

## TOPcast Episode 13: The MOOC Gets a Toddler Check-Up

- KELVIN From the Center for Distributed Learning at the University of Central Florida, I'm Kelvin Thompson.
- TOM And I'm Tom Cavanagh.
- KELVIN And you're listening to TOPcast: Teaching Online Podcast.
- TOM Perhaps the only teaching online podcast? Perhaps?
- KELVIN Perhaps.
- TOM Probably not.
- KELVIN Probably not. I listen to some podcasts that at least touch on online stuff, so that's probably disingenuous of us to say the "only."
- TOM Well, if there's anything I don't want to be, it's disingenuous.
- KELVIN I'm not even sure what that means.
- TOM I would rather just be ingenuous.
- KELVIN I could be an ingénue.
- TOM *(laughter)* Please don't.
- KELVIN *(laughter)* And on that note...
- TOM Yeah, on that note... All right. So, those of you who are new to TOPcast, thank you for joining us here in season two of TOPcast!
- KELVIN *(noisemaker noise)* Woo! Happy new year!
- TOM Wow. Folks, for the record, it's not even a real noisemaker. It's Kelvin's app.
- KELVIN I have a noisemaker app!
- TOM We are such nerds. Oh my gosh. So, for those of you who are new to TOPcast and may not realize it, one of the things we do here, besides talking about online learning, is drink coffee.
- KELVIN Yeah. Because who wouldn't want to do that?
- TOM And I have become perhaps the biggest freeloader in higher education by drinking all of Kelvin's coffee over the past year. Thematically-brewed and -selected coffee, correct?
- KELVIN Yes. Just for you, Tom.
- TOM And so, right now, Kelvin is pouring from the thermos.

KELVIN Yes, indeed.

TOM How is this thematically selected?

KELVIN All right. So here we go. We've talked a bit about coffee processing before. We had some India Tree-Dried coffee on a previous episode. Despite the fact that coffee is a fairly old and established beverage, techniques for processing, roasting, grinding, and brewing continue to evolve. So today's recently-, locally-roasted coffee is from Columbia, and it's processed in a way that has grown popular recently in certain Central and South American countries. They call it—it's kind of weird—honey processing. And it has nothing to do with honey, just so you know. Because I was excited at first. Like, "Ooh! That sounds good!" But no. We remember from previously, coffee is actually kind of a fruit. A little coffee cherry, they call it, that has a skin and pulp and all that stuff. The thing that we roast and grind is the seed in the center. I'm waiting for someone to come up with some kind of a pumpkin beverage—you know, we roast those pumpkin seeds—but no, nobody's done that yet. So if you take off the skin and the pulp, there is this layer—this sticky gluey stuff—they call mucilage. They also call that honey. If you just strip it down to that and leave everything from there down in and then do the drying, they call that the honey process. And so this trendy method of coffee production is supposed to result in a more flavorful—maybe even, I don't know, fruitier—coffee without the risk of mold or souring that would otherwise be required for the same kind of effect. So, I thought this coffee would be appropriate given that we are checking in on something of a trendy phenomenon in this episode: the MOOC.

TOM The MOOC. All right, so we're drinking trendy coffee.

KELVIN You like it?

TOM I like it. It's good.

KELVIN Yeah, it's pretty good. It's not bad.

TOM It's trendy.

KELVIN And fruity.

TOM Yes.

KELVIN Maybe.

TOM Okay. So you mentioned that magical acronym: the MOOC. So if you are...

KELVIN *(interrupts)* Living under a rock?

TOM Well, yeah, I was actually going to say that, but I wanted to be nice. Perhaps somebody isn't part of higher education, and I'm frankly still surprised when I mention the idea of a MOOC—mostly in some faculty circles that maybe don't really teach online or read *The Chronicle* ever.

KELVIN Or come up for air?

