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Review: *Disrupt This!: MOOCs and the Promises of Technology* by Karen Head

For those who may be new to MOOCs, Karen Head provides a brief explanation of how they gained popularity in the early 2000s, how MOOCs typically have tens of thousands of students enrolled in a single section, and how MOOCs offer credit (whether for a certificate or college credit) at a relatively low cost of usually $100 or less. MOOCs started becoming popular because they were branded and marketed as a way to save precious university resources such as instructor time and, more enticingly, as a way to make money for institutions. Writing centers have long worked in conjunction with MOOCs (Balfour, 2013; Griffin & Minter, 2013; Murphree, 2015). For these courses, if papers are required, many times instructors send students to schedule appointments at the writing center to obtain feedback because with thousands of students, instructors are usually unable to provide personalized feedback for each student.

I was excited to read Head's *Disrupt This!: MOOCs and the Promises of Technology* because I have been intrigued by MOOCs (massive open online courses) and other educational technology. I was also curious to learn more about how Head's work as a writing center director correlated with her experience of developing and teaching a MOOC composition course. Throughout this book, I found her attitude when tackling this opportunity to be inspiring. She states she would rather be on the front lines of new technology advances than sit on the sidelines and wait for others to dictate what technology should be used and how it should be used, and she describes her experience in tandem with supporting literature regarding MOOCs as she crafts her narrative. I found her organization throughout the book to be superb. By creating a linear narrative, she guides the reader through her experiences with MOOCs. She uses topical chapters as a way to pause and emphasize critiques of others' works, painful points such as working with other departments with vastly different goals for the project, and lessons learned throughout the project. This organization creates an easily digestible read that engages the reader throughout.

For institutions, academic departments, and student services such as writing centers, which are accustomed to providing much for little and having labor go unrecognized, the idea of MOOCs can be an enticing solution for combatting issues such as funding, physical space, and labor. However, in recent years, scholars have been more critical of the promises surrounding MOOCs. When taking into account how other scholars have described writing centers and their position alongside MOOCs, these critiques become even more serious. Head echoes many of these of critiques and urges administrators to mindfully reflect on technology before implementation with the sole hope of saving money or following a new initiative from another university.

Overview

Head starts off by depicting her experience of being nudged into the world of MOOCs and follows with chapters focusing, on the one hand, on issues she encountered working with MOOCs and, on the other hand, on critiques of others' works regarding technology in higher education. In her epilogue, she compares her work and her criticism of technology to Kentaro Toyamo's *Geek Heresy: Rescuing Social Change from the Cult of Technology*. The epilogue concisely weaves her arguments and concerns together. Head and Toyamo share similar experiences of entering a technology opportunity with some level of optimism, but both left with more worries about potential pitfalls than hopes for the benefits. Many of their hesitations stem from a lack of meaningful engagement with technology and the users. Head posits that those who wish to champion MOOCs should look to writing centers to better understand the importance of these centers and how they foster meaningful connections every day among tutors, technology, and clients.

Throughout the book, several themes emerge: the tendency of institutions to jump on the technology bandwagon too quickly; institutions using technology to mitigate college prices; the politics of incorporating technology like MOOCs on a college campus; and thoughtful critiques of seminal works. While I thoroughly enjoyed this book, one small critique is that I wish Head had provided more snapshots of how this new role of creating the composition MOOC related to her job duties, especially since she discusses labor issues that can arise when incorporating new technology. Critique aside, she provides many strong themes that would be beneficial to a variety of readers.

Jumping on the Technology Bandwagon

The pinnacle argument throughout this piece is that universities should be open to disruption while at the same time being thoughtful of implementation and assessment of methods. Head notes a trend in institutions blindly adopting various fashionable technologies or processes as a way to appeal "to legislators and pundits" (p. 7). Head points out that universities can be quick to jump on bandwagons, but when schools do, they seem disinclined to examine rigorously technologies and practices before their implementation. She argues that assessing new technology and practices is paramount in creating sustainability for these initiatives.

