

The Big Read: Nothing beats the real thing

Dec 5, 2014 | Jonathan Jansen

I held my breath as one of the techno-geeks on the panel at the Stanford University Business School eventually posed the million-dollar question.



CAMPUSES FOR CAREERS: Learning off a computer screen is not as valuable as being educated in a bricks and mortar institution. Photograph by: THYS DULLAART

"Traditional university offers the discipline of attending classes"

As described in last week's column, I was attending the panel at the Silicon Valley campus representing four renowned companies that had leveraged innovative technologies that promised to completely reformat the ways in which we think about education.

The companies included the acclaimed Khan Academy, which revolutionised the teaching of science and maths subjects through YouTube videos, and Coursera, which contracts more than 100 universities worldwide to offer MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) to anyone free of charge.

Now came the test as the panellist rounded on the auditorium filled with enthusiastic Stanford undergraduates who probably cared less about education than about "the next big thing" that allows them to profit from these new technologies.

"Which of you, if we could offer you exactly the same quality education as Stanford, for a fraction of the price, would rather register for one of our online courses than do the same thing at Stanford, coming into classes every day?" Not one hand went up. The reasons were simple.

Students do not seek a university education for purposes of obtaining information or training alone. They go because university offers a once-in-a-lifetime undergraduate experience in and around the classroom.

It is the place where you acquire knowledge with and from intimate friends; it is where you go to gain all kinds of social and political insights during volunteer work with teams from your department, or over a lunch-time protest in the open quad. It is where many students learn independence away from the family home. It is a space in which to experiment with ideas and things in the company of really smart - and dumb - fellow travellers. It is the locale for learning the balance between competing demands of sports, arts, culture, academics and lazing around. And then, of course, a good percentage of students find their lifelong partners on campus, but I digress.

Getting an online certificate from hours learning off a computer screen, even with the add-on of "live" experiences offered by more sophisticated e-learning innovations, is not the same.

Universities are brands. They signal to employers the value of a certificate and what it promises, depending on which brick-and-mortar institution you attended.

Right now - and this must change many years from now - an online verification of courses passed and taken from one of these start-ups does not convey quality, depth and reputation yet, as do established universities. Students and parents understand this, and that is why no hands shot up in this Stanford story.

More important than brands, data already available shows that student pass rates drop precariously to around 30% of the class when learning through one of the MOOCs at a large state university.

Why? Because there is one thing a traditional university offers that online or correspondence courses do not - the discipline of attending classes.

Whether classes are compulsory (as is the case in disciplines like medicine in South Africa) or not, the mere fact that you have to attend a class at a specific time with a cohort of other students is a remarkably effective motivator for most students.

That is one reason why, to take a local example, Unisa's pass rates have always been lower than those of traditional universities.

As one of the presidents of a traditional US university hugely invested in online education recently told a friend of mine: "There are only two problems with MOOCs - massive and open."

It is, of course, a commercial bonanza to have millions register online for a course of study. It is a completely different matter that they pass with desired levels of competence.

As a teacher of the humanities I have to make the point, though, that there are complexities of thought, richness of dialogue and open-endedness of deliberations that cannot be taught in online models of mastery learning, where becoming competent in specific domains of content knowledge is the primary objective. But that is a debate for another day.

Does this mean there is no place for MOOCs? Of course not. Initial observations suggest the kind of people who benefit most from technology-driven innovations in education are professionals already in careers, and who are motivated enough to undertake the equivalent of "executive education" programmes at a business school.

To first-year students I would simply say for now: go to class.