TOM Yeah, they have no idea what a MOOC is. So let's define it. We'll set the table. A MOOC is a magical online—no. *(laughter)*

KELVIN *(laughter)* Wouldn't that be nice?

TOM Massive Open Online Course. And it is a funny acronym that has stuck. And it's not that new, really. It's been around a little while. But when we were talking about doing an episode on the MOOC...we've been talking about this for a while.

KELVIN I think we've been talking about it the entire year that we've been doing TOPcast.

TOM It's been on the list. "We need to talk about the MOOC!" I keep thinking that we needed to do...well, you're [Kelvin's] a parent.

KELVIN Uh huh. I am.

TOM I'm a parent. Both of our kids are out of the toddler stage, but you [Kelvin] may remember going to the pediatrician for the toddler check-up when they were a couple of years old. The MOOC is a couple of years old. I think it's time for a toddler check-up. And like a toddler, sometimes the MOOC acts up. Sometimes the MOOC needs to go in a timeout corner.

KELVIN *(laughter)* If only!

TOM And sometimes the MOOC is just adorable. I'm stretching the metaphor to the absolute breaking point. So I think it's time for a toddler check-up. So let's say...if we say the birth of the MOOC (I know this is not right) was 2012 when it was in *TIME* magazine, then it's like 4 years old now, at least at the point we're recording this. It's a little beyond toddler, but not quite into...it's sort of pre-school. Maybe it's overdue for its toddler check-up. So we need to check in. How's it doing? What's the pulse? Is it developing as it should? Is it on pace? Is its weight outpacing its height?

KELVIN There you go. That's right. You get that thing where [they say,] "Your kid is going to be in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile. They're going to be 7 feet tall. They're going to be, you know, whatever."

TOM Is it above average?

KELVIN We hope everybody is. There's a statistics joke in there somewhere.

TOM Everybody's above average.

KELVIN And every parent wants to see that their kid is going to be wonderful and above average and stellar. So, you know, we've talked a lot about this: we love the Gartner Hype Curve.

TOM Who doesn't?

KELVIN Right? Because it explains so very much of our lives.

TOM It is widely applicable.

KELVIN It really is. In 2012, that was hyped by the New York TIMES. It was the Year of the MOOC, right? Of this big, big thing. And so, that was probably the pinnacle of the Gartner Hype Curve, and then we went right on down into the trough of disillusionment.

TOM The trough of disillusionment. It's like the fire swamp and the rodents of unusual size.

KELVIN That sounds beautiful.

TOM It's a *The Princess Bride* reference.

KELVIN (*Vizzini's voice*) Inconceivable!

TOM So, yeah. MOOCs were part of some pretty grand predictions back then. If I recall correctly, Sebastian Thrun made some pretty famous and bold predictions about the future of higher education and universities consolidating or being run out of business by the introduction of the Massive Open Online Course, so that there might only be like ten institutions teaching and the rest taught online by these uber professors. And you know what? Not so much. It didn't really happen that way. And in fact, Thrun's company, Udacity, has completely pivoted in that time. So maybe that'll be our first check-up point. Let's just take a quick look at the big players, and maybe we'll start with Udacity. Because Udacity, I think, may have had the biggest change in its approach. It started out as a MOOC provider for higher education students or those who wanted a higher education experience. If I recall, he didn't really hire traditional, credentialed faculty to teach the courses. I think he did to develop the courses, but to teach the courses, he got people who really knew the subject and were good on camera. Frankly, that's not such a bad idea. But there were some sort of famous fiascos—like with San Jose State—where things didn't quite work out the way everybody expected or wanted them to, and the bloom came off the rose. So they've completely pivoted their business model to be basically a corporate training provider. And that may make some sense going forward for them, but it's not what it started out as, and it certainly isn't the harbinger of the end of higher education.

KELVIN No, not at all. Not at all. Maybe—I don't know if this is helpful—but just maybe pick up on what we think we've observed about MOOCs a little bit as part of our little check-up. You [Tom] mentioned this... Well, maybe we should back up and say that you [Tom] alluded this earlier that MOOCs were actually around before 2012.

