

Managing MOOCs

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) provide large numbers of learners with unlimited access to online material, but they are not for everyone.

BY MARGERY WEINSTEIN

Finding high-quality, relevant training materials online can be difficult and costly. The learning sites developed by most organizations usually are off-limits to outsiders, or are only open for a fee. The exception to this rule: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

These unrestricted online learning portals allow outsiders to take advantage of the material at any time, often for free. This gives companies an opportunity to avoid reinventing the training wheel. If another, similar organization already has created an online portal with the same subject matter you need to educate your employees about, so much the better—especially if you are able to have your workforce access the materials at no cost. Here is how some companies and training experts recommend approaching the use and creation of MOOCs.

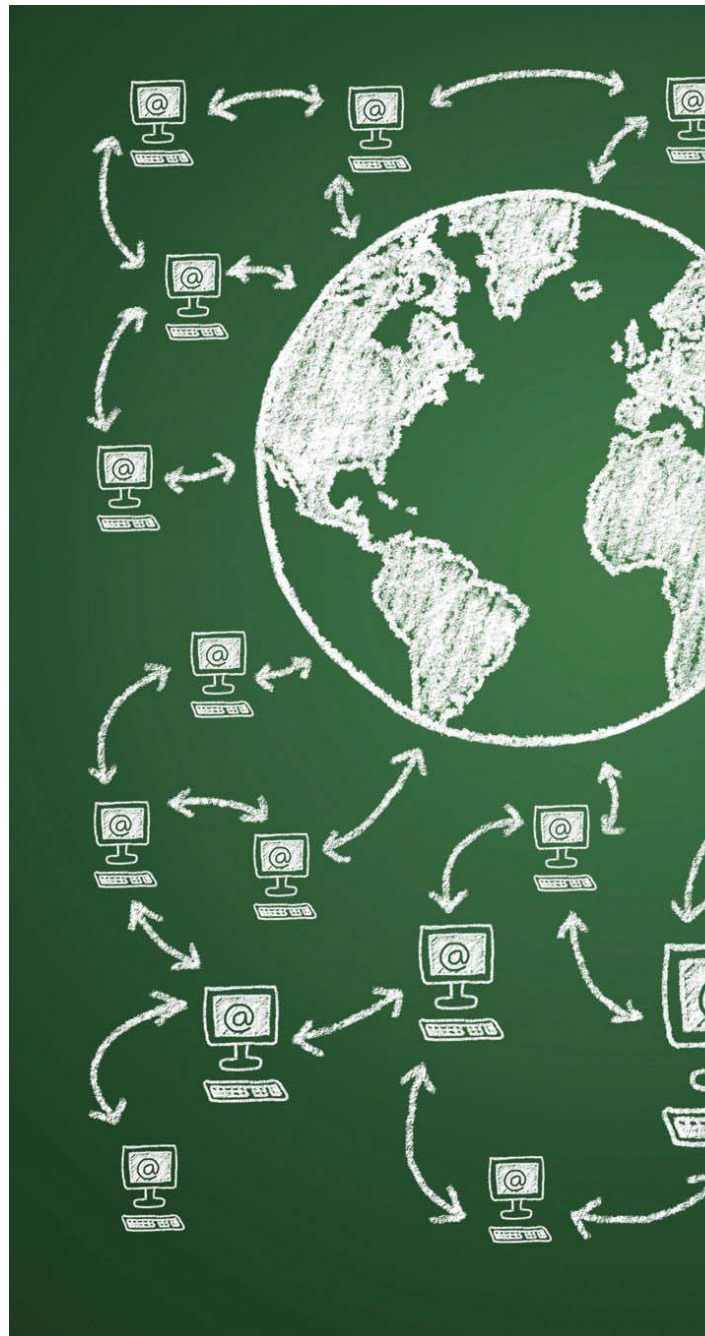
GIVE LEARNERS A PROACTIVE ROLE

With MOOCs offering information on a wide variety of subjects just a Google search away, some learning professionals find that these resources can empower employees. “Like many companies, we are evolving from a training organization into a learning and development role. The difference is significant,” says Chris Clement, director, Sales Training and Development, Shaw Learning Academy, Shaw Industries. “Training often is viewed as something that is ‘pushed’ to a population, while the learning and development model is more of a ‘pull’ approach. MOOCs potentially can fit in a ‘pull’ model by making a variety of learning from various sources available, and allows learners to become much more involved in the direction of their development.”

