

Lessons Learned Building the Online History Program at the University of Memphis

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AS A RECENT ARTICLE in *Wired* noted, “everyone’s going MOOC-crazy these days.”¹ Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which aim to educate hundreds of thousands of students, have indeed captured substantial media attention. Part of the reason for this, of course, is that several elite universities have partnered with the leading MOOC providers: Canvas, Coursera, edX, Udacity, and Udemy. The entry of elite schools into online education, though, overshadows older online programs at a number of public universities and their record of success.

Online education is hardly new. A number of us have been teaching online for more than a decade and several colleges offer history degrees online, particularly the M.A. Whether MOOCs will succeed remains uncertain. MOOCs continue to recruit new academic partners, such as the nineteen colleges and universities overseen by the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), but other universities have begun terminating, or at least pausing, their MOOC experiments, as San Jose State University recently did.² The promotion of MOOCs by elite universities like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Princeton University has certainly helped validate online education. Similarly, the publicity MOOCs have received has ignited serious discussion of online education both within and outside academia. Unfortunately, much of the discussion of online education centers on the MOOCs themselves, which now overshadow long-existing

online efforts by other colleges that take substantially different approaches to instruction.

MOOCs, which can enroll tens of thousands of students in a single course, are exceptionally cost effective, and universities have begun to pass some of these savings on to their students, as the Georgia Institute of Technology will in a recently announced computer science degree.³ MOOCs are particularly popular in courses amenable to automated grading, such as mathematics and computer science. In the humanities, where essays, research papers, and class discussion generally form the majority of a student's grade, MOOCs tend to rely on peer grading, which is problematic at best, and often off-putting to students.⁴

The majority of online courses, though, have little in common with MOOCs. Courses tend to be small (less than fifty students), are open only to students who have paid tuition, and are taught by instructors who interact regularly and frequently with their students. "The closed, online class, with a sound instructional plan, allows faculty to provide feedback and support to students, as well as provide opportunities for small group collaboration guided by the instructor."⁵ It is these online courses, not MOOCs, that are mostly responsible for the tremendous growth in online education over the past decade. From 2000 to 2008, the number of undergraduates taking at least one online course increased from 8% to 20%. Computer science and business majors were the most likely to take online courses (27% and 24%, respectively); humanities majors, the least (14%). By 2012, almost one-third of college students had taken at least one online class.⁶

The majority of students who enroll in online courses at the University of Memphis take a mix of online and traditional classroom courses. This actually came as a surprise, since there are additional fees for online courses in the TBR system. Online courses give students the flexibility to balance work, school, and other responsibilities. Students can continue their educations despite busy schedules, health issues, or relocation. This flexibility has allowed many of our students to take more classes, which has shaved a semester off the average time for our undergraduates to complete their degrees.

Almost 100 students are enrolled in our online B.A. and M.A. programs and take all their classes online. Students take our online courses from across the United States and even overseas. A recent survey concluded that our average online student is a 38-year old mother with a full-time job. She takes one or two classes each semester and lives within fifty miles of campus. National surveys indicate that online students are more likely to be older, married, and have children than classroom students.⁷ Increasingly, though, the on-campus and online student populations are coming to resemble one another.⁸

The number of online programs that serve these students has increased significantly over the last decade, accelerated by improvements in technology, the growing number of for-profit colleges, and the financial problems at many colleges, for which online programs appeared to offer a solution. For the most part, online programs, particularly those of for-profit schools like the University of Phoenix, have focused on high-return and high-demand fields, particularly business, computer science, criminal justice, education, and nursing. Online programs in these fields have won growing acceptance. Online M.B.A. programs, in fact, have become so common and accepted that *Fortune* magazine recently praised them and noted that Carnegie Mellon, Duke, the University of North Carolina, and other prestigious schools have either launched online M.B.A. programs or have added significant online components to existing programs.⁹ Another indication of the ubiquity and respectability of online programs is a recent survey by money management firm Fidelity, which indicated “54% of parents expect their children to take online courses for credit.”¹⁰

Online programs in history, though, are much less common, particularly at the undergraduate level. Recently, this has begun to change. The American Public University System, which operates American Military University and American Public University, built a large core of military history courses over the last decade, and has steadily expanded its offerings in other historical fields. Other for-profit schools, such as Ashford University, have recently discovered the popularity of history courses and have begun expanding their history offerings. Ashford and American Public both offer a B.A. in history, and other for-profit schools will likely follow their lead. The faculty members I spoke with at Ashford earlier this year were quite surprised, though pleased, with the rapid growth of enrollments in history courses, and are expanding their faculty and course offerings accordingly.

