpose of this paper is to weigh up two sides of the coin, finding that MOOC creates more chances than challenges for both students as well as teachers in colleges and universities in China. It will not be a substitute but a supplement to traditional classes in China's higher education.

## 2. Definitions and characteristics

### 2.1 Definitions of Mooc

A MOOC refers to the Massive Open Online Course which integrates the connectivity of social networking, the facilitation of an acknowledged expert in a field of study, and a collection of freely accessible online resources (McAuley, 2010).

A MOOC is a course and a network about the emergent practices and the theory of Connectivism, proposed by George Siemens as a new learning theory for a digital age (Mackness, Mak and Williams, 2010). The concept of MOOC is convened and led by Stephen Downes and George Siemens through the University of Manitoba, Canada. 2012 is called the year of the MOOC when Coursesa, edX and Udacity offer massive open online courses, drawing millions of clicks around the world.

Based on the theory of Connectivism and combined with the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), MOOC allows people to learn in large open networks and presents a convenient access

for more people to share knowledge. MOOC makes it possible to get the superior exchange of knowledge, beneficial for autonomous learners, staff training as well as educators. These free online courses create an equal chance for knowledge acquisition, setting no obstacles for learners' identities. MOOCs offer higher education resources (e.g., famous universities and top professors) to global learners who have the desire for education or job skills.

MOOC changes from an idea to an industry in several years. Millions of students from around the globe have enrolled; thousands of courses have been offered; hundreds of universities have lined up to participate (Christensen, Steinmetz, Alcorn, et. al., 2013). MOOC may represent a budding revolution, by means of which Students, universities and organizations link together.

### 2.2 Characteristics of MOOC

MOOC allows learning to happen across space and time due to its mainly asynchronous and online architecture (Waard, Koutropoulos, et. al., 2011). MOOC is so popular because of its unique features which the traditional classes lack. The main characteristics for MOOC to support knowledge development will be that they are diverse, open, autonomous and connected. Details of these features are described as follows.

Diversity: combining or mixing any web-based courses (e.g., Cousera, edX, and Udacity) to form rich curriculum resources for online learners. Participants can take any courses according to their likes.

Openness: breaking the boundaries of time and space via the Internet, and expanding access to massive learners, course contents, teaching models, and educational ideas. Learners have access to the courses of world-famous and top professors.

Autonomy: providing online learners with diversified courses and free time to accomplish these learning tasks. Learners arrange, monitor, evaluate and control the learning process.

Connectedness: integrating various communication tools (e.g., facebook, twitter, and forums) to create a digital platform for learners to share information, solve problems, discuss and communicate. World participants join together, and an international class is formed via information technology.

Besides these characteristics, MOOCs combine such pedagogical approaches as constructivism and behaviorism to produce an optimal outcome. In addition, they mix instructional technology with actual job tasks in order to create a harmonious effect of learning (Driscoll, 2002). Some of the characteristics of MOOCs are the key features that the traditional classes have been lacking.

## 3. MOOC's influence on traditional classes in China's higher education

With such unique characteristics as diversity and autonomy, MOOC has taken higher education by storm. There is no doubt that MOOC makes a change of modern educational methods, supplying a flexible, autonomous and connected learning platform than traditional classrooms. No enrollment boundary for learners is another challenge for colleges and universities. One may join any online course and be the classmate with different people like workers, retirees, housewives, and even a prince from UAE. Nevertheless, MOOCs are not perfect. They have some unavoidable limitations. For example, many courses are made in English or other foreign languages that cause difficulties for non-native speakers.

### 3.1 Challenges that MOOC brings about

MOOCs have commanded considerable public attention due to their sudden rise and disruptive potential (Christensen, Steinmetz, Alcorn, et. al., 2013). One fifth of the MOOC participants are college students and the number of student enrollment is still increasing. MOOCs bring about some challenges to traditional classes in higher education.

The biggest challenge for traditional classes is that MOOC combines the most attractive educational resources like fist-class universities and top professors for online learners. Teaching staffs in MOOC are a team who work cooperatively to make perfect teaching lectures. This may be more attractive to autonomous learners. Take Coursesa as an example. Columbia University and Princeton University and other 31 famous universities are cooperating with Coursera which have announced another 29 universities join them in the year of 2013. Harvard University and MIT became partners in edX years ago.

