Open to Debate: Open Education and the Library

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Abstract

Universities have embraced massive open online courses (MOOCs) with startling speed. For some, this "disruptive" idea sparks excitement about a world of free and easily accessible education. Others see MOOCs as a way to further monetize education and reduce the number of faculty on the academy's payroll. This session encouraged participants to get involved in the conversation and consider other provocative questions arising from the new academic landscape created by open educational resources and free online courses. In an Oxford-style debate, session attendees got to be the debaters by voting on some of today's most controversial issues, engaging in debate, then voting a second time to see if opinions had been changed. This session sought to provide a stimulating, informative and interactive exploration of the controversies surrounding the latest developments in open education.

Introduction

Controversial questions surrounding open education in the form of MOOCs, open educational resources (OER) and open access (OA) are currently being debated in online blogs, scholarly literature and university library staff rooms. In the discussion session "Open to Debate: Open Education and the Library," participants were given the chance to actively engage in that debate with colleagues. A vote taken before and after the debate encouraged participants to take a stand, carefully consider the pros and cons presented for each of three questions and then come to a final decision based on a more informed position. Final votes on all three questions show some minds were changed in the process.

Description

Open education is a transformative idea. Providing quality online courses, open access textbooks and open educational resources for anyone with an Internet connection could create a nation of knowledgeable lifelong learners or decimate higher education as we know it. Or both. Like all disruptive ideas it raises some controversial questions. In this session, the presenters framed three questions addressing the open education movement:

- Are MOOCs a good thing?

- Can open access and open educational resources replace traditional publishing?
- Should libraries buy textbooks?

Using Poll Everywhere, a pre-debate vote was taken, allowing attendees to vote as for, against or abstaining on the issue. Attendees were then teamed up and assigned a "side" of the debate. Handouts provided background and context for current controversies and then attendees were asked to engage in an Oxford-style debate. Each faction presented their defense and the debate began. At the end of the debate, a second vote was taken to see if opinions on the issue had changed. The side that swayed the most opinions won. The intent of the session was for attendees to leave with a better sense of the issues and opportunities created by open education and an understanding of where their faculty and administrators stand on the subject and why

Key Points

Following are the main pro/con points that were provided to attendees to prepare them for their debates.

Are MOOCS a Good Thing?

	For	**Against**	**Abstain**
Original Vote	6	3	2
Final Vote	5	6	0

Con Arguments

- The average MOOC completion rate is 6.8% (Parr, 2013)
- 150,000:1 - the student-to-professor ratio in a Fall 2011 Udacity class (Papano, 2012).
- Ideal student-to-professor ratios have long been in the 10:1 to 20:1 range. To compensate, many MOOCs are machine graded and discussion boards are peer-to-peer rather than instructor-to-student focused.
- In 2013, San Jose State University Philosophy professors refused to use edX lectures in their courses, stating that "two classes of universities will be created: one, well-funded colleges and universities in which privileged students get their own real professor; the other, financially stressed private and public universities in which students watch a bunch of videotaped lectures and interact, if indeed any interaction is available on their home campuses, with a professor that this model of education has turned into a glorified teaching assistant." (Kolowich, 2013)

Pro Arguments

- 200+ universities participate in MOOC making

- 10 million students enroll in MOOCs (Shah, 2013)
- Per Anka Mulder, President of the OpenCourseWare Consortium: "Millions are using MOOCs so apparently MOOCs are addressing a demand. These people pay nothing for their courses and still get quality education, sometimes great, sometimes average, but still better than none at all." (Mulder, 2013)
- "Recent MOOCs differ from previous attempts to provide online education to non-traditional learners in that they are free of charge and don't require pre-entry qualifications, rather than low-cost degree initiatives aimed at creating new revenue streams." (ACU, 2013)
- Engineering professors at San Jose State successfully used videos from MITx's MOOC *Circuits and Electronics* to flip the classroom, engaging in the "Blended Learning" mode encouraged edX founder Anant Agarwak. Students watched MITx videos online, then used class time to work through problems. This experiment increased completion rates of a dreaded engineering class from 55% to 91%. (Harris, 2013)

Can Open Access and Open Educational Resources Replace Traditional Publishing?