The small number of online history programs has meant there has also been relatively little discussion of how to teach history online, and almost none about how to develop, manage, and grow online history degree programs.¹¹ This article seeks to fill that gap. Drawing on my experience directing and building the online history program at the University of Memphis over past decade, I hope to offer a few lessons and points to consider for those contemplating launching online history programs.

The University of Memphis offered its first online history courses in 2001 as part of the Regents Online Degree Program (RODP), a collaborative effort by the thirteen community colleges and six universities overseen by the Tennessee Board of Regents. That first year, RODP offered only the two halves of the U.S. history survey. University of Memphis faculty later developed three other history courses for RODP: U.S. military history,

the history of technology, and the American Civil War. These provided a foundation for the University of Memphis History Department to launch its own, independent online program in 2008. We did this with relatively little support and encouragement from the administration, and it was only possible because RODP offered online students all their required general education courses. RODP also provided a useful foundation of experience and knowledge. This allowed department faculty to rapidly expand the number of courses we offered to our students, many of whom were familiar with online courses, since they had taken them through RODP. When we launched, we were one of only a handful of public universities in the United States that offered an online history B.A.¹² The program grew rapidly, and online enrollments currently account for one-seventh of the department's total enrollments.

Online history M.A. programs are much more common, presumably because they do not have the general education and elective course requirements of undergraduate programs. We launched our online M.A. in 2010, and enrollment in that program has also grown rapidly, underlining the first point I would like to make.

1) Online History Courses are Popular

It should not surprise anyone that online courses are popular with students. This popularity, of course, fueled the growth of for-profit colleges, several of which now boast more than 100,000 students. In spring 2013, 29% of University of Memphis students took at least one class online. This mirrors a recent national survey, which found that almost a third of college students take at least one online course each semester. In fact, online course enrollments are growing at a 10% rate compared to a 1% growth rate for the college student population as a whole.¹³

Online history courses have proven particularly popular at the University of Memphis, where they account for about 10% of total online enrollments. Some of these courses are in fields one would expect, such as military history, which is popular enough that several universities—including Austin Peay State University, Norwich University, and American Military University—offer specialized online master's degrees in military history. University of Memphis offerings in ancient and Asian history, though, also boast high enrollments, and courses in African American history and the history of childhood and family—the focus areas of several department faculty—are consistently our most popular offerings.

There is significant demand for history courses offered online. We receive almost daily inquiries about our online programs and have yet to devote significant attention (or money) to marketing our program. We

printed some brochures and added sections about the online programs to the department website. A 2010 video for the American Historical Association featuring our department as particularly innovative and highlighted the online program was certainly helpful. So, too, is our school's successful basketball team, which apparently gives our program some credibility. Still, most students find us through simple Internet searches or through word-of-mouth from current students or graduates. The growth in the University of Memphis online history program over the last few years, along with those of for-profit colleges, suggest that if you build an online history program, students will enroll.

2) Collaboration Produces the Best Online Courses

Several of our faculty members have collaborated on course development and produced excellent courses. Online courses, in fact, are ideal for faculty collaboration since they easily allow each contributor to focus entirely on a particular area of interest. The most important collaboration, though, is between faculty developers and instructional designers, which can at times prove difficult. Most faculty members have relatively little experience with web design and related skills. Most instructional designers, in turn, have comparatively less teaching experience and are unlikely to have any teaching experience (or sometimes even basic knowledge) of a professor's particular field. The result, too often, is a dialogue that pits a professor's field knowledge and practical teaching experience against instructional design theory.

It is essential to harmonize this relationship. One needs to preserve an instructor's personality and approach to a subject while ensuring that a course is developed clearly and logically along generally recognized design principles. Instructional designers are often able to suggest tools that address instructors' needs and are an essential source of information on new technology.

3) Course Design Matters

Building on the previous point, effective course design matters. The first instinct of too many instructors new to online teaching is to upload their lectures and PowerPoint slides and call it a course. When planning a course, it is important to consider how students will interact with each other, the instructor, and course content and assignments. It is a good idea to craft a course around these interactions, particularly class discussion and other assignments, which you support with primary sources, short lectures, and other materials.

Remember that students take online courses because of the flexibility they offer. Narrow windows for exams and rigid due dates are generally not a good idea. The online environment forces students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Online instructors, in turn, need to facilitate this.

It is not uncommon for one person to develop a course for other people to teach. The one time we tried this, though, it ended poorly. The experience of teaching a course is vital for developers. Only by actually teaching the course will developers see how students function in the course, what (and how) they learn, and how the course can be improved. Course developers should teach their course at least once before handing it off to others to teach.

