



Ralph Scott

MOOCs For Librarians

We are all familiar with the online college concept with its open web access and unrestricted enrollment opportunities. Massive Open Online Colleges, MOOCs for short, have become a popular way for a lot of people to study. Some 25 million people have enrolled in classes from traditional universities as well as new online start-ups such as Coursera, Future Learn, and EdX. While there are studies that show low completion rates for many of these courses, overall attendance has been good with the majority of these students being college graduates who want to “improve their skills” (Zhenghao September 22, 2015).

A number of these MOOCs (as well as complete MLS programs) are targeted for librarians and para-professionals. I have enrolled in a number of these courses to enrich my job skills. The first one I signed up for was a Future Learn class run by the University of Glasgow “Antiquities Trafficking and Art Crime.” This course was a lot of fun and really helped me in my work as a special collections librarian. Future Learn next suggested that I enroll in another University of Glasgow class entitled “Early Modern Scottish Palaeography: reading Scotland’s records. This course delved into reading the early hands of the Scottish court clerks. Most recently I completed a course taught by Keio University on “Japanese Culture Through Rare Books.” I have tried one Coursera class from the University Colorado/University Complutense Madrid “Deciphering Secrets the Medieval Manuscripts of Europe.” While

this course was interesting and I learned a lot, the assignments were difficult and the instructor provided little feedback. I also have taken courses sponsored by professional associations such as the Society of American Archivists class “Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACs).”

An interesting MOOC of use to new librarians is David Lankes (Syracuse University) “New Librarianship Master Class” (<https://davidlankes.org/new-librarianship/new-librarianship-master-class-mooc/>). This class is divided into four weekly sessions covering the mission of libraries, pressures exerted by communities on libraries, continuity and changes in libraries over time, and the difference between sharing and lending. While this is typical of courses in librarianship MOOCs offer, other topics can be studied as well using this open course system: foreign languages, history, politics, literature. In fact almost any topic this is covered in the standard university curriculum can be found on a MOOC. An older pre-MOOC course system is also run by the Learning Company under the title of “The Great Courses” (<https://www.thegreatcourses.com/>). Founded in 1990 by Tom Rollins, Great Courses started out on VHS tapes and now uses primarily DVDs and web based delivery systems. Rollins claims on his web site that over 19 million courses have been taken since the company’s founding. Great Courses are like MOOCs only they lack in interaction you get with the regular classroom or online setting.

Library Schools would do well to incorporate a number of these courses into certificates of advanced study that could be marketed to professionals in a number of fields. In taking these courses themselves, librarians can gain insight into the issues that patrons face when attending MOOCs. I frequently see students at library computers online with various MOOCs. I’m better able to help patrons with problem with these courses having taken a number of them myself.

It is interesting to note that these MOOCs have become an extension of the Benjamin Franklin’s notion of a free public library system. These low or no-cost instruction platforms help to educate the citizenry and thus according to Franklin’s ideals create a better informed group of decision makers. MOOCs provide a new means of access to an education for library users that is independent of the traditional classroom setting and cumbersome bursar’s fees. Helping users view and use these MOOCs is something that every library can add to their service portfolio. The demand for MOOCs will increase the usage of web resources in libraries and as a result require libraries to increase their web presence and wi-fi services. Librarians needs to be up to speed on this type of learning, both through observation of patrons and via MOOC courses they have taken themselves. It will be interesting to watch this aspect of online learning and its transformation into educational delivery in the future.