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Commentary

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[What is This?](#)

On April 28 I sent an email to my dean. The subject line was “Online MegaClass”:

After seeing news reports about the online teaching programs offered by the Khan Academy <http://www.khanacademy.org/> and MIT’s OpenCourseWare courses <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm> I had a wacky idea (some would say all of my ideas are generally wacky, but I digress¹):

I want to teach an online section of COMM 300 Visual Communications with 10,000 students.

I’ve been thinking how I could do this logistically, but before I get too far into it I needed to know: Is it possible for anyone in the world to take a course offered at Fullerton for credit and NOT be a traditionally registered student?

If not, could anyone take the course without credit?

If so, could the cost of the class be drastically reduced?

Could the class be offered independent of any term (students could start it anytime during the year)?

Would the COMM Department and College benefit from such an endeavor?

Would there be funding for marketing the class worldwide?

Finally, is there anything in my contract or a UPS document that prevents me from doing this on my own?

That’s all I have for now.

While I waited for a reply, I registered with the Khan Academy and Udacity and took a computer science course through Coursera. On the 30th, I sent another email. The message detailed Ken Auletta’s piece in *The New Yorker* published the same day that was concerned with Stanford’s efforts at online teaching with classes that have more than 150,000 students from about 190 countries. The university’s president, John Hennessy, believes

online learning can be as revolutionary to education as digital downloads were to the music business. Distance learning threatens one day to disrupt higher education by reducing the cost of college and by offering the convenience of a stay-at-home, do-it-on-your-own-time education. An online syllabus could reach many more students, and reduce tuition charges and eliminate room and board. Students in an online university could take any course whenever they wanted,

and wouldn't have to waste time bicycling to class (Since then, John Mitchell was named the first vice provost for online learning at Stanford).²

On May 2 the dean replied with a quotation from a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article about online education: "Colleges are making a strategic investment in a commodity that will soon be freely available to everyone. Worse, they are using it to automate a business model that will soon be irrelevant."³

Several emails followed that culminated in the dean's visit to my office on August 29. He asked me to head a task force concerned with online education for the College of Communication. Consequently, I will coordinate our work with the in-progress and Cal State system's "Online Initiative."

"Project 10,000" is the name of a project in which students anywhere in the world can take courses offered by my college faculty without charge (they pay for a completion certificate if desired) may be a real possibility.

After a careful read of Wilson Lowrey's *Monograph*, it unexpectedly offered some optimism and strategic possibilities for the online teaching project.

Although on the surface it may seem that his piece published in this issue describes case studies involved with new communication technologies for various media entity situations that test his model for adoption or inaction, a close analysis rewards a reader like few other previously published works within these pages. His model can be applied to innovative ideas at your shop.

Inspired by a neo-Weberian ecological and institutional approach (before reading the piece I fully admit I knew nothing about Weber other than the line of fine quality barbeque grills), Lowrey identifies internal and external challenges to change and how institutions can predict fluxes in their constituents. As he notes, "Any new media entity scours the environment for news of change, responds strategically and seeks a sustainable niche, but it also begins to seek stability, familiarity, legitimation, and validation from similar media." Lowrey concludes, "Media adhere to their own kind and to past paths already taken, but they also respond to changing economic and social conditions."

As with media entities, educational institutions understand what has worked in the past, embrace what becomes successful demonstrated by others, and revel in what their publics—students, alumni, supporters, donors, legislators, and so on—accept. With the knowledge that administrators are generally uncomfortable with uncertainty, this *Monograph* nevertheless gave me hope for "Project 10,000."

One of Lowrey's conclusions is that "entrepreneurs with well-connected 'parents' . . . were more likely to attain legitimacy and persist." There are few larger or more imposing structures as the California State University system. However, with a dean and key university stakeholders on board, an experiment in MOOCs (Mega Open Online Courses) may be approved with the help of a variation of Lowrey's news ecology model.

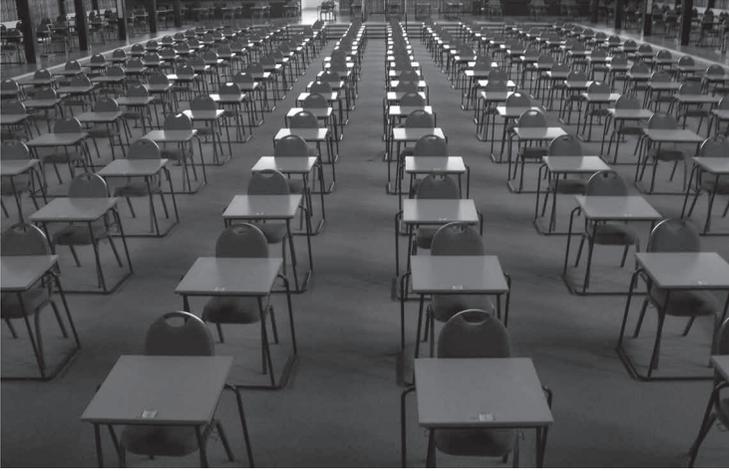


Illustration Desks are readied for a national standardized test at the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland. Will such analog procedures soon become obsolete with online classes?

Courtesy of Paul Martin Lester

Paul Martin Lester,
Editor-in-Chief

Notes

1. Other ideas included an “open architecture” curricular structure in which concentrations (or silos) are eliminated so students have more choices, a proposal that for one semester every course offered would be taught online, and the introduction of a Spanish-language journalism concentration.
2. Auletta, Ken (April 30, 2012). “Get Rich U. There are no walls between Stanford and Silicon Valley. Should there be?” *The New Yorker*. Available at <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/04/30/120430fa_fact_auletta>.
3. DeMillo, Richard A. (May 4, 2012). “So you’ve got technology. So what?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available at <www.lincoln.edu/imc/DigitalCampus2012.pdf>.