It is critical to state course expectations clearly and explain assignments thoroughly. Without the physical presence of an instructor in front of a class to explain things, misunderstandings are likely. Wherever possible, courses should have common appearance and organization. While no two courses will be identical, common approaches to discussion, assignments, and grading are helpful. This will help students transition from course to course. A standard design template will facilitate this.

Textbook publishers offer a shortcut to course design with large amounts of content and even whole courses ready for use online. These present two problems. First, of course, it ties the developer to a particular textbook and materials. Second, the publisher-produced courses that we have examined are better suited to high school than college students. Most mirror the blandness of many textbooks. The worst emphasize learning and regurgitating the textbook chapter-by-chapter. At best, they provide foundations on which an instructor will have to build a more engaging course.

4) Faculty Generally Require Incentives to Develop Online Courses

Developing good online courses is a time-consuming process that requires often more work (and more detailed work) than preparing to teach a classroom course. While some faculty are happy to develop online courses, most expect, and deserve, some compensation for this effort.¹⁴ Paying professors to develop courses is common, and that is what we have done at the University of Memphis. Most of my colleagues would have preferred teaching reductions, but these are difficult to arrange.

In addition to hiring instructors, revenue from the online program has allowed us to fund faculty research and travel at levels never before achieved. Almost every member of the department has benefited from

this. Three of my colleagues developed online courses, which they taught during semesters they were abroad doing research.

5) There is no Perfect LMS

The terms “learning management system” (LMS) and “course management system” (CMS) are often used interchangeably to describe the software used to manage online courses. LMS generally implies the inclusion of the administrative functions a university needs to manage enrollment by large student populations in diverse courses.

All the major learning management systems, which include Angel, Blackboard, Desire2Learn (D2L), Moodle, Sakai, WebCT (acquired by Blackboard in a 2006 merger), and several others, allow instructors to place course materials online, host discussions with students, and provide numerous options for students to take quizzes and submit written assignments. Several textbook publishers have begun developing their own learning management systems, and some for-profit schools have developed their own proprietary software. So, the market for these products and their features will continue to change for the foreseeable future.

The Tennessee Board of Regents first chose WebCT as its LMS. Five years ago, it switched to D2L, and it may choose a different LMS in the future. Odds are that you, too, have no choice as to LMS, and that is OK. None of these products offer a perfect solution to all the problems posed by online teaching. A recent study compared the four most popular systems (Blackboard, D2L, Moodle, and Sakai) across seven categories. Despite upgrades and improvements implemented in the last few years, the authors concluded that all four products needed improvement. Problems range from appearance to navigation, and even managing assignment availability and accepting late papers.¹⁵

Currently, Blackboard is the most popular LMS, and enjoys something more than half the market share. Perhaps the most visually appealing LMS, it is quite popular with students. Yet it restricts course developers in some ways and buries some of its functionality, making these elements difficult to find and use. Desire2Learn, despite recent updates, lacks several features of competing products, particularly in handling student-submitted assignments. Moodle and Sakai, popular open-source alternatives, provide a great deal of customizability, though at the expense of greater support requirements from the hosting university.

All learning management systems have flaws—enough flaws that other companies offer products that address these limitations. So, you will need to consider the purchase of additional products that will help your faculty

develop and teach their courses. Unlike the choice of LMS, faculty often have considerable input into the decision to purchase these products.

There are numerous products in this category. SoftChalk, for example, provides a more pleasing appearance and interface than the average LMS and allows you to easily customize the appearance of your courses, integrate graphics and multimedia elements, and more. Respondus makes it easier to create quizzes. Adobe Connect, Elluminate, and Wimba offer synchronous chat with students or conferencing with whole classes—features absent from or poorly implemented in several learning management systems. A number of companies offer lecture capture software, which allows one to record and upload live lectures. Numerous tools address plagiarism, such as TurnItIn.com, which integrates with the major learning management systems.

6) Do Not Neglect Legal Issues

Online courses pose particular challenges involving copyrights, intellectual property, and accessibility, particularly compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Intellectual property regularly came up in discussion, often as the first question asked, when I approached department colleagues about developing courses. Who will own the course they develop? Copyright, of course, is the flipside of this issue. Faculty members are concerned about the rights to their work, just as authors and publishers are concerned about their rights. When overseeing course development, one needs to protect the rights of the course developer, but also ensure that the developer does not incorporate materials that violate anyone else's rights.

