MOOCs and Directing an Academic Field

Royce Kimmons

Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Royce Kimmons's blog](https://edtechbooks.org/-emt) [https://edtechbooks.org/-emt] on March 5, 2013.

One of the hallmarks of the academy is the idea of academic controversy or the notion that we need to have people willing and equipped to discuss diverse perspectives and to interrogate accepted beliefs. The importance of this idea is evidenced in many prevalent artifacts of academe, including journal publishing, demands for academic freedom, and the practice of universities refusing to hire their own graduates as professors. Essentially, the academy resides on the premise that diversity of opinion is important so that dialogue can take place and the best ideas can eventually rise to the surface.

As a student, your experience and what you learn in a course will be greatly influenced by the perspectives, biases, and even pet theories of those who are teaching you. It's likely that the content of a course will largely remain the same whether you take it at a community college or an elite university. The pedagogy of a course is often a toss-up, but probably doesn't influence students, because there's no way to know beforehand if "Professor Jones is a skilled pedagogue." Rather, when talking about decisions to attend elite universities, many

students will talk about the ability to learn "from" specific professors as being extremely important for their decision. That is, when seeking elite educational opportunities, we want unique perspectives from innovators in our field of interest whose interests, beliefs, values, and biases align with our own, and we want to be trained to research and work the way that they do.

As a result, divisions in the field (at best) or cults of personality (at worst) form. Students of one professor become accustomed to one way of thinking, students of another professor become accustomed to another way of thinking, and so on, and though they will bring their own unique views to the field themselves, they are nonetheless heavily influenced by those who taught them. Though they may not completely agree with their professors' lenses of interpretation, they will at least recognize them and use them as places from which to establish their own. Thus, their professors remain a central part of their academic careers moving forward.

If universities hired their own graduates as professors, then this would present a clear problem, because institutions would become bastions for monolithic thinking: presenting singular views and interpretations of issues in the field. By hiring graduates from other universities, the hope is, at some level, to increase the number of filters, diversify the academic gene pool, interrogate biases that would naturally arise in the institution, and pave the way for more open-minded discourse.

To work, however, this model requires professors to have limited audiences. If I, as a professor, train ten students a year, then as long as those students go somewhere else afterward, the perspectives that I will have ingrained in them will meet with valuable interrogation, and my students will mutually interrogate the institutions that they enter.

However, imagine if a single professor could train 100,000 students a

semester. How quickly would biases and pet theories permeate the field? Who would stand to interrogate those students on their developed biases, and who would they stand to interrogate except themselves? If I want to influence people to my way of thinking, what's faster: a) publishing in a journal that only a handful of experts in the world will read or b) teaching 100,000 novices that my viewpoint is the only viewpoint or the only viewpoint worth having?

If I want to transform the academic field in my own image without controversy or interrogation, then the way to do it is through a MOOC.
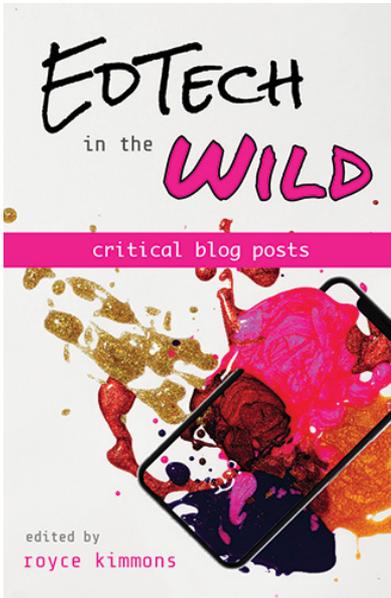
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