The two MOOCs Clement says he is familiar with are Coursera and edX. The company does not currently direct employees to use these resources, but the access we all have to these sites gives employees the ability to research subjects and fill learning holes on their own. For example, an employee newly promoted to a high-level management position could type in “business management” into the search box on Coursera.org and would find courses such as “Introduction to Finance” from the University of Michigan. Site visitors have the option of clicking a

button to pay a fee to “earn a verified credit” or they can click another button to “join for free.” Similar to Coursera, edX.org visitors have the option of clicking a button to “simply audit this course” for free or “try for a certificate” for a fee.

Shaw may take a structured approach in the coming few years, directing employees to specific MOOCs to expand the learning material for its Shaw Learning Academy courses. Clement says he foresees the possibility of directed MOOC use as part of a



blended learning program. “Effective training in the 21st century will have to become more diverse, incorporating blended learning as an approach to truly be effective. That means thinking beyond traditional instructor-led training (ILT) models and designing

organization is willing to put in the effort to facilitate the collaboration among its employees who are taking the MOOC,” says Josh Brand, senior director of Global Delivery for Harvard Business Publishing (HBP). “For example, a company can significantly enhance the MOOC experience by creating an action-learning project that its employees must complete in small groups as they go through the MOOC. The projects must be scoped thoughtfully and tied to real work.”

The openness of the MOOC platform makes it easier than it might be on other platforms for learners to engage each other. For instance, Brand says HBP uses a MOOC-like platform to encourage executives to teach one another. “HBP delivered a large cohort program for 700 executives at a pharmaceutical company focused on leadership, strategy, and customer centricity. The program is orchestrated through a proprietary HBP ‘MOOC-like’ platform, and has both self-paced and live elements. The live elements are all done virtually because the executives are located around the globe,” Brand explains. “One of the design elements of this program is ‘teach others,’ where each executive is challenged to teach at least three people in the organization the core content of the program.”