Protecting the rights of the course developer is easily addressed with an agreement that specifies the rights of the developer and the university. At the University of Memphis, we use a dual-ownership agreement. If the developer leaves the university, the university can continue to offer the course. The developer, though, maintains the rights to the course and can teach it elsewhere.

Use of materials in online courses (or any college course) is governed by the 2002 Technology, Education and Copyright Harmonization Act (TEACH Act), which restricts online courses more than it does classroom courses. Showing a movie to your students in a classroom is generally allowed. Uploading that same movie to your online course, however, may require specific permission. Digital rights for many documentaries, particularly those owned by PBS, are available at reasonable prices. Avoiding these copyright issues is one reason to consider using publisher-produced materials, as the publisher should already have paid any requisite fees.

While not as muddled as copyright law, ADA compliance also has some muddy areas. In general, one must supply text descriptions for any images in a course and transcripts for audio and video content. The latter can be time-consuming to produce for historic films, though speech transcription software continues to improve. What if, though, an instructor embeds a short video in a discussion post or simply suggests, as part of that same discussion, that students view a short clip on YouTube? Is one required to provide transcripts for external or optional materials that are not housed within the course LMS? As with copyright issues, these questions are best answered by a university's legal department, which should be consulted as you develop your online program. There have been a few student lawsuits involving technology in recent years, and there will likely be more.¹⁶

7) Online Students Have Different Needs and Might Not Be as Tech-Savvy as Advertised

Many online students are not as technically proficient as often portrayed in education literature, which touts the technical acumen of digital-age students who grew up with computers. It is not uncommon for students to need help uploading files, understanding different file formats, and even posting in discussion forums. All of these, of course, are essential e-learning skills, and need to be explained in detail in any online course. It is a good idea to have an orientation to online learning in all lower-division and survey courses.

The needs of online students sometimes differ from those of on-campus students. Like on-campus students, they need access to library databases and journals, but they often cannot walk into the university library and ask a librarian for help. Their local library may be small and lack the resources they need. All courses should contain instructions on how to access library sources and Interlibrary Loan, and departments should coordinate with the library to make sure that help is available to online students. Obtaining the primary sources that ground historical research can be a particular problem for online students, and our department devoted some of the revenue from the online program to purchase digital document collections. Other departments at the University of Memphis have done the same, and we have begun to coordinate our purchases to ease the burden on our limited funds.

8) Online Discussion and Interaction is Different

In a live classroom, discussions tend to move quickly from topic to topic. It is difficult to cover as many topics online, but online discussions can

be prolonged and detailed. Freed from the constraints of a fifty-minute class session, opportunities abound to encourage students to develop unique expertise that they can share with the class. Students have access to a variety of sources (either in the course or on the Internet), including documents, videos, audio, and photos, as well as time to consider them and produce detailed, thoughtful responses to questions. Document-centered primary source discussions form the core of our online courses. Students tend to learn the most in the courses in which they do the most writing—and students do a lot of writing in the discussion areas of online courses.¹⁷

The online format also makes it easy to revisit topics repeatedly through the course. I open the second half of the U.S. survey by asking students to imagine themselves as industrial workers in 1900 and consider whether they would join a union. Later in the course, we can revisit this discussion and reconsider the place of unions in American society and their value to workers. Since students can re-read the previous discussion posts as needed, it is easy for them to refresh their memories and consider the role of unions as the course moves forward.

Discussions of later periods benefit from the vast amount of video available on the Internet. Hulu.com, for example, offers an array of television shows on which one can anchor discussions of family life in the 1950s. Students can view a show or two on their own and then tell the rest of the class about it. As with unions, this is a topic that one can revisit as the course continues. How did television portrayals of family life change in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s? How do the families of 1980s shows like *Married with Children* or *The Simpsons* compare with those of the 1950s? Discussions of World War II benefit from easy access to the *Why We Fight* series and other propaganda films.

Online instructors need to actively involve themselves in these discussions and guide them forward, as well as maintain regular contact with students via e-mail and class announcements. Similarly, they need to provide detailed and prompt feedback to students, particularly on tests and other major assignments. Speedy and regular engagement with students trumps flashy multimedia.

9) An Online Degree Program and its Faculty Should be Fully Integrated into the Department and University

All too often, online learning is presented as an inferior form of education, and this is reflected in how many universities have approached online education by creating separate online programs. Students are aware of this. Along with questions about accreditation, cost, transferring credits, and faculty, prospective students regularly ask us about whether the term

“online” will appear on their transcripts or diplomas. Students know that courses from MITx and eCornell are not the same as courses from MIT and Cornell. As journalist Kim Clark recently noted, “The MIT-built MOOCs offer a chance to earn an ‘MITx’—*not* MIT—credential that won’t on its own help you toward a degree but might look nice at the bottom of a résumé next to other continuing-ed classes.”¹⁸ Different branding diminishes the value of the courses students take and the degrees they earn.

