

## More universities try the MOOC model by moving professors' lectures online

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Philip Zelikow packs a lot into his modern world history course, roaming in a given week from the Napoleonic wars to Latin American revolutions to India circa 1800. But the professor sets a casual tone as he teaches dozens of undergraduates at the University of Virginia and tens of thousands of others worldwide through a lecture series delivered entirely online.

"True, it's a lot of conversations to have with the professor, and you don't get to talk back directly," Zelikow says in an introduction recorded in his book-lined office. "But on the plus side, you get to stop, pause, fast forward, rewind — or if you get tired of the professor, just turn him off. So, welcome to The Modern World."

This massive open online course, or MOOC, offers the world a free sample of education from the elite public university that Thomas Jefferson founded. But it also reflects a broad push in academia to redefine the college classroom for students who pay tuition on campus.

Zelikow's U-Va. students watch his lectures on their own time, freeing up precious classroom hours for in-depth discussion with a historian who has served in the upper echelons of U.S. government. This technique, known as flipping the classroom, is spreading in universities around the country as educators seek to harness technological advances to make undergraduate lecture courses less of a passive listening exercise and more of a dynamic give-and-take.

There is growing consensus that the classic college lecture, with a "sage on the stage" holding forth for an hour or more, too often delivers mediocre results. Students tune out. Professors get stale.

"Year after year, you're walking into the same room, saying the same words," said Stanford University computer scientist Andrew Ng. "Year after year, telling the same jokes. You start to wonder if this is how best to teach."

Dissatisfaction with live lectures helped drive Ng and Stanford colleague Daphne Koller to put course materials online. The success of those experiments led them last year to launch the MOOC platform Coursera.

Coursera and edX, another online platform led by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have drawn millions of people around the world to sign up for free online classes from top-flight schools. And they have fueled debate about what matters most in instruction.

Teaching reforms go well beyond MOOCs. In Maryland, educators have slashed live lecturing recently in courses such as Psychology 101 at Bowie State and Salisbury universities, Intermediate Algebra at Frostburg State, and Principles of Biology and Principles of Chemistry at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore.

"In the end, students are more satisfied, and faculty are more satisfied," said William E. "Brit" Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland. Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) this year proposed expanding the state's course-redesign initiative.

U-Va., which joined Coursera last summer, is also looking to improve undergraduate teaching. University officials say they are pleased that MOOCs are giving faculty unprecedented access to a global audience. But that is not their main goal.

"The very best thing is, it provides a way for us to rethink how we do face-to-face education," said James L. Hilton, university vice president and chief information officer.

Zelikow volunteered to lead U-Va.'s MOOC debut.

Known for serving as executive director of the 9/11 Commission, which examined the September 2001 terrorist attacks, Zelikow is a member of President Obama's Intelligence Advisory Board. On the U-Va. faculty since 1998, he is the university's associate dean for graduate programs in arts and sciences.

Zelikow said he is typically skeptical of "naive, faddish talk" about the transformative power of technology. "I'm not a tech geek," he said.

But it intrigued him that a MOOC might enable him to overhaul a course he has taught many times: The Modern World — Global History Since 1760. In years past, he would typically present a long, prepared lecture for a large class, as entertaining as he could make it, with graduate students then leading small-group discussion sections.

For the version that began Jan. 14 and will run through April, Zelikow recorded dozens of lectures. Lengths vary: six minutes on "Liberty and 'Common Sense'"; 19 on "Breaking open China and Japan"; 36 on "Enemies of Liberalism." The setting is his office, with close camera angles on the professor sitting in front of shelves of maroon reference volumes on U.S. foreign relations. He sprinkles in maps, art and photographs to make points. The effect he seeks is learned, casual and intimate.

"Welcome back," he greets viewers. "Make yourself comfortable."

About 47,000 students who registered to take the course for free received suggestions for optional readings. But they can also just watch the lectures. So far, about 25,000 have. Those who take weekly multiple-choice quizzes can earn a non-credit "statement of accomplishment" if they score 65 percent or higher.

"I enjoy the course 'to the max,'" Arlen Coyle, 68, of Oxford, Miss., one of the nonpaying students, wrote in an e-mail to The Washington Post. He said it requires "moderate" effort. "Prior to taking the weekly test," Coyle wrote, "I review my bound notes, confirm that I understand everything, sometimes re-open and review the visual materials Prof. Zelikow used during the week, then tell myself: 'Do it, old man.'"

For about 80 U-Va. students, there are required readings, quizzes, written assignments, a midterm and a final exam. That is all fairly standard. The biggest novelty is that Zelikow – liberated from the obligation to lecture in class – leads discussion sections himself every Tuesday afternoon. One day this month, for example, he asked students to consider the preconditions for innovation in a society.

“Take a moment. Think about it. Jot down a few things. I just want to listen to you talk about this for a while,” he told them.

On Thursdays, teaching assistants oversee what the professor calls “history labs,” pushing students to explore primary source documents related to specific cities and points in time.

Zelikow touts another new twist. The new format enables students to read particular passages from a textbook or another source just as that information is most relevant: when a student is about to watch a related lecture. As a result, the professor says, readings and lectures can reinforce each other more than ever before.

“I’ve been teaching courses like this for about 20 years now,” Zelikow said. “This is the most powerful design.”

Raj Singh, 20, a second-year U-Va. student from Herndon, said he likes watching lectures outside of class. “You spend time learning what happened on your own,” he said. “Then, you come to the discussion and history labs, and you get a better feel for the ‘why’ questions.”

Drew Brophy, 21, a fourth-year student from Grosse Pointe, Mich., said the video lectures connect with students who have short attention spans. “For the YouTube generation,” he said, “it works a lot better. . . . This is an optimal way to do class.”

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