

# What is a MOOC in 2018?

A white paper by Dr. Christopher Haynes in association with the Office of Strategic Initiatives

## Introduction

In higher education, the objects that shape our spaces of teaching and learning—buildings, doors, walls, podiums, desks, chalkboards, whiteboards—have been by virtue of their ubiquity pushed below the threshold of our attention. These invisible constraints, reinforcing certain teaching and learning practices, proclaim by their unregistered presence *this is the way things are done*. Their lineage is long, so intertwined with the nature of higher learning as to suggest the impossibility of meaningful learning in their absence, a tacit canonization felt in our pedagogies and in our institutions.

In the 21st century, digital pedagogy has emerged as a vehicle for interrogating the ways we teach and learn and the spaces in which we do it. The proliferation of online and hybrid learning environments has restructured the relationship between student, instructor, and course. But the questions higher education needs to ask in response to the digital age are not circumstantial (which course modality, what LMS), but existential. What do we do, and why do we still do it that way? The Office of Strategic Initiatives recognizes MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as a centrally important site of this inquiry and the tensions it encompasses. MOOCs are inflection points, defined by the audacity of their scope, the scorn leveled against them, and their challenge to our complacencies.

Making MOOCs, and making them well, means calling our most cherished methods and practices into question. Why the 16 week term? Why the 3 credit course? Why the privilege of “presence” in a 500-seat lecture hall? MOOCs are not the answer to these questions, but they can be a path toward one. Faced with rapidly diversifying demographics, the urgent need for lifelong education, and the decline of public support, MOOCs allow educators to match the structure and the substance of their courses to the needs of the learning experience, not the conventions of academic calendars.

## What are MOOCs in 2018?

According to a June 2017 audit performed by the MOOC indexing site [Class Central](#), there are upwards of [33 active MOOC platform providers](#) globally. MOOCs have evolved beyond online versions of famous on-campus courses to become flexible vehicles for a wide variety of global-facing and at-scale learning experiences with much deeper reach than the Stanford and MIT affiliated “Big 3” ([Coursera](#), [edX](#), [Udacity](#)).

So, what is a MOOC in 2018? How has the idea evolved since its popularization in 2012? Let’s look at some examples.

Some MOOCs maintain the free, open, and accessible model:

- [Modern American Poetry \(“ModPo”\)](#) focuses on close reading modernist and post-modernist poetry and poetics, and the course operates as a global network of secondary and post-secondary educators, poetry and publishing professionals, and hobbyists actively sharing resources, personal stories, and professional connections.
- [The Modern and the Postmodern](#) is a course on the history of philosophy taught by the president of Wesleyan College that has, through regular communication from the instructor and the community, become an ongoing listserv for curating articles and resources addressing contemporary issues facing higher education.
- [Circuits and Electronics](#) is a three-course sequence that closely maps to MIT’s famous introduction to circuits and electronics course. The course sequence is both open to the global community and used as a way to allow matriculated MIT students to access a chronically over-enrolled prerequisite course.
- [The “MOOC MOOC”](#) is a six week course on critical pedagogy, completely untethered from the LMS experience by drawing together an ad hoc community via open-source readings and resources, regular Twitter chats using #moocmooc, and Google Hangouts broadcasts with education professionals and subject matter experts.
- [Humanizing Online Instruction \(“The #HumanMOOC”\)](#) is a three-week training course on teaching and learning online that draws together traditional instructional design and contemporary principles of open and networked learning to help educators bring more human presence into their online learning environments.

But the next act in the drama of the MOOC explores new forms of for-pay credentialing, some based on institutional academic credit, and some relying on targeted microcredentials and verified badging.

- The [Specialization](#) is Coursera’s solution for curating industry-facing course sequences and project application experiences leading to a non-credit certificate.
- The [MicroMasters](#) is a credit-eligible course sequence offered by edX that converts to between 25-50% of an on-campus Masters degree if a student earns the certificate, applies to the affiliated program, and is admitted. The [MicroMasters in Supply Chain Management](#) is edX’s most successful experiment to date.
- The [Nanodegree](#) is Udacity’s solution for skills-based professional and corporate training, focused on career advancement and job preparation.
- Professional Certifications: Both [Coursera](#) and [edX](#) offer a variety of professional certificates in high-demand fields, many of which are endorsed by industry representatives or organizations.
- Undergraduate Academic Credit: Arizona State University’s partnership with edX, the [“Global Freshman Academy,”](#) offers introductory ASU courses as MOOCs that earn academic credit transferable to ASU and other university partners.
- Graduate Degree Programs: Coursera offers a set of fully-online masters degrees in business administration, entrepreneurship, and accounting ([list of available Coursera degrees](#)), and Georgia Tech offers a fully online [Master of Science in Analytics](#) through edX and the [Online Master of Science in Computer Science](#) through Udacity.

## MOOCs at CU Boulder

At the University of Colorado Boulder, faculty and departmental MOOC efforts are guided by the Office of Strategic Initiatives under the direction of [William Kuskin](#) and spearheaded by [Quentin McAndrew](#), [Christopher Haynes](#), [Cory Pavicich](#), and faculty associate [Bob Erickson](#).

CU Boulder has been making MOOCs since 2013. Over the last two years the campus has expanded its MOOC offerings. The Leeds School of Business offers a multi-course program in [Advanced Business Analytics](#). The College of Engineering has popular programs in advanced [Power Electronics](#) and [Embedded Systems Engineering](#) through the Department of Electrical, Computer, and Energy Engineering. CU Boulder also hosts a variety of other courses and programs, such as the Integrated Physiology course [The Science of Exercise](#), the CMCI collaboration [Teamwork Skills: Communicating Effectively in Groups](#), and the multi-course offering [Effective Communication](#), a unique program that bridges business writing, professional presentation, and graphic design competencies.

CU's MOOCs have touched students of all educational levels, ages, and personal and career backgrounds. The experiences these learners desire are varied—academic courses, hobbyist dabbling, professional advancement, career networking—inviting us as educators to reimagine the boundaries we too often place on convention and tradition. MOOCs make good on the promise of higher education bearing a lifelong trajectory, and CU Boulder's commitment to MOOCs represents a strategy to cultivate that longer path, even when that means educating students who will never set foot on campus or see our beautiful flatirons in person.

## Conclusion

MOOCs have, from the start, drawn criticism on the grounds that they amplify what we know is ineffective in higher education and cede educational mission to the dazzling tools of the technophiles. In practice, though, MOOCs prove themselves testing grounds for new models for teaching and learning, new thinking about the modularization of educational engagement and the credentials it earns, and new ways to recognize and compensate the hard work that faculty and instructors put into crafting high-quality experiences for CU students and our global community. MOOCs are certainly not the panacea ardently desired by their most vocal advocates in 2012, the so-called "[Year of the MOOC](#)," but neither are they the harbingers of nightmarish techpocalypse feared by their detractors. Between these poles lies the hard work of educating students and improving institutions. As one expression of our academic future, then, MOOCs acknowledge the realities of the past while serving as sites of exploration and experimentation.