	For	Against	Abstain
Original Vote	7	2	1
Final Vote	7	3	0

Con Arguments

- In 2013, John Bohannon submitted fictitious scientific research with obvious methodological, scientific and writing flaws for review to 255 open access journals. The results:
  - 60% of decisions made by the journals showed no peer review efforts
  - Of the 106 journals that performed review, 70% accepted the paper
  - 36 review comments noted "damning" scientific problems with the paper; 16 of those journals still accepted the paper for publication
  - 45% of the Directoy of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) that reviewed the paper, accepted it for publication.
- The number of predatory open access journals identified by library scientist Jeffrey Beall expanded from 18 in 2011 to 477 just three year later. At lease 16 of these predatory journals are listed in the DOAJ. (Bohannon, 2013)
- Publishing in OA journals can cost researchers and academics up to $3,900 an article. (Solomon & Bjork, 2012)

Pro Arguments

- The DOAJ currently has over 9,500 scholarly journal titles available at no cost.
- A 2013 study found that only 11% of teachers and 6% of students perceived the quality of open access textbooks as being lower than the quality of traditional textbooks they had used in the past. (Bliss, Robinson, Hilton, & Wiley, 2013)
- A 2007 *Nature* study found that the rate of errors or omission in Wikipedia articles was 3.8 per article, compared to 2.9 in *Encyclopedia Britannica* articles. (Giles, 2005)
- Peer review is being introduced to OA:
  - o Rice University's OpenStax.com currently publishes peer-reviewed OA textbooks for General Education courses
  - o Peers review OER in Rice University's Connexions and California State University's MERLOT

Should Libraries Buy Textbooks?

	For	Against	Abstain
Original Vote	9	2	0
Final Vote	6	5	0

Pro Arguments

- Between 2002 and 2012, the cost of college textbooks increased 82% in contrast to a 28% inflation rate in overall consumer prices. (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013)
- "In deciding which classes she'll take every quarter, Alissa Ramberg often applies the textbook-cost-factor test: She figures out which professors require pricey textbooks, and avoids those classes" (Long, 2014).
- "And West said that for some classes, open materials can be superior. For example, students in a nutrition class worked with original research papers and assessed nutritional claims on products and foods instead of using a textbook. 'That's much more interesting than reading a textbook and finding out why something is good, or not good, for the heart,' West said." (Long, 2014)
- Inventory research has suggested that as much as half of a library's holdings never circulate. (Kolowich, 2012)
- "65% of students said that they had decided against buying a textbook because it was too expensive. . . 94% of students who had foregone purchasing a textbook were concerned that doing so would hurt their grade in a course." (U.S. PIRG, 2014)

Con Arguments

- "The traditional publishing model features robust editorial and distribution mechanisms designed to ensure the quality and availability of printed textbooks. Open textbook publishing currently lacks this structure, raising legitimate concerns about the accuracy and reliability of the content." (EDUCAUSE, 2011)
- "The role of selection will become increasingly important in libraries because of the hard choices caused by economic situation, growth in the output of information resources, and the need to build two libraries simultaneously, a digital one and a traditional one." (Johnson, 2004, p. 23)
- "'Why is the library materials budget expected to be cut by 30%?' There are many contributing factors to the budget crisis. Declining funding from the state, declining lottery funds, and increased materials costs. " (University Library, CSU Long Beach, 2013)
- "Instead, publishers are actively working to keep prices in the stratosphere. One tactic is to frequently issue "new" editions of textbooks. Often publishers just shuffle the practice problems and add a few pages. If the professor assigns work out of the new edition, then older versions with their different problem and page numbers become obsolete." (Zhou, 2005)

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