Coursera

Last year Is participated in a number of MOOCs on Coursera. These massive open online courses are run by lecturers at traditional brick-and-mortar universities, and are generally based on the courses they teach at their home institution. While the overwhelming majority of courses are taught in English, the partner universities are global and so there are course offerings in a dozen different languages. Courses themselves range from The Worlds of Historical Fiction to Internet History, Technology and Security. The completion rates (wherein a student watches most of the video lectures and attempts most assessments) are low, most students either disengage or only sample the lectures, never attempting any assessment.

Of the five courses I have started, I have completed three, dropped out of one (due to working several sixty hour weeks that coincided with some crucial weeks of the course), and am working on completing the fifth. The courses have been run like their more traditional counterparts with 2-5 hours of lectures and then a homework assignment each week. Since the homework has to be submitted for assessment by a set deadline, and isn't generally posted more than a week in advance of this deadline, it can be hard to keep up if you haven't the necessary time every week.

The first course I took was Introduction to Interactive Programming in Python which taught the basics of Python by programming various simple games including pong and asteroids. I used a web-based IDE written specifically for the course which had some libraries to facilitate building the GUIs needed for the games. The maths required for some games (such as the vectors needed for pong) was provided, but the necessary programming concepts were taught generally and then it was up to me to use the right ones for any given project.

Metadata was one of the most interesting courses. With all of the others I had some prior experience with the language used, or the concepts taught, but metadata wasn't a subject I knew anything about. It was really interesting getting to start a subject from scratch again, and with such an enthusiastic lecturer. We studied various schema, including Dublin Core, controlled vocabularies, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings, and structured data for the sematic web. Most of the course was theoretical, but did look at creating and using metadata schemas in RDF and XML.

So far the only MOOC platform I have used in any depth is Coursera. I have sampled courses on Udacity and CodeAcademy and found that Coursera's format of lectures, assignments and scheduled deadlines gives the courses more structure. The teaching level on Coursera seems closer to that of the modules I studied at University of Bristol, which motivate my study more than courses which are too simplified.

I would hope that in the future it becomes more common to study using MOOCs rather than the traditional university route, and that institutions find a way to attribute work to

students so that the courses studied remotely can be used as part of course-load for a degree. While institutions like the Open University already exist the cost of their courses can be prohibitive, especially for the unemployed, or those in low paid jobs. MOOCs could allow a wider range of people to gain qualifications that would enable them to improve their job prospects and career opportunities. They also allow people to dabble in areas that may be of interest to them without committing large amounts of time or money to something they may not persevere with.