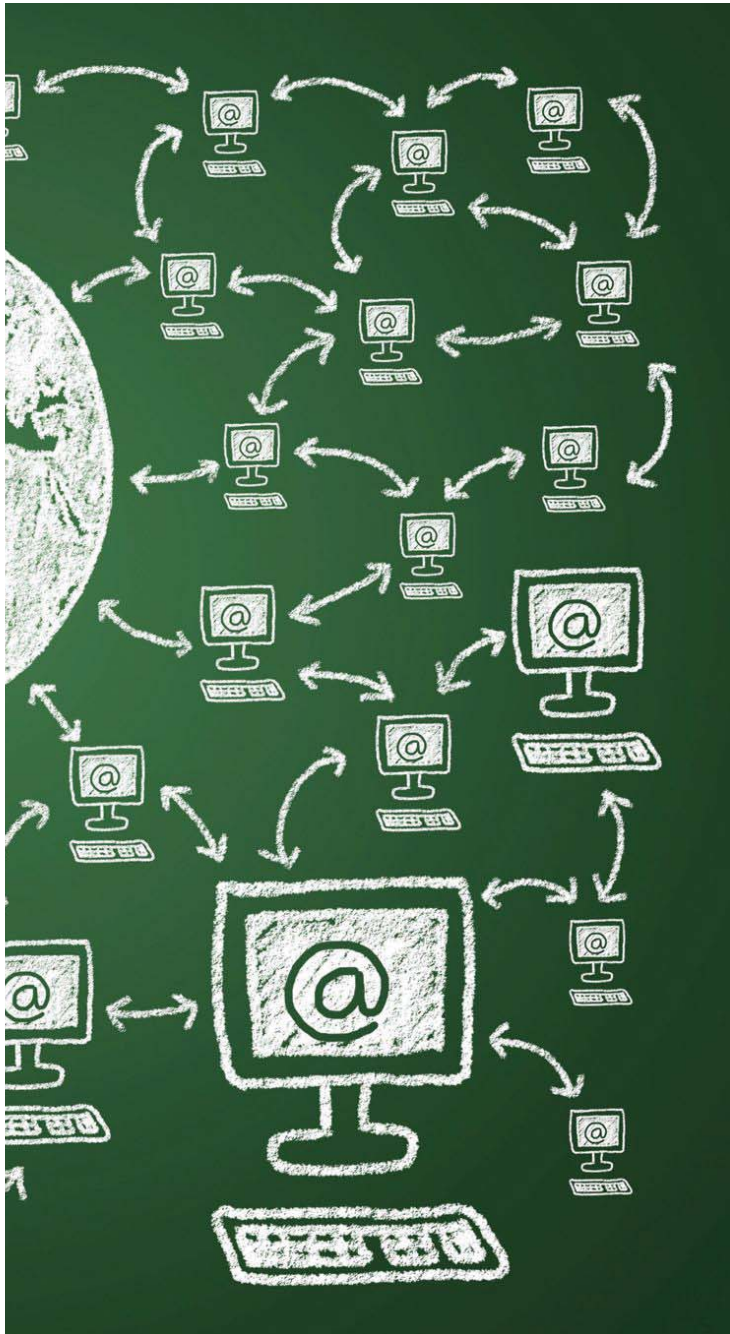
DEVELOP YOUR OWN MOOC

Creating your own MOOC can be expensive and labor intensive. “Both the content production and the technical platform can be costly,” says Andrew Miller, program director for Aquent Gymnasium, a division of global staffing firm Aquent that has created a MOOC program focused on online design education. “In our case, a single course costs well in excess of \$160,000 to produce.”

Like any kind of new learning resource, a company thinking of investing in a MOOC has to consider its business goals and the related needs of the audience (learners) it is trying to reach. But you also need to think about whether your goals and the needs of your learners are suited to the MOOC format. “Yes, MOOCs can allow for interaction between students and instructors via message boards, and some MOOC providers allow for ‘office hours’ (again, online) where students can ask instructors questions. But if the material requires real-time feedback and interaction between teachers and students, or if active discussion between students is essential to the learning goals, then the MOOC model may not be appropriate,” says Miller. “Similarly, if you are not trying to teach thousands of people, you may not want to invest in developing, building, and managing a MOOC.”

A MOOC may be helpful to a global organization with a large-scale training program. For example, a global organization might have a training initiative that includes a combination of methods/units such as workshops, trainings, and assessments, says Miller. “The cost of sending instructors out to all of its locations might be prohibitive in this case. The workshops could be facilitated by local teams in each location, but the training components and assessments could be produced centrally and served as a MOOC.”

EMC Corporation, which just launched a MOOC in June, is becoming familiar with some of the challenges and benefits of operating its own MOOC. Beth Cliff, head of Global Talent Development and EMC University, notes, “There are a number of difficulties, but none are



programs that meet people where they are,” he explains. “An example would be to combine ILT with video-based programs, Web modalities, and 24/7 content such as a MOOC. This gives training a longer retention period and also allows organizations to expand their bandwidth beyond live facilitation.”

Learners also can benefit from a more active role using a MOOC via the collaborative power it offers. “MOOCs can facilitate collaboration if employed thoughtfully and if an

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insurmountable.” She says challenges include:


- Identifying the right vendor partner/platform that works in a corporate setting for large groups
- Creating a registration process to link with your learning management system (LMS)
- Obtaining up-front development funding

- Using internal resources to manage MOOC development
- Getting people to share and discuss among themselves on the MOOC itself
- Making sure participants have completed the material once they’ve signed on
- Combining the “self-paced” spirit of a MOOC with some of the “top-down” mandatory requirements typical of corporate training

QUICK TIPS

- Direct employees to public MOOCs such as Coursera.org and edX.org to supplement your curriculum at no cost.
- Use MOOCs for “action-learning” projects in which employees collaborate to conduct research and develop solutions to business challenges.
- Utilize MOOCs for large-scale training such as onboarding or new manager training that large swaths of your workforce are mandated to complete.
- Keep in mind that the ability for easy collaboration exists within MOOCs, but the trainer has to take a proactive role, helping to start the conversation between learners and solicit learner input.
- Many MOOCs have message boards where learners can leave questions for the instructor, but real-time interaction between learners and the instructor is much harder to accommodate on MOOCs. If your curriculum is dependent on real-time collaboration, MOOCs may not be for you.
- Consider technology requirements before investing in a MOOC of your own, including the ability of the MOOC platform to integrate with your learning management system for learner registration and assessment.

On the upside, Cliff says, the MOOC platform offers large-scale collaborative abilities. It is important, however, to leverage these advantages using the same “tools of the trade” used for Webinars, other forms of online training, and, of course, classroom learning. For instance, learner engagement in a MOOC can be facilitated by trainers “sparking dialogue with thoughtful, provocative questions, fielding debates, or asking cohorts to form smaller groups to solve assigned problems or projects.”

As with any other training investment, trainers need to be proactive. “MOOCs should be evaluated for success the same as other learning vehicles—it’s just that they have a heavy technical component, and a big scale issue,” Cliff says. “Everything is BIG, because MOOCs are especially successful with large groups (remember, the ‘M’ part of MOOC is ‘massive’). I think of a MOOC as one of many tools of our L&D trade. I am enthusiastic about the possibilities for us here at EMC.” 

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