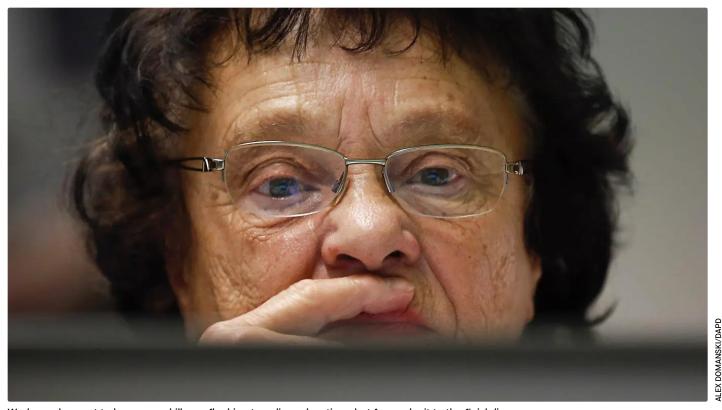# QUARTZ

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MISSIVE TO THE MASSIVE

The dirty little secret of online learning: Students are bored and dropping out

By Todd Tauber • March 21, 2013

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Workers who want to learn new skills are flocking to online education—but few make it to the finish line.

Online education has been around for a long time. But massive open online courses are finally making it respectable. Maybe even cool. Let's not forget, though, that they are still experiments. And despite being "massively overhyped" (even in the eyes of their most dyed-in-the-wool supporters), they are not actually having a massive impact on

Because if online education is going to be useful for learners, then it's time for online learning to grow up.

Hundreds of courses are now available from dozens of the world's best universities and professors. There's been a steady stream of glowing public relations and growing credibility among employers. There's even an acronym for massive open online courses that's gone mainstream: MOOCs. The four major MOOC platforms (Coursera, edX, Udacity and Udemy) have attracted at least 4 million sign-ups to date. Many of those people are working adults looking to pick up new technical or business skills, or update old ones, in order to advance their careers.

So far, though, online courses are not building a massively better-skilled workforce.

Sure, a few free, open, online courses have generated eye-popping registration numbers, upwards of 200,000 in some cases. However the average enrollment for MOOCs is more like 30,000 to 50,000. The real problem, though, is that more than 90% of these would-be learners don't finish. Many don't even start the courses for which they are registered. And a lot of those who finish don't take another one. That means the number of people actually learning anything substantial is much less massive than the PR suggests.

Not So Massive After All

So why are all these students falling asleep, virtually, in their digital classes? Mainly because the people putting education online are still thinking in terms of classrooms. And despite incorporating "decades of research on how students learn best", the world has changed a lot in just the last few years.

went online roughly five times a day, in long chunks, according to Joe Kraus, a partner at Google Ventures. Today, with smartphones, it's 27 times, in much shorter bursts. Twentieth century instructional methods just don't work as well for busy, distracted 21st-century learners.

Another big issue, especially for non-traditional students, is that learning has to fit in between life and work. In a recent Duke University survey of MOOC students, for example, the most commonly cited barrier to completion was "lack of time/amount of time required." Yet most of today's online courses basically consist of reading assignments, lecture videos, homework problems and quizzes. They might be broken up into short lessons, but they still follow the same old linear, 14- to 20-week long structure of a semester. So is it really surprising that so many of the students in a recent University of California, Irvine massive online microeconomics course couldn't be bothered to read the textbook or supplemental learning materials?

To be fair, there's always going to be dropouts when learning is voluntary. According to the MASIE Center, a think tank focused on the intersection of learning and technology, only 32% of people even start on-the-job e-learning courses if they're not required. That's fine if nobody pays or expects much. But considering the stakes for learners, not to mention the massive amounts of money and brain power being invested in creating online courses, we should expect better. Companies paying for training or tuition reimbursement certainly will.

Fortunately, we won't have to wait long because a lot of smart people are already putting a lot of thought, work and money into making them better. The National Science

researchers to understand exactly why the vast majority of MOOC students don't make it to the finish line. Carnegie Mellon University, meanwhile, is spending $500,000 to $1 million to create each of 15 new courses based on up-to-date research into how adults learn online. And investments in next generation adaptive learning technologies are surging.

