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Two-year colleges go open source to seek fix for remediation

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Free online courses have run into a backlash of late. But a handful of community colleges may have found a way to dial up open-source content to help tackle one of higher education's thorniest problems: remedial education.

The two-year colleges aren't offering massive open online courses as substitutes for their offerings, however, or for the instructors who teach them.

They have created their own online content, sometimes tapping ^[1] free lectures from the Khan Academy or other sources. And rather than using it for stand-alone courses, the colleges have designed supplemental study guides for remedial classes or for the placement tests incoming students take.

Remediation is a serious stumbling block for students. Research has found that just one in four students who place into remedial courses will eventually earn a college credential or transfer to a four-year institution.

Major MOOC providers, particularly Coursera, have touted ^[2] the potential of their courses to help more students succeed in remedial and gateway courses. That suggestion has rankled some in the community college sector, particularly the possible "outsourcing" of remediation to startups and professors at prestigious colleges. But a few acknowledge that there may be lessons ^[3] to learn from the MOOC playbook, particularly when they have a say in how to incorporate those ideas.

For example, Cuyahoga Community College, which is located in Cleveland and better known as Tri-C, earlier this year developed a free online math course. Khan's lectures account for about half the remedial course's material. College officials said the rest comes from the open-source TeacherTube and Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching, or MERLOT.

Tri-C's new MOOC-style course isn't aimed at the college's students. It is shopping the class to local high schools, as The Quick & The Ed, a blog from Education Sector, reported ^[4] earlier this year. The idea is to encourage students who are likely to attend Tri-C to brush up on their math skills before they arrive on campus.

Charles Dull, the college's dean of eLearning and innovation, said Tri-C took the course on a "road show to a lot of the high schools in Cuyahoga County."

And if students try the course but don't end up at the college, he said that's fine, too. "We opened it up to just about anyone who could benefit from it."

DIY MOOC

Tri-C received ^[5] a \$50,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to help develop the course. Gates last fall awarded ^[6] a total of \$550,000 in grant money to 10 institutions to experiment ^[7] with MOOC content for remedial and introductory courses. Several other community colleges received the grants, including Wake Tech Community College ^[8], which is located in North Carolina.

The Gates grantees aren't the only ones giving open-source courses a whirl. Bossier Parish Community College, a two-year college in Louisiana, has created five free online courses without outside seed money. All the courses match up with remedial courses in math, English and reading. And the "Open Campus ^[9]" classes are available to anyone.

Faculty members designed the courses in-house, said Allison Martin, director of institutional effectiveness initiatives at Bossier Parish. The first five went live this spring, with almost 500 students registering. Two more are slated to debut in the fall.

Martin said the college looked at partnering with major MOOC providers to build the courses. Wake Tech, for example, collaborated with Udacity on a remedial math course. But Bossier ultimately decided to go it alone.

"We think we have a better understanding about our own developmental education population," she said.

Instructors at the college are using the material in tandem with remedial courses, and are directing students to try the online content for extra help and as study guides. Bossier Parish is also distributing information about the online courses to students who plan to take placement tests over the summer.

The project's leaders said they felt students at the college would react better to learning from online instructors they were likely to see on campus and in classrooms. That's why they went with homegrown content taught by five faculty members from the college.

Most of Bossier's students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, said Jim Henderson, the college's chancellor. He said those students in particular do not react well to impersonal or "sterile" online courses.

"They've got to be able to see that face and know that 'this is a person I can talk to,'" Henderson said.

Inexpensive Innovation

Both the Tri-C and Bossier Parish courses include more than MOOC-style experimentation. The courses are also self-paced and competency-based.

The Tri-C course is a "low-risk failure environment," said Sasha Thackaberry, the college's director of eLearning technologies. That means students can take each of its various modular levels as many times as they want. But they must master each level before they can progress to the next one.

That approach is grounded in game-style learning, Thackaberry said, which the college has been working on incorporating in courses for some time. "It actually teaches persistence and resilience."

Most students are familiar with gaming. And college officials said nontraditional students in particular thrive on the positive feedback of progressing from level to level, rather than just receiving a single grade when they complete a course.

"The pressure isn't on them to succeed," said Dull. "It's to learn."

To pass the noncredit course students must master 80 percent of the competencies embedded in it. If they do, they receive a digital badge the college designed and registered with the Mozilla Foundation. Badging is a broad, nascent experiment aimed at signaling skills and knowledge outside of traditional credentialing.

The new course at Tri-C, and the Gates' grant that supported its creation, enabled the college to combine competency-based education, badging and MOOCs – all concepts faculty members and administrators have been discussing.

"It was a great way for us to pursue a lot of ideas that we thought would be successful," Thackaberry said.

Tri-C and Bossier Parish used Blackboard's CourseSites, a free learning management system, as the platform for their open-source courses. Officials from the two colleges said CourseSites was user-friendly.

In addition to continuing to offer the course to local high school students, Tri-C is considering using it as a preparation tool for incoming students. The college is studying how students perform in the course and is making the material available for other institutions to use.

Bossier Parish is also tracking how its MOOC-style courses might affect remedial placement rates. College officials said they expect to see a bump in the number of students who are deemed college-ready and place directly into credit-bearing courses.

If that happens, it will be a hard-to-achieve payoff for a small investment. The college spent about \$20,000 to cover its instructors' time designing the courses. The courses' hardware and software costs were \$3,000.

Henderson said Bossier Parish has no choice but to find inexpensive and innovative ways to serve students. That's because during the last four years, the college has seen its enrollment grow by 70 percent while its state support declined by 50 percent.

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[1] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/04/22/community-colleges-warm-free-self-paced-course-content>

[2] <http://diverseeducation.com/article/53565/#>

[3] <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/moocs-and-remediation>

[4] <http://www.quickanded.com/2013/04/could-moocs-vet-college-ready-students.html>

[5] <http://www.tri-c.edu/onlinelearning/Pages/mooc.aspx>

[6] <http://www.impatientoptimists.org/Posts/2012/11/What-Are-MOOCs-and-Why-Are-Education-Leaders-Interested-in-Them>

[7] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/09/14/gates-foundation-solicits-remedial-moocs>

[8] <http://www.waketech.edu/introductory-algebra-review-mooc>

[9] <http://www.bpcc.edu/opencampus/index.html>

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