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Oct 1, 2013

Written By: Jason Dorrier
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GOOGLE JOINS TOP UNIVERSITIES IN QUEST TO FULFILL POTENTIAL OF ONLINE EDUCATION

With online education, you don't have to go to MIT to learn from one of MIT's top professors. You don't have to spend six figures or four years to get knowledge applicable to the career of your choosing. Education can continue all your life, if you like.

The idea is full of potential. But today, it's still an experiment, and as anyone who's taken a course will tell you, the experience is far from perfect.

One challenge is getting people to fully commit to classes. 90% of enrolled students never finish. Another problem is figuring out how to allow educators the latitude to get creative building their courses. That is, they aren't programmers, so how do you give them the tools to focus on what they do best?

To tackle problem two, Google is joining forces with edX, a collaboration of 29 top universities offering 72 online courses, to build an open source online education platform. The new platform, called Open edX, will allow anyone—from universities, to corporations, to individuals—to build and host online courses of their own making.

The new platform will be rolled out on a site called MOOC.org in early 2014, and anyone interested in creating their own course can get instructions and tools developed by Open edX. But they won't be

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developed by Open edX. But they won't be limited to Open edX tools. It is open source, after all.

While edX has the resources and education experience of the likes of MIT and Harvard, Google is Google. The firm is idealistic, flush with cash and programming talent, and open to projects with no immediate revenue stream in sight. Further, Google has dipped its toes into online education with an open source online education platform called Course Builder.

Course Builder was launched late last summer as a tool for educators interested in taking their wares online. With the new edX collaboration, the firm plans to keep Course Builder running but nudge its users to Open edX in the future.

An open source platform involving some of the top educational institutions in the world and one of the most successful firms in tech? Sounds like a fruitful alliance. EdX's president said they hope it will be like a "YouTube for MOOCs."

Coursera's Signature Track offers course credit for a fee.

Not everyone is going free and open source. Coursera, a for-profit online educator, boasts 5 million students, 453 classes, and 88 institutions around the world. And whereas Google and edX want to improve the online education experience—Coursera is trying to figure out how to keep students engaged and give them credit for their work.

In that vein, Coursera launched its Signature Track program in the beginning of 2013. For a set fee per class, Signature Track links online coursework to your identity and offers Verified Certificates for completed coursework. Verified Certificates don't add up to a degree, but they are issued by the university offering the course. 25,000 students have signed up, bringing in $1 million in revenue so far.

Also, offering academic credit for a fee seems to be increasing completion rates. Coursera says that controlling for self selection—those enrolled are likely already more likely to complete their class—Signature Track increases the stickiness of online courses.

There's room to be skeptical online education will ever equal traditional methods. And it's been hyped to high heaven in recent years. But fleshing out its potential requires the experimentation, open source or otherwise, we're seeing today.

Ultimately, it may be a combination of software and hardware that makes online education viable. An Oculus Rift, for example, paired with an immersive virtual world, could engage future students on the cheap and from anywhere in the world.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock.com

This entry was posted in Singularity and tagged coursera, edx, google, mooc, online education, udacity.

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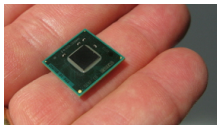

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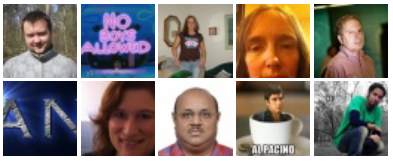

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