Much has been written about the growing use of part-time instructors in higher education. It is particularly common in online teaching and even more so among the for-profit online universities, for which adjunct instructors may teach more than a dozen courses in the school year. Given their low rates of pay, it is not uncommon for adjuncts, particularly those teaching online, to teach for several different schools. When prospective students ask about my department’s faculty, this is their concern. Will their professors be there for them? Can they reach them on the phone? How involved are they in their courses and mentoring students? Online students want the same access to their teachers and the same attention from them as on-campus students enjoy.

Online students should not be treated as second-class citizens, nor should the people who teach them. We prefer to hire full-time instructors, rather than adjuncts, to teach our online courses and have worked hard to fully integrate them into our department. For the most part, this has gone well. One early problem occurred when we limited enrollment in online classes to twenty-five students. This is widely considered the optimal size for online classes.¹⁹ The norm in our department, though, is thirty students for undergraduate courses. Capping online classes at twenty-five raised some eyebrows. Were the online instructors slacking off? So, we raised the enrollment cap in online courses to match department norms. The complaints ceased, and the additional students have not had an appreciable effect on the courses. Most learning management systems allow instructors to divide classes into smaller groups for discussion, and our instructors take advantage of this when needed.

Roughly half the department’s tenured faculty have developed and taught online courses. While some members of the department will probably never teach online, those who have form a critical mass of support for the program, and have taken ideas from their online courses into their classrooms. The instructors hired by the online program, in turn, also teach in the classroom, which has helped them develop good working relationships even with those members of the faculty who remain suspicious of (or even oppose) the online program. They are full members of the department who vote and serve on committees. Faculty course developers supervise those graduate students teaching the U.S. and world

history surveys, and Ph.D. candidates in our program teach both classroom and online courses. The latter experience has helped several of them on the job market. So far, two of our online instructors moved on to tenure-track positions in the department, highlighting the integration of the online and classroom programs.

Making online students full participants in the university and campus remains a challenge, and minor problems continue to crop up. How do online students get ID cards that allow them access to various student services? How do they purchase tickets to University of Memphis sporting events when they are in town? Do they need to be vaccinated? We resolve them as they come up and have so far not encountered any insurmountable obstacles.

10) Always Have a Back-Up Plan

The first year I taught online, something went wrong with server that hosted RODP's courses and it began deleting all the courses in alphabetical order. Someone spotted the mistake and stopped it just after it finished deleting all the history courses, including two I was teaching. The IT department restored the courses from back-ups, but these were a week old. So, many of us teaching that semester lost a week of student work. Assignments could be resubmitted, but few students keep copies of their discussion posts. Those were gone. Fortunately, I kept notes (and still keep notes) of student discussion activity on paper. So, I only missed grading that morning's posts. Nonetheless, I could not recreate the missing week of student posts, and this substantially disrupted class discussion.

Nothing this severe has happened to our courses since. Servers and networks are more robust and back-up procedures more thorough. Still, service outages are regular occurrences. Last year, Desire2Learn experienced major network problems that left students and faculty across North America without access to their online courses for as many as three days.²⁰ Outages of a few hours are common. So, keep back-ups of your courses and have ways to reach students outside the LMS. Paper records, particularly of grades, are a good idea.

Another reason to keep back-ups of your course files is that your institution may change its LMS. A number of faculty members at the University of Memphis found the migration from WebCT to D2L rather painful. This was particularly true of those faculty members who had done all their development work inside the LMS. Migrating from one LMS to another is often easier if you keep copies of all your course files in common file formats (HTML, JPG, etc.). And if you are managing an online program, make sure you have back-ups of all its courses and understand

how your various colleagues teach their online courses. Instructors can fall ill or simply leave, and taking over an online course can be more difficult than stepping into another instructor's classroom course.

Conclusion

Revenue from the online program has softened the impact of recent budget cuts and allowed the department to fund new fellowships for our graduate students, support both faculty and graduate student research travel, purchase library resources, and hire more full-time instructors. While enrollment growth in our online history courses has slowed, this is at least partly due to the Tennessee legislature's repeal of the college U.S. history requirement. Enrollment in our upper-division and graduate courses continues to grow, though at a slower rate than in the program's early years. Demand for online history courses from students remains high, with inquiries about our program occurring nearly every day. Opportunities clearly remain to grow our online program and for others to launch online history programs. Students are eager for high-quality online history courses.

Notes

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