Professor Al Filreis reflects on his experiences directing an open online poetry course on Modern & Contemporary American Poetry called ModPo, which has engaged 415,000 participants since 2012.¹

Who keeps us safe?

It was exactly a decade ago, as I write this: I nervously clicked ‘publish’ on a 10-week online course about modern and contemporary U.S. poetry. Although the course was hardly new to me—I had offered it in classrooms since 1985 and had even taught it partly online and then entirely online since 1996 or so—the platform this time was robust and hot, all the media rage. I knew that the launch was likely to get a lot of attention worldwide. It did. The platform was relatively new, and some basic elements were not ready for prime time, quite creaky (the discussion forums in particular). But 2012 within weeks of my launch was going to be dubbed by the New York Times among others ‘The Year of the MOOC,’ and I pushed ahead despite the major unknowns. Heady moment. An open-enrolment introduction to artificial intelligence had enrolled 150,000 people. There were a few four- and five-week short courses on pop topics—on Time Management, on Writing Professional Emails, on ‘A Life of Happiness and Fulfillment’—that enrolled 225,000 and more. How would modern—and indeed supposedly ‘difficult’ or, at any rate, experimental—poetry be received in the context of all this hullabaloo? I had no idea, but was game. And I stuck with my perhaps esoteric convictions about the not-easy art I admired. There would be no Robert Frost in the course.² And no confessional poets—no Lowell, no Plath. But there would be an incoherent, seemingly illegible New York Dadaist, Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven; a forgotten Depression-era communist (Ruth Lechlitner) who wrote about abortion; and an obscure Harlem Renaissance poet, Anne Spencer, whose poems about gardening had something to say about race.

The raging tech-world context for my ambitions as a teacher at that moment was, as my use of the infamous acronym above hints, the so-called Massive Open Online Course. It was free and open to anyone with a connection sufficient to stream low-bandwidth videos. My course would mostly entail reading poems on a screen of any size (outside the U.S. most participants typically would use phones or tablets), and then typing out

1 https://modpo.org/
2 Well, not quite true. There is one Frost poem in week 5 of the course, but it is presented negatively—a what-not-to-do instance in the context of modernism.
responses to what others were saying about the poems. We opened on September 4, 2012. That first season 42,000 people enrolled from 179 nations.

I was positively stunned by the response. The platform—provided by Coursera in its first season of offering a limited round of trial-basis courses hosted by a few universities—was built on the assumption that the lecture and quiz-taking would be the two main teaching modes. ‘ModPo,’ as we called our course, used neither; I as its founding teacher/convener felt that neither would make for an online course of much interest and, what’s more, I had been harboring—and for years already had been writing about—a deep antagonism to such pedagogy. Our MOOC was meant, from the start, to be a course with real discussion at its centre. Read a poem. Then watch a video in which I led a collaborative close reading of that poem with eight colleagues—in which my role was to ask a few improvised questions and moderate enthusiastically so that all eight could take a turn responding to some phrase or line or word in the poem. And then, bolstered by the experience of seeing and hearing a close reading performed by a gathering of various minds and voices, go to the forums and post your own response, comment on others’ responses, and try to figure out what the poem is saying in that community space. And that was it: read, watch others discuss, then yourself discuss, then repeat. Do that 119 times in ten weeks, in response to 119 poems, and you have an intensely interactive, often intimate, learning experience across time zones, generations, sensibilities, local educational attainment or social status.

Intimate? It is a word used again and again by participants across the years. Interviewed about her ModPo experience, early participant Tracy Sonafelt described the boisterous, structurally chaotic discussion forums: ‘Sure, the forums can become unwieldy and [can] intimidate some because they are so huge...but eventually study groups and webs of connection with others of a similar mind make that vastness feel small and intimate and personal. If a student wants to be noticed, she will be; if she wants to hide, she can do that too. We are responsible for our own learning, and we are partners in shaping the ‘curriculum’ that is ModPo.’ ‘You remember how much joy there can be in learning,’ observed Alice Allan from Australia. ‘You’ll see everyday things in a new light. ...You’ll form new bonds with your classmates and become part of a community that feels both intimate and global.’ Dorian Rolston, in an article about ModPo published in The Paris Review, pondered the MOOC in relation to its home base inside the 1854 Tudor-style cottage in Philadelphia called the Kelly Writers House. ‘ModPo was designed to be the cottage’s online extension,’ Rolston writes,
‘and it is, in some ways, just as welcoming.... [Filreis’s] intimate pedagogy shapes the course site’s very infrastructure.’

Because I had already been teaching all-online courses, and because at my university I had long been advocating what in the 1990s was called ‘teaching with technology,’ I was familiar with a simple, persistent skeptical assumption: attempts to create a true learning community remotely, outside of the classroom with its traditions of spatial intimacy, would never replicate the human connection that is a prerequisite to education. From my involvement in various intra- and inter-campus initiatives—several of them during the techno-utopian moment of 1996-99—I had come to know the concerns of those who doubted the efficacy of such speculative focus, sudden administrative energy, and new investments. I was well versed in this distrust; indeed, in part because of the precipitous solution-obsessed attention by some university administrators, I had begun to share some of the doubts. How terribly superficial would the touted revolution be? Still, in 2012 I was not entirely surprised by the elated response of thousands of ModPo participants who were discovering each other as intellects and lovers of art despite the separations of distance and other social, economic, and linguistic factors of dislocation. Nor was I surprised by the affirmative responses of a few journalists who diligently covered ModPo in 2012 and 2013 as part of the ‘Year of the MOOC’ beat—those, I mean, who took the time to venture inside the community hosted by the course, talking with far-flung and exhilarated ModPo people. The key was not that a massive open online course could make college-level learning available and real to people anywhere; I still doubted that about the vast majority of MOOCs, in which you passively watched a lecture and took a quiz, and where the discussions forums were set up for the posting of questions seeking clarification of points made in the lecture or perhaps querying about deadlines or requirements, or seeking guidance in using the buggy, recalcitrant platform. But within several weeks of ModPo I knew that an open online course need not be impersonal if it could somehow invite learners to turn the platform toward the advantage of open discussion and interactive responsiveness.

What I did not expect was the particular political valence the MOOC would take on almost immediately. Some colleagues in the humanities felt that the quality of instruction in MOOCs was embarrassingly low, featuring simplistic mini-lectures in a format that left little to no opportunity for students to interact with the lecturer. While courses in several STEM fields and on vocational topics might perhaps succeed to teach skills and even concepts in this mode, the humanities, where iterative rounds of

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interpretation were the key to learning, would be disadvantaged. (In contemplating this serious charge against MOOCs, we would have to ponder whether in large or even middle-sized in-person courses humanities professors have been successfully practising the sort of learner-centred interactivity found lacking in online instruction.) Others observed that ‘Sage on Stage’ academic superstars were being carelessly created, perhaps by opportunists, without much regard to real scholarly achievement in the fields they now far too widely represented to global publics forming their first impressions of U.S. academia. Still others resented the sudden euphoric attention of presidents and provosts while long-standing structural problems inside the university, directly affecting their own residential students, went unaddressed. Wild predictions were offered by columnists and national politicians about how MOOCs could radically reduce the cost of tuition, and about how much more ‘efficient’ this sort of teaching was or would become; these claims tended to alienate faculty further. (Dave Cormier in December 2011 saw MIT accrediting a MOOC for the first time and named it ‘Black Swan 1’ among his 2012 prognostications. Thomas Friedman, in a widely cited column, declared that ‘Revolution Hits the Universities’ and that they would never be the same. Friedman quoted a 17-year-old with autism—Daniel Bergmann, who had taken ModPo and composed his first-ever essay—on Emily Dickinson’s ‘I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed’—in September 2012: ‘I can’t yet sit still in a classroom so [your course] was my first real course ever. During the course, I had to keep pace with the class, which is unheard-of in special ed.’)

Then there was the matter of which learners had first rights to all this knowledge and instruction now being given way, for free, to anyone. Here two academic leftisms converged or, rather, were being openly contradicted. One Left celebrated the liberation of paywalled academic knowledge, teaching and resources—a better fulfilment of the dream of many academics who had long decried ivy-tower barriers to entry, the sequestering of knowledge created at the universities (at significant public expense even at private institutions) to which ideally all people should have access. The other Left worried that the guild of hard-working and typically underpaid faculty was being undermined by university administrators and trustees seeking to score easy public and media points—and were betting they could soon enter wide ‘new markets’ of learners—by initially giving it all away pro bono. With this criticism there was some measure of felt solidarity with students whose families struggled to pay rising tuitions so as to gain hard-won access to resources and intellection now being freely

4 http://davecormier.edblog/2011/12/19/top-ten-black-swans/
5 https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/opinion/sunday/friedman-revolution-hits-the-universities.html
appropriated and uncontrollably scattered, such that the precious costly degree might soon have less value.

I've tried here, in a short space, to summarise the complex first backlash against MOOCs—2012–13. A fascinating moment, to be sure. Elated as I was by the successful outreach through ModPo of the relatively little-known poetry I admired, I felt bitterly towards some of these rejoinders, mostly via Twitter disputes, negative reviews in higher-ed journals, and a few contentious on-campus conversations. Then I saw the backlash dissipate as soon as the headlines shifted from hyperventilating reports of radical utopian transformation in higher ed to dour accounts of MOOC drop-out rates and the struggles experienced by faculty seeking in the second wave to create their own MOOCs despite suddenly lessening incentives and rewards and institutional focus. ModPo continued to be free—a stubborn insistence of mine a decade later. Our essays were optional, ungraded, and peer reviewed. A small percentage of participants wrote and submitted them. Many people continued to be part of the ModPo scene, year to year, re-reading poems, getting involved with our ‘SloPo’ season (mid-November through August), signing up as Community TAs (CTAs), participating in our weekly live interactive webcasts during then annual Symposium Mode (September through mid-November), traveling to in-person meet-ups at cafes and bookstores around the world, setting up (more recently) weekly or monthly Zoom ‘office hours,’ and reading and discussing the scores of new poems being added to an augmentation of the main syllabus we call ‘ModPoPLUS.’

I take the initial backlash to have been, ultimately, an expression of anti-utopianism. Critics of MOOCs did not give credence to chiliastic claims being made by or on behalf of deans and presidents and wildly growing for-profit groups such as Coursera or Udacity or Canvas Network. In taking such a view nearly all the sceptics missed how the radical ideals of the tiny, peripheral ‘cMOOC’ could be brought into the colossal, bulky ‘x-MOOC’ mode. People who were involved with ‘cMOOCs,’ the brilliant and chaotic Connectivist open online seminars, which preceded the star turn of the MOOC genre in 2012, continued to contribute important ideas about collaborative and hybrid pedagogies that influenced a few ‘xMOOCs’ (the cMOOCers’ name for large, presumably impersonal, lecture-based MOOCs with their typically top-down, teacher-centered approach to learning). It was possible to see a future of xMOOCs, even those hosted by virtue of the backing of investors and through hastily arranged university/for-profit partnerships, that might benefit at least somewhat from the Connectivist vision of learners themselves learning how to alter the structures of learning; from participant-created workshop-style innovation; and from process-oriented rather than content-dependent collective instructorships. In that possibility one might discover, truly, that there is wisdom in a crowd. (I have
written about this sort of enormous crowdsourcing as it applies to poetry, a field in which it is I believe especially apt—in an essay about ModPo called ‘Citizen Poetics.’ But again, though, the 2012-13 backlash was sceptical and dissenting rather than idealistic. I am less interested in that initial counterargument, and its internecine politics, than I am in the new wave of criticism that struck in 2020, when Coronavirus disease forcibly caused nearly all educators to teach online and the politics of online teaching became extensive.

This new backlash against online teaching was founded on a longstanding mistrust of centrist