

New technologies and distance training



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Today, the classroom-based teaching instituted in the 12th century with the establishment of universities is sharing the academic realm with distance learning, a form of education that has been gaining in popularity since the 1970s. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for online training, both on and off campus, is accelerating growth of an “e-learning spectrum”¹ that is transforming the way we teach in digital learning environments. How are these developments changing the face of education? To what extent will they influence our teaching methods?



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Synchronous learning that connects isolated students or groups of students through various platforms is meshing with asynchronous student-centred correspondence and online teaching to blur the conventional lines between classroom and distance education.² This new flexibility in time and space—one of the undeniable appeals of these courses for many students—has spread to the workplace as well. What does this mean in terms of the technical skills teachers now need to have? How will these impact the quality of their courses and their professional life?

Indeed, the knowledge economy has given rise to a new and burgeoning form of education: Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. Often free and asynchronous, these courses are designed to support a large number of learners in educational networks that, based on the philosophy of Ivan Illich,³ should provide channels containing all of the resources needed for real learning, connect those wanting to teach with those eager to learn, and create an

environment conducive to interaction and the development of skills. These platforms are largely based on open educational resources (OER), full program courses whose materials can be used, modified and re-transmitted with little or no licensing restrictions.

Extending educational access to remote regions and developing countries is, without question, a laudable goal. But the reality is that this approach, as humanistic as it is, also raises the pricklier issues of intellectual property and the commodification of the knowledge capital produced within the university context— issues that have yet to be settled by university administrations and teacher unions. When the diversity of contract teachers and of the educational materials they produce, post online and propagate is thrown into the mix, the situation becomes even more ambiguous. How can we better balance the goal of promoting affordable education through vast networks of information and interactive learning opportunities against the need to protect the

efforts, the creations and the very jobs of teachers and other specialists working in the sector?

The evolving nature of distance learning also prompts a number of other questions: Are the cost of setting up MOOCs and the decision to invest in them over other methods justified? Is this not just another pretense, on a different scale, for universities to engage in outreach by casting a wide net in the hopes of dredging up new student “clienteles”? As private distance learning companies scramble to get in on the action, we run the very real risk of seeing this education turned into a commodity and made uniform by the use of specific platforms. From a social standpoint, what effect will this free form of education—often provided at the expense of quality teaching—have on the overall course offering and on the interest in and recognition of traditional degrees? Buying university credits for such courses may be a marginal activity for the moment, but new opportunities for doing so are emerging all the time.

1 OCDE (2005). *La cyberformation dans l'enseignement supérieur : État des lieux*.

2 Bertrand, Louise (2010). *Renouveler l'université. Pour un rapport au savoir adapté au XXI^e siècle, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval*.

3 Illich, Ivan (1971) *Deschooling Society*. New York, Harper & Row.
Available online: http://ournature.org/~novembre/illich/1970_deschooling.html.



How can we, as higher education professionals, address these new technological, cultural and relational challenges in a way that allows us to meet the growing demand for new and diverse education formulas without relinquishing our academic heritage? All of these are questions we need to reflect on and try to answer. ■



Precurity

An international overview



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The Quebec higher education system is made up of different ranks of teaching personnel: professors, course lecturers, tutors, language teachers, part-time teachers, instructors, teaching assistants, post-doctoral students, etc. The rights of these employees are laid out in collective agreements that set the parameters of their job assignments and afford them a certain protection from contract violations by their employers. The most precarious of these university teaching positions are the course lecturers, tutors and other contract teachers, who find themselves condemned to the uncertainty of variable contract work. So how does this compare to what's going on in other countries?



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In France, the system is equally complex, with professors, lecturers, teacher-researchers and contract teachers composing the university teaching body. The most vulnerable to employment precarity are the contract teachers hired directly by the universities for short-term contract cycles that can go on for years. According to the unions, these employees number in the thousands, whereas the French Ministry of Higher Education puts their number at closer to a few hundred.¹

In the United States, figures compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2011 indicate that a third of all teachers in the country's university colleges and universities are contract workers, a proportion some observers say is probably about the same in Canada.»²

1 LE MONDE 05.10.2009 http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2009/10/05/les-soutiers-de-l-universite_1249443_3224.html.

2 Moira MacDonald, January 9, 2013. Sessionals, up close. University Affairs <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/sessionals-up-close.aspx>.