Moreover, MOOCs can make the most use of instructional technologies like video tape and CD-ROM, and web-based technologies like live virtual classroom, self-paced instruction and collaborative learning, while the traditional classes can hardly get such multifaceted technical support. Most traditional classes are instructed in the classroom with the teacher standing and lecturing in front and students listening and sitting in the chairs. If students do not understand or digest what the teacher talk about, they hardly had the chance to ask the teacher to say it again. Inversely, learners in MOOC seem to be more autonomous, for they can control the learning process, and stop or replay the lectures when they need.

Additionally, MOOC team surpasses the single teacher's ability, and it contains intelligence of every member. Massive open online courses are produced by a team consisting of lecturers, editors, course designers, computer technicians and so on. These courses usually have the features of logic, system, integrity and reversibility. Online students monitor their study at their own pace. On the contrary, the traditional class relies on one teacher, and the students cannot control the pace of the class. Faster learners may absorb some knowledge in a short time, while slow learners need more time to digest. This problem cannot be easily solved by the traditional way of teaching.

### 3.2 Opportunities that MOOC creates

MOOC meets people's need of higher education and help them gain skills for high quality jobs. However, MOOCs are not perfect and not the only best way to satisfy learners' desire for education. Comparatively, the traditional classes are still powerful, and they are qualified for the major method to cultivate mass talents. Opportunities are left for traditional classes in China's higher education.

To begin with, dialogues and interactions are the most powerful advantage in the traditional classes. Dialogues between teachers and students take a crucial part in education. In traditional classes, teachers know much about students like their expectations, learning abilities and learning styles through immediate dialogues which are rarely taken into consideration in the online courses. MOOC is set in advance, so it is not easy for lecturers and listeners to communicate when learning obstacles or puzzlement appear.

Besides, the traditional classroom is a better place than MOOC in the aspect of problem solving. Students meet various difficulties and problems in learning new knowledge. They need teacher-student interaction or peer activities to find a way out, but online learners lack the chances of face-to-face communication and the difficulties have to be lagged behind when learners are taking online courses even if

they have online communication tools.

What's more, socialization needs a real and interactive atmosphere to implement. Goals of higher education consist of knowledge, skills, emotions as well as moral cultivation. Traditional classes and schools provide students with social context, where face-to-face communication, interaction and discussion take place. The most important thing is that one feels love, care, and support in the team. Study becomes a fun with so many classmates in real context. People's communicative abilities and social values are formed with human beings not with machines. Socialization can rarely be realized in the virtual world. It is admitted that MOOC helps to achieve some teaching objectives, but it is not all about higher education. In China, traditional classes and schools are still irreplaceable, as they are better for students' cooperation, interaction and socialization.

It is suggested that China's higher education combine the traditional classes with MOOCs in the future, for both of them aim at helping learners to be efficient workers and better citizens. Boring classes are out of date. College teachers need reform their classes to grasp students' interests. They need change their traditional roles and try to be listeners, organizers and facilitators to students. Meanwhile, they have to equip themselves with the latest educational technology, because technological knowledge is crucial to teachers in modern higher education.

## 4. Conclusions

As a new way of instruction, MOOC blossoms in a sudden, arouses great interests from educators, and draws widespread participation of College students all around the world. In China, College students' passion for MOOC is not weaker than that of other countries. Tens of thousands of Chinese students take more than one MOOC in their spare time, because it provides them with optimized resources of learning. MOOC creates challenges and opportunities that influence the traditional classes in China's higher education. On the one hand, students have more autonomy to arrange their online studies, and the learning process is controlled and reversible if necessary. On the other hand, college teachers feel great pressure from MOOC, for their traditional teaching roles are challenged by the innovation. However, MOOCs and the traditional classes are not absolutely contradictory. These high-quality courses and lectures can be used to improve teachers' professional abilities, if they make advantage of MOOCs. To sum up, MOOC creates more chances than challenges for both students as well as teachers. It will not be a substitute but a supplement to the traditional classes in China's higher education in the future.

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