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# The Professors' Big Stage

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

I just spent the last two days at a great conference convened by M.I.T. and Harvard on "Online Learning and the Future of Residential Education" — a k a "How can colleges charge \$50,000 a year if my kid can learn it all free from massive open online courses?"

You may think this MOOCs revolution is hyped, but my driver in Boston disagrees. You see, I was picked up at Logan Airport by my old friend Michael Sandel, who teaches the famous Socratic, 1,000-student "Justice" course at Harvard, which is launching March 12 as the first humanities offering on the M.I.T.-Harvard edX online learning platform. When he met me at the airport I saw he was wearing some very colorful sneakers.

"Where did you get those?" I asked. Well, Sandel explained, he had recently been in South Korea, where his Justice course has been translated into Korean and shown on national television. It has made him such a popular figure there that the Koreans asked him to throw out the ceremonial first pitch at a professional baseball game — and gave him the colored shoes to boot! Yes, a Harvard philosopher was asked to throw out the first pitch in Korea because so many fans enjoy the way he helps them think through big moral dilemmas.

Sandel had just lectured in Seoul in an outdoor amphitheater to 14,000 people, with audience participation. His online Justice lectures, with Chinese subtitles, have already had more than 20 million views on Chinese Web sites, which prompted The China Daily to note that "Sandel has the kind of popularity in China usually reserved for Hollywood movie stars and N.B.A. players."

O.K., not every professor will develop a global following, but the MOOCs revolution, which will go through many growing pains, is here and is real. These were my key take-aways from the conference:

¶ Institutions of higher learning must move, as the historian Walter Russell Mead puts it, from a model of "time served" to a model of "stuff learned." Because increasingly the world does not care what you know. Everything is on Google. The world only cares, and will only pay for, what you can do with what you know. And therefore it will not pay for a C+ in chemistry, just because your state college considers that a passing grade and was willing to give you a diploma that says so. We're moving to a more competency-based world where

there will be less interest in how you acquired the competency — in an online course, at a four-year-college or in a company-administered class — and more demand to prove that you mastered the competency.

¶Therefore, we have to get beyond the current system of information and delivery — the professorial “sage on the stage” and students taking notes, followed by a superficial assessment, to one in which students are asked and empowered to master more basic material online at their own pace, and the classroom becomes a place where the application of that knowledge can be honed through lab experiments and discussions with the professor. There seemed to be a strong consensus that this “blended model” combining online lectures with a teacher-led classroom experience was the ideal. Last fall, San Jose State used the online lectures and interactive exercises of M.I.T.'s introductory online Circuits and Electronics course. Students would watch the M.I.T. lectures and do the exercises at home, and then come to class, where the first 15 minutes were reserved for questions and answers with the San Jose State professor, and the last 45 were devoted to problem solving and discussion. Preliminary numbers indicate that those passing the class went from nearly 60 percent to about 90 percent. And since this course was the first step to a degree in science and technology, it meant that one-third more students potentially moved on toward a degree and career in that field.

¶We demand that plumbers and kindergarten teachers be certified to do what they do, but there is no requirement that college professors know how to teach. No more. The world of MOOCs is creating a competition that will force every professor to improve his or her pedagogy or face an online competitor.

¶Bottom line: There is still huge value in the residential college experience and the teacher-student and student-student interactions it facilitates. But to thrive, universities will have to nurture even more of those unique experiences while blending in technology to improve education outcomes in measurable ways at lower costs. We still need more research on what works, but standing still is not an option.

Clayton Christensen, the Harvard Business School professor and expert on disruptive innovation, gave a compelling talk about how much today's traditional university has in common with General Motors of the 1960s, just before Toyota used a technology breakthrough to come from nowhere and topple G.M. Christensen noted that Harvard Business School doesn't teach entry-level accounting anymore, because there is a professor out at Brigham Young University whose online accounting course “is just so good” that Harvard students use that instead. When outstanding becomes so easily available, average is over.