Massive, open, online courses (MOOCs) have dominated the conversation in higher education since their sudden arrival in spring 2012. Building upon the enrollment of more than 100,000 students in open courses offered by Stanford University, companies such as Udacity, Coursera, and edX were launched with the goal of offering free, open, academic courses, taught by distinguished faculty to students all over the world. The MOOC movement is evidence of the profoundly disruptive change that is widely seen as coming to higher education. The cost of a college degree is growing at an unsustainable rate. In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama put higher education on notice that this trend cannot continue. But what does this mean for academic libraries?

For more on MOOCs in libraries, see

- Opening Up
- MOOCing at the Public Library
- Massive Open Opportunity

If there is any unit on a university campus that has survived and thrived on disruptive change, it is the library. Libraries in institutions actively offering MOOCs applied this background to figuring out how to manage intellectual property questions. They had to decide whether or not to try to negotiate for course materials. They needed to strategize on the opportunity to push for wider use of open content. It was a challenge to help faculty design courses and use technology to deliver engaging instruction to more students than they had ever seen in their entire careers. These are all traditional responses to the academic support role that libraries typically play in institutions of higher learning.

Going it alone

However, for libraries in universities not offering MOOCs, there seemed to be no role, other than to watch and read about the movement in wonder, amusement, and occasional envy. For the Z. Smith Reynolds Library (ZSR) at Wake
Forest University (WFU), however, this was not enough. ZSR was the 2011 winner of the Excellence in Academic Libraries award from the Association of College and Research Libraries. It was judged to be exceptional at aligning with and furthering the mission of its parent institution. It is known for encouraging and placing high value on innovation and frequently leads the campus in the adoption of emerging technologies. The library was the first to use social media (when social media was new) and the first to teach completely online classes with its 1.5-credit information literacy course, Lib 100: Accessing Information in the 21st Century.

So when WFU was not contemplating offering any MOOCs in 2012, the library decided to experiment with an open, online course on its own.

While the philosophy of massive, open courses went against the “Wake Forest way” of up-close and personal teaching with a high level of engagement between students and faculty, ZSR had demonstrated with the online version of Lib 100 that it was possible to have close engagement in an online class.

A number of other factors led to the decision. The library was seeking greater visibility with its alumni, who had gone to school in an age when the library was not the unquestioned intellectual hub on campus, as it is today. Parents were another audience the library wished to reach. Parents are increasingly involved with their students’ lives and at a private institution such as WFU, they are capable of offering significant financial and political support. The governing bodies of the university were proud of ZSR’s national award but wondered privately about the continued relevance of a unit like the library in the digital age. To establish its role as an innovative campus leader with these important constituents and to engage in the purest form of innovative inquiry, in fall 2012, the library resolved to offer an abbreviated open, online version of its Lib 100 information literacy course. As a takeoff on the “x” movement (X-games, TEDx, edX), it was called ZSRx. And to continue the pun, the full title was ZSRx: The Cure for the Common Web.

The making of a mini-MOOC

The design of the course was entrusted to a brand-new e-learning librarian, fresh out of library school, with a background in education. He immediately saw the potential for the course and welcomed the chance to be creative. By early spring 2013, he had designed a four-week course with modules that explored tools and techniques for using the web to increase productivity, search effectiveness, evaluate skills, and raise awareness of issues related to privacy on the web.

- Module 1: Search Strategies
- Module 2: Advanced Searching
- Module 3: Privacy and Filters
- Module 4: Tools for Information Management

In the interests of time and expediency, the course was built with Google Sites and employed Google Groups and the Google+ community for discussion. This platform proved adequately flexible, though there was some confusion between Google Groups and Google+ for novices, and the registration process was not particularly smooth or intuitive.

ZSRx was marketed to 40,000 WFU alumni by means of a mass email from the alumni office in early March 2013. It was also advertised on the Wake Forest Parents Page. Yet though it was only promoted to Wake Forest affiliates, in fact it was open to anyone who heard about it or found the link. This kind of targeted marketing to a defined audience belies the “massive” definition of a MOOC. ZSRx was sometimes called a “mini-MOOC,” which is a bit of a contradiction in terms, and sometimes referred to as a “LOOC,” or limited, open, online course. Given the experimental nature of the initiative, the goal was to enroll 100 students. When the email went out to alumni, more than 500 people enrolled on the first day, and the course ended up with 700 registrants on five continents. To a small library in a small university, that felt massive enough.

The course designer wanted students to feel free to sample as much, or as little, as they chose. He likened it to a bowl of candy and reassured people if they only chose one or two delights, that might be better than feeling obligated to consume the whole thing. Unlike “traditional” MOOCs offered by providers like Coursera or edX, there were no tests, no homework assignments, and no certificates of completion. However, participants did engage with the course and with one another. Of the 700 who signed up, 150 provided introductory statements on who they were and why they took the course. Alumni were represented from the Class of 2012 all the way back to the Class of 1954. Participants were delighted to connect with fellow alumni who lived nearby or in their hometown. Testimonials were very generous:
I've learned a lot from the course—and since at 81, I'm what you could call a computer dinosaur, no one is more surprised than I!

Kudos to you and Wake for doing this, and I hope you will offer other courses in the future.

From stand-alone to series

Based on the success of this first MOOC, the Z. Smith Reynolds Library has turned ZSRx into an entire series of open, online courses. Next in the series was a four-week course for Wake Forest parents, designed to bring participants to a fuller understanding of how the current younger generation experiences their college years and how parents can support them in the process. Plans for the future include courses on digital publishing, social media, and a possible partnership with public libraries in the state on genealogy.

ZSRx has shown that libraries can successfully take an active role in the development of open, online, learning communities. While libraries may continue to play traditionally supportive roles for MOOCs and other online learning ventures in their institutions, they may also choose to step up to a more direct role in providing lifelong learning opportunities for their chosen communities. How much better for libraries to be at the center, rather than at the periphery, of such a movement.

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