TOM Yeah, you're right. Maybe before we check in on some of the other big players.

KELVIN A little street cred here. An homage.

TOM Let's at least recognize that we know a little of the history of MOOCs. And for the record, you [Kelvin] delivered a MOOC prior to the Year of the MOOC.

KELVIN Oh man, we're trendsetters. I guess that's true.

TOM The BlendKit MOOC. We were calling it a MOOC and building a MOOC before everyone else had heard of MOOCs.

KELVIN That's right. Well, we were riding the coattails of what some have now called cMOOCs—connectivist MOOCs—after Siemens and Downes and others. The first MOOC I can remember up in that vein was CCK 2008, which I always mess up. It has connectivism and knowledge and connective in the title somewhere. So when we did BlendKit 2011, it was in that same vein.

TOM And [CCK 2008] was George Siemens and Stephen Downes.

KELVIN You know, massive back then—they were using this term—was maybe a couple hundred people. Not ten thousand or whatever.

TOM And when Thrun did his one—it was a computer science one at Stanford—and he got like 110,000, it really opened everyone's eyes to the possibilities. Numbers like that get your attention.

KELVIN That's true. So at this point the cMOOCs are still around but the xMOOC is dominant and that's what people think of. They're definitely associated as you mentioned, Tom, at edX which is like the Ivy's and so forth, and Udacity and Coursera as for-profit company and the like. You know, I think some of these things are interesting. You would hear—just like it was going to revolutionize education—it was also touted back then as an immense democratizing force in education. It's going to change the world because anybody can get access to a high quality higher education even if you don't get the diploma necessarily.

TOM And the narrative—the dominant narrative—was always the fourteen-year-old kid in Mongolia who would have otherwise never been able to access this kind of an education who now is going to Stanford or MIT or whatever. Great! I mean, who can argue against that? That's awesome, and we should continue to do that sort of thing. But I mean, the

truth is the vast majority of the people who are taking these MOOCs are people who already have Bachelor's degrees.

KELVIN And overwhelmingly North America and other so-called first world countries. Not that it [international access] doesn't happen. It does happen.

TOM We've done a couple here. Certainly not at that scale. And the faculty who have taught those have shared with me that a lot of the students were international.

KELVIN Which is very cool. The other thing is—I guess in a little bit in defense of the xMOOC...I don't know how I found myself in that situation, but here I am—completion rates have been compared to completion rates of academic credit-bearing courses and been left found wanting. You see, you know, 5% mentioned and so forth, and you hear people say, “Well, if I had a class that only 5% completed, I'd be fired out of my ear!” Some of them argue that thinking of MOOCs as courses in the same way as higher ed. courses is foolish because people have different goals and levels of commitment with MOOCs. [They're] just checking it out, or they're tuning in a little bit, picking up some relevant content that they want—some factoids, some little bit of nugget—and then taking off. Completion might not be one of the goals that those folks have, and so there's other kinds of metrics that folks have looked at. Some have said that maybe MOOCs are better compared to textbooks than they are courses, like really interactive textbooks. I think that's kind of interesting.

TOM You can use the pieces that you want and discard the pieces that you don't. I co-authored a blog post about MOOCs a while ago. I think it was for Sloan Consortium when they were called the Sloan Consortium. And in it—it was Chuck Dziuban and I—we made the argument, among other things, that in a traditional academic course, it's the faculty member that sort of sets the success criteria for the students. I think in a MOOC it's the other way around. The student sets the success criteria.

KELVIN Oh yeah, excellent.

TOM And the student comes in and says, “This is what I want out of this course. I want to learn this thing. I don't care about your credential. So I don't care about finishing, but I got what I want. It was successful to me.” I think it turns the whole evaluation standard on its head.