Before education can be effective, though, you first need to grab and hold learners' attention. So these people would be smart to start by recognizing that learning online is not the same as it is in a classroom. And they should take some cues from the companies that are excelling at captivating easily distracted, constantly connected people on the same computers, smartphones and tablets where they will be learning.

If they do that, they'll see that digital learning needs to become much more mobile, personal and social. That may sound obvious, but it's apparently not. At last count, for example, only 34% of college faculty are using social media for teaching. As Carson Kahn, an educational technology specialist at the City University of New York, puts it, "education lags 30 years behind most of the world, and 50 years behind Silicon Valley."

Let's start with mobile first. Around 83% of millennials–today's college students, entry-level workforce and emerging managers and entrepreneurs–literally sleep with their smartphones and consumers have doubled the time they spend on mobile apps in the last two years (to about two hours a day now). Facebook, for one, recognized that most of its users are now coming from smartphones and tablets and that those people are engaging twice as much (in page views, interactions, consumption and production) as desktop or

strategy around mobile. And it's why K-12 schools and colleges around the world are racing to put tablets in classrooms while some of the world's biggest technology, education and media companies are racing to supply them.

"Mobile," however, means more than just delivering the same old content on smartphones or tablets. Mobile education needs to be tailored for smaller, more limited, more intimate mobile devices. That means the user experience needs to be more streamlined and intuitive than today's learning management systems. It also needs to be designed for the specific behaviors of mobile users. And mobile users are first and foremost easily distracted. More than 25% of them acknowledge that smartphones make it significantly harder to focus on a single task.

That's because they're not using their devices in classrooms or offices. They're using them in noisy, public, social spaces, like trains, coffee shops or living rooms (or meetings, if we're being really honest). Mobile content, then, needs to be "bite-sized," visually stimulating and interactive. Because online, you have maybe five to 10 seconds to grab people's attention, according to recent research by University of Massachusetts professor Ramesh Sitaraman. Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube, whose educational videos alone have been viewed more than 3 billion times, get all that. But in the age of information overload, good design and more content—even if it is short, beautiful, entertaining and accessible on any device—isn't the whole answer.

Everyone has different interests and needs. Which brings us to personalization. As Khan Academy president Shantanu Sinah recently noted: "Students right now are kind of forced into a system where they're pushed forward in almost an

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to personalize the instruction and target what their individual needs are. You can fill those gaps, and when you do that and when you empower students to do that … the learning is so much more productive." Amazon, Netflix and Pandora do that very effectively for books, TV shows and movies ("if you like this…"). Twitter and LinkedIn have been doing it for professional news and information, too.

Taking a cue from Twitter and LinkedIn, education online also needs to do a better job leveraging peer interaction and collaboration. Most MOOCs do already promote discussions among classmates to help with homework and grading. But the emergence of Twitter and LinkedIn (and soon Facebook) as go-to sources of professional insights shows that people want to actually learn from, and work with, their colleagues and business contacts just as much as from PhDs, editors and other experts. A recent Michigan State University study even found that students who used Twitter to engage with classmates as well as instructors "were more interested in the course material–and ultimately received higher grades."

The MOOC providers, their institutional partners, education-technology entrepreneurs and even the big, traditional education publishers all understand this and they're working hard to improve the state of affairs. Yet no one has quite put it all together yet. Surprisingly—or maybe not considering they spend more than $1 billion on technology—the institution who's come closest so far is the University of Phoenix. Yes, *that* University of Phoenix, the one the US Senate accused of providing "an inferior education" last year.

The U of P's new executive education course, Innovator's Accelerator, developed with Silicon Valley design firm, IDEO, mixes short videos and frequent assessments with facilitated

tools designed specifically to drive participation. According to Inside Higher Ed, the results—a narrative, six-week learning experience—"are impressive, and honestly a bit worrying" for makers of traditional online courses. Just a few catches: It reportedly cost the university's parent company, Apollo Group, millions of dollars to develop; it costs participants $1,999; and six weeks is still an awfully long time for many of today's adult learners.

Online education has come a long way in a short time. Now it's time to continue that evolution. If we can continue to improve quality and do a better job of fitting education into the way people actually learn now, we'll be a lot closer to sustaining the original vision of effectively bringing high-quality education to scale. Meanwhile, it's about time we accept that the future of online learning looks a lot like the University of Phoenix.