

The Audacity: Thrun Learns a Lesson and Students Pay

Tressie McMilan Cottom

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Tressie McMilan Cottom's blog \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Dx\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Dx) on November 19, 2013.

Sebastian Thrun, founder of Udacity, one of the most high-profile private sector attempts to “disrupt” higher education discovered inequality this week. Thrun has spent the last three years dangling the shiny bauble of his elite academic pedigree and messianic vision of the future of higher education before investors and politicians. He promised nothing short of radically transforming higher education for

the future by delivering taped classroom lessons of elite professors through massive open online courses. So what went wrong?

After low performance rates, low student satisfaction and faculty revolt, Thrun [announced \[https://edtechbooks.org/-shp\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-shp) this week that he has given up on MOOCs as a vision for higher education disruption. The “godfather of free online education” says that the racially, economically diverse students at SJSU, “were students from difficult neighborhoods, without good access to computers, and with all kinds of challenges in their lives...[for them] this medium is not a good fit.” It seems disruption is hard when poor people insist on existing.

Thrun has the right to fail. That’s just business. But he shouldn’t have the right to fail students like those at San Jose State and the public universities that serve them for the sake of doing business.

It is fine if you missed it but for three years now Massive Open Online Courses from tech giants and start-ups have been selling a solution to all that ails higher education. Two short years ago Thrun declared to Silicon Valley and the traditional universities with the courage to follow him that he could not go back to teaching at Stanford. He’d taken the red pill, massive open online courses pioneered by Udacity, and he couldn’t go back.

In 2013, reality harshed Thrun’s red pill high. The low completion issues he had encountered with his MOOC courses while at Stanford became deeper, more fundamental problems at [San Jose State \[https://edtechbooks.org/-LJC\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-LJC). Single digit completion rates in MOOC courses make for-profit colleges’ dismal completion rates look progressive. Thrun said the courses were the pedagogical best he could make them. Coming from a rock star professor from an elite institution, that suggests the class must have been pretty damn good. But it [wasn’t \[https://edtechbooks.org/-ksn\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-ksn) good enough for SJSU students.

The faculty at SJSU handed Thrun’s Udacity a very public [flogging](#)

[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-JZD\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-JZD). Many faculty members questioned the morality of a publicly funded college with a mission to serve diverse students should spend tax-payer money and invest the hopes of students with fewer options than those at the Stanfords of the world into being Thrun's guinea pigs.

It is a fair question that in many ways the academic and scientific communities have already answered with a resounding no. When I want to interview students for a research project I have to present a carefully, detailed plan to my University for approval. The plan is vetted by an [Institutional Review Board \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Thr\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Thr). Every research university has an IRB but they didn't always. Before 1974 doctors figured out the internal reproductive organs of women by cutting them open [without \[https://edtechbooks.org/-NiP\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-NiP) consent or sedation. They [observed \[https://edtechbooks.org/-iCb\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-iCb) the effects of untreated syphilis on test subjects — insanity and death — without bothering to inform the participants that there was a known, available treatment. They [told \[https://edtechbooks.org/-UIW\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-UIW) volunteers they had electrocuted a stranger to see how human decision-making works.

Basically, before IRB a lot of modern science would have been war crimes had the U.S. been on the losing end of World War II. And because this is America, there was a disturbing pattern among the victims of these kinds of horrific experiments. They were overwhelmingly black, brown, indigenous, poor, and powerless. A 1978 report on regulating research on human beings declared that ethical research has “an obligation to protect persons from harm by maximizing anticipated benefits and minimizing possible risks of harm”. The connection to inequality was clear. The most vulnerable were likely to be prodded, poked and tested because the elite don't often sign up to risk their lives for little reward. And flagrant disregard for these risks had few penalties because the victims were powerless. The rules governing academic and scientific research recognizes that some groups are too vulnerable to risk the failure that

the scientific method requires.

Where was this institutional ethic in what Thrun freely concedes was always an experiment? When Udacity was primarily interested in beaming the erudite countenance of professional smart people out into the world, it can be said that any risk was assumed by the those who chose to sign up. But when Udacity went after formal arrangements with colleges like SJSU to offer courses, for credit, to students enrolled in the University, the risk calculation changed.

Udacity's partnership with SJSU mostly offered general education courses in things like math. General education courses like English and math fill up fast in most colleges because all students have to take them. At places like SJSU that don't benefit from Stanford's highly selective admissions standards to skim the most prepared students, those general education classes have to do double-duty filling in learning gaps. Offering these courses for credit using Udacity significantly increases the incentive for students to take the class and risks for students if the class is a dud. General education courses are path dependent, meaning you fail one course at the beginning of a sequence and you cannot take the next course in that sequence. Research shows that disrupting path dependent coursework really hurts the most marginal students by increasing their time to degree completion, dinging their motivation, and sinking their GPAs.

Udacity always knew that the non-completion rates were high for its courses. They may not have known why, but that was a reason for greater testing, not a reason to roll-out the for-profit product for University clients. With sanction from the California governor on down the political line, Udacity had to meet no ethical requirement to prove that the risk of failure was worth the promise of rewards. And what was promised? University partners could prove they were innovative, forward-thinking, and cut expensive faculty out of the complex equation of teaching students.

To prove that teachers don't matter and Stanford knows best what the world needs, a public university gave a for-profit company unfettered authority to experiment on its students without informed student consent or consideration of an ethical threshold. We may need more experimentation in higher education but it should be as explicit and ethical as any other we conduct in the name of science and progress.

Thrun says it wasn't a failure. It was a lesson. But for the students who invested time and tuition in an experiment foisted on them by the of [stewards \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Hbx\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Hbx) public highered trusts, failure is a lesson they didn't need. Students like those at SJSU tend to know quite a bit about failure — institutional, social, and political. They did not need to learn again what Thrun, a smart guy from Stanford and Google, could have learned from a book.

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