KELVIN Yeah, and I think that's fascinating. Maybe...I was going to make this point, which I guess I'll make it and I'll come back to this one. I've heard Sebastian Thrun—maybe not use this metaphor but use the same kind of concept—[say that] MOOCs have also served as sort of a giant petri dishes for testing out a variety of educational interventions and methods. I've heard him say once, “Well, it's like we could do this kind of intervention or we could do that kind of intervention. Well, how about we do both? We got enough people, and we can tell, at scale, which one is generally more effective.”

- TOM You get a statistically valid sample instantly. There's a lot of attractiveness to that. edX—it was originally set up between MIT and Harvard, but others have since joined the edX Consortium—was set up primarily for research. Now I think it has to financially stand on its own bottom—as Harvard likes to say—but it does have in its DNA a research mission. I've also heard Daphne Koller and Andrew in his talk about Coursera and the fact that they can experiment very quickly. Or if they see something's going wrong, they can quickly react before it becomes an issue because they do have such numbers. And to the point—and I can't believe I'm defending the xMOOC here—I think it was Andrew Ng at a conference—it might be somebody else—that said, "Yeah, the completion rates maybe aren't great in comparison to academic courses that are more traditional. But when you're talking about 100,000 students, 5% of 100,000 students may be more students than I would have taught in my entire career otherwise." So you're still reaching a large number of students who maybe couldn't get it another way? At least some of them.
- KELVIN No, I think that's right. And so that other point—you [Tom] were talking about the piece that you write with Chuck Dziuban and standing evaluation on its head—I think in that same vein as being a giant petri dish for methods, thinking about the roles of the learner and the instructor and materials and evaluating that through fresh eyes is not a bad thing in general. I mean, yeah, it's unique to that particular situation, but what can we learn from an evaluation standpoint? How can we think about things differently, even in our traditional settings? Because, you know, in terms of talking about disruptive innovations and so forth, I think MOOCs—xMOOCs—have taught us a lot about that, and there's probably things to be harvested in those kind of principles.
- TOM Yeah, I think so, too, and I love the... I mean, this is, I think, another symptom of the fact that the MOOC is still riding that hype cycle. It still hasn't figured out quite what it wants to be when it grows up. It is still just a preschooler.
- KELVIN That's right.
- TOM [It's] the fact that there are these very interesting experiments going on. Coursera is experimenting with these sort of, you know, credentials in partnership with testing centers. edX and Udacity have these partnerships going on with the Georgia Tech computer science degree for whatever—\$5000 or whatever crazy price it was. Now I understand some of that was underwritten by AT&T, and that there some other things, but just the fact that you could deliver a high quality Master's degree from an institution like Georgia Tech at scale like that, so affordably, I think, is interesting. And I encourage people to continue experimenting with it, but it's not... The dust has not settled. *(laughter)* I'm mixing a lot of metaphors on what the MOOC is going to be.
- KELVIN No, that's right. I will say... maybe one thing that I think is an interesting and probably is a good thing to explore but I'm not a fan of personally, I guess, that has also been experimented with, is the machine learning and auto-scoring assessment. I'll frame it as tested out for minimum viability in MOOCs. We probably need to test the limits of that, like velociraptors pushing against the fence—as long as we're messing around with

metaphors—but you know, I don't necessarily want to see us doing that in online education in general, personally. That's just me.

TOM Yeah, well, I mean I get that. It may be a safer space to experiment because there's less at risk, but maybe an area that where I see the MOOC world and the more traditional world kind of converging is the idea of these micro-credentials. The MOOC providers are experimenting with these micro-credentials and these mini-certificates or things that don't necessarily come with academic credit but have currency in the marketplace for employment or something. Institutions of higher education are also looking at those kinds of things. It could be that there is some sort of overlap or convergence there where experimentation in one side or the other will inform what's happening in the other one.