I am a reader who enjoys examples, and Head did not disappoint. She carefully supports each claim with clear examples, as in the case of institutions that have been quick to adopt MOOCs: the University of Florida and Texas State University. The University of Florida offered a fully online bachelor's program similar to a MOOC with the intention of enrolling out-of-state students who would pay out-of-state tuition. The hope was that this initiative would bring in a considerable amount of revenue to the university. Texas State University created what they called the "free first year," in which nontraditional students were encouraged to complete their first year using MOOCs and pay $90 for the standardized test after each course. Head exemplifies her critique of universities jumping on the bandwagon too quickly when she explains how the University of Florida had to cancel its online program less than two years after its inception because of too few out-of-state students signing up and the loss of institutional money. She offers Texas State as a potential example to monitor over the next few years, although she is quick to mention the large-scale, up-front philanthropy efforts that were required to start this MOOC, as well as the up-front funding required for most MOOCs. The validity of the claim that MOOCs save (or increase) resources is examined several times throughout the book.

Using Technology to Mitigate College Costs and Save Resources

It is clear that Head believes MOOCs most likely redistribute resources elsewhere rather than saving or generating resources for an institution. This claim about redistribution of resources (rather than saving resources) is found in much of MOOC literature, especially as it relates to writing centers. For example, there is a trend of MOOCs using writing center consultants or class peers to review student papers (Griffin & Minter, 2013; Murphree, 2015). So, while instructors are typically "saving time" by not reading these essays or are increasing revenue for their department by offering these courses, this labor has been reallocated to the writing center, which may or may not see any of the funding associated with the MOOC. For writing centers who typically start with limited resources, MOOCs have the possibility of adding to the strain of limited resources and uncompensated labor. Additionally, writing components in MOOC courses have reallocated potential resources in other ways. For example, MOOC literature has focused on the emergence of controversial tools such as the automated essay scoring (AES) application and calibrated peer review, which can be added to MOOC classes (usually for a fee). These tools remove yet another element of personal connection, an element of learning Head encourages. While Head acknowledges the bottom-line needs of the university, such as enrollment and numbers, she continually argues for the students' needs to be considered first and foremost. These political interactions become another emerging theme throughout *Disrupt This!*.

Politics of Incorporating Technology like MOOCs

As readers, we feel the palpable tension between Head, who does her best to create a meaningful learning experience in her course, and others who are involved in the process (administrators, Coursera, etc.) who push back because of different motives. After securing a $50,000 grant from the Gates foundation, Head was notified her project would be handled by Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities (C21U). While this department was designated to oversee the funds, neither she nor any of the full-time staff of 19 received any compensation. Rather, C21U allocated these funds mostly to production costs and administrative fees. Head was able to fight to secure a small amount of the grant to partially compensate postdocs, but she found the labor her team provided went largely uncompensated. Overwork has appeared as a concern in recent scholarship that advocates for attention to writing center labor issues, such as *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson, 2016) or *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* (Kahn, Lalicker, & Lynch-Biniek, 2017), which advocate for compensating the various forms of labor in writing centers and writing studies. While Head found herself in a complicated political web regarding compensation, there were several more limitations and stipulations imposed on her team and project that negatively affected the course and her experience. These experiences led her to draw upon and offer critiques of seminal and prominent pieces in writing center and educational technology studies.

Thoughtful Critiques

One of my favorite aspects of *Disrupt This!* is the continual thread tying Head's experiences with her Composition 2.0 MOOC to thoughtful critiques of seminal works by Richard DeMillo (2011), Clayton Christensen (1997), and others. Head argues some of these scholars may be too far removed from students to adequately make claims about students' needs and desires regarding technology and MOOCs. She cites powerful examples of many top, student-centered MOOC researchers who have actually been far removed from students for years, and as a field, we should examine these authors' works more carefully. While critiquing others, Head humbly shares her own privileges, such as her small class size and low course loads, and discusses how they may shape her own experiences and thoughts.

She argues that one aspect that sets her apart from several of the other authors who have written about MOOCs is her experience in a writing center. This experience has shaped her understanding of the importance of connecting with students and creating more personalized or individualized touches in courses. She argues that MOOCs struggle because of this lack of a personal connection, and those who are creating MOOCs could learn a great deal from writing center directors. As a last remark, Head leaves the reader with the understanding that the abundance of technology is not the issue; rather, it is the lack of meaningful engagement through technology. *Disrupt This!* does not disappoint and provides a transparent, thoughtful, and enjoyable read.

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