

Moving Ahead With MOOCs

JSPH will pilot its first MOOC later this year. We asked Juan Leon, PhD, JSPH Director of Online Learning, to provide an overview of what MOOCs are all about.

What is a MOOC?

MOOCs are “Massive Open Online Courses” usually offered free of charge and available to a global audience. Various forms of recognition, certification, or academic credit may be offered by some MOOC providers, though most MOOC participants today are not driven primarily by desire to earn a degree through MOOC-based study.

How do MOOCs work?

MOOCs did not emerge from the introduction of a novel, enabling technology. Rather, they’ve emerged through a reconceptualization and redeployment of existing online learning technologies driven by contemporary trends in higher education, society, politics, and culture. These trends promote greater sharing of knowledge (an aspect of “openness”) and lowering barriers to high quality, life-long learning.

MOOCs work by making digitized content accessible to very large numbers of learners in the structured online environment provided by a course management system. It’s the “massiveness” of the MOOCs more than any other single characteristic – course enrollments sometimes number in the tens of thousands – that most profoundly influences the kind of learning experience they offer. Due to the large class sizes, designing MOOCs for productive peer interactions and other contributions from students become especially important, and the role of the instructor changes significantly.

What is the focus of the JSPH MOOC?

We aim to pilot two to three MOOCs in 2013-2014. One course will introduce *Population Health*, a second will focus on *Prevention and Wellness*, and a third may take an international perspective, addressing comparative health systems.

Initial MOOCs have often been from disciplines that lend themselves to quantitative assessment, such as engineering, computer science and math. How are MOOCs becoming more applicable to disciplines such as population health?

Subjects lending themselves to objective, quantitative assessments that can be automatically graded reduce some of the logistical problems inherent in the MOOC’s very large class sizes. For an interdisciplinary subject such as Population Health, however, the appeal of MOOCs is less about the mechanics of testing than about the opportunities offered by the online learning experience.

Representativeness: A large, diverse group of students drawn from around the country and around the world can more fully represent the needs and interests of all the stakeholders that are part of the “universe” of population health. The abstract systems perspectives promoted in population health studies come to life the more classmates can authentically voice the views of players located throughout those systems.

Embeddedness: Because online learners typically participate in courses from where they live and work, these students can make excellent “field reporters.” Whether analyzing the outcomes a local healthcare quality improvement effort, polling neighborhood sentiment regarding a proposed public health policy, or designing

a pharmacoeconomic simulation that address a county-wide health concern, these embedded observers can prove invaluable to class efforts better understanding reality on the ground.

Effectiveness: These online learners – broadly representative, fully embedded, and highly motivated – are likely to prove effective change agents for population health.

What will the JSPH MOOC look like? Will there be video lectures/quizzes?

In general, MOOCs are online courses and they do not look terribly different from other online courses available today. That said, some MOOCs will tailor their look to their audience demographics. They may design the course to look more like Facebook if their audience finds that style easy to use.

MOOCs designed for healthcare professionals and those with similar interests are typically more conservative, and I expect our own design will stay close to our current design for our other online programs. The emphasis is on instructional integrity.

Video lectures and quizzes are part of that design, as appropriate. In the MOOCs a greater variety of briefer presentations will be favored, and quizzes will be more formative (allowing students to check their own work and self-correct) and more adaptive (directing student to additional questions and/or material based on their responses to questions posed).

What E-learning technologies will be utilized with the JSPH MOOC?

We are working with the MOOC platform provided by Blackboard, the university’s course management system.

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Will the JSPH MOOC be offered for credit?

There are no plans to offer MOOC courses at JSPH for credit at this time.

How can MOOCs help extend the JSPH brand?

Through their special attributes of representativeness, embeddedness, and

effectiveness, our MOOCs can directly further JSPH's mission. Because the term Population Health remains new to many, and our School's existence is still a novelty to most parts of the country, offering free mini-courses, potentially to large numbers of participants, will answer questions about the meaning of population health and raise awareness of what we're doing at JSPH. We expect to promote

that awareness further by showcasing a number of JSPH and TJU experts in each of the MOOCs. ■

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