KELVIN And as long as MOOCs are still around, I think another thing that is interesting that you hear about now and again—and I guess we've played with it a little bit in some small level even with our BlendKit MOOCs—is the idea of contextualizing or doing a wraparound kind of thing with a MOOC. So that you, as an individual instructor—again, kind of like a textbook—you can say, “Hey. I'm going to provide you some contextualization here that then we are going to make use of this MOOC in some way. We're all going to go take that MOOC, or we're going to use different elements of it.” Of course there's different licensing options, and you've got to be careful about staying straight with that and using the materials and the courses in the way that they're intended, but I think that's kind of an interesting thing. You know, you get best of both worlds, and you could be at a small liberal arts school in a small class and then build yourself up these high end resources with this uber professor, as you say, and then still anchor back here in this local context. That's kind of interesting.

TOM Yeah, it is. As well as the whole idea of prior learning assessment.

KELVIN Yes.

TOM So, if you take a school like Excelsior that will give credit for basically credit-by-exam, but allowing you to prep for the exam by taking a free MOOC. Now you may pay for the exam and the credit but at a reduced rate than you would have if you had taken the class. If you're willing to do the work on your own through a MOOC and take the exam to prove that you mastered it, you can potentially get a college degree a lot cheaper than you would if you had actually gone through a more traditional path.

KELVIN That is very, very cool. But here's the curmudgeonly part of the episode where I say that some of us who've been around online ed. for a while have been a bit chuffed when the general public [equates] online courses with MOOCs. Now, that's kind of lessened over the last year or so, but I swear that the people who know what a MOOC is—or even if they don't know of the term—there's this idea of this large impersonal experience [with] low completion rates. There's sort of this hazy thing in a lot of people's minds when you say, “Oh yeah, I do online courses.” “Oh that?”



TOM “Yeah, I take one of those. I dropped out of that Harvard class.”

KELVIN “No, no, no, not that.”

TOM Yeah, and that’s one of my pet peeves, too. It has lessened, and so I’ve stopped getting on my soap box and pounding on the table and saying, “MOOCs does not equal online learning.” I think—what have I said—it’s just one flower in the garden of online learning, and I think that harkens back to previous podcasts.

KELVIN I think so. It sounds familiar.

TOM I guess this may be a recurring theme: this rage against this MOOC conflation. So we’re over it now. We’ve had a lot of therapy—

KELVIN *(interrupts)* And coffee!

TOM —and coffee, and we’ve talked about it, so we understand that that’s changing. But yeah, it is still out there, particularly with the general public that don’t do online learning every day like we do.

KELVIN Yes, but surprisingly, we’ve identified here, as we’ve been talking, some positives, right? Some things that have come about positively because of the MOOC thing, and MOOCs haven’t stopped. They’re not frozen in time. The canon’s not closed, right? There’s still things going on, and who knows exactly what the future will hold with it? But I don’t know that they’re going away any time soon.

TOM No, I don’t either. And I don’t think they should. I think there’s a place for them, but the point of this toddler check-up is to say that the MOOC hasn’t found its place. It’s continuing to grow and develop, and we’ll give it healthy vegetables and food, and we’ll make sure it gets thirty minutes of exercise a day, and we will, you know, continue to encourage its creativity.

KELVIN And climb out of the trough of disillusionment and find its place on the plateau of productivity.

TOM Yes. Yes. Although I was going to go with a playground metaphor.

KELVIN The playground of productivity.

TOM There you go! Because that’s what toddlers do.

KELVIN Okay.

TOM They grow into preschoolers that play on the playground.

KELVIN      Okay, that's good. So, is this an okay place to leave it? That the MOOC has not, as you [Tom] pointed out, obliterated traditional education as some predicted; however, it's not evaporated either, and it remains to be seen who this entity's going to grow up and be.

TOM          I can hardly wait [to see] who our little MOOC will grow up to be.

KELVIN      *(laughter)* There it is!

TOM          There it is.

KELVIN      All right, so I guess for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

TOM          I'm Tom.

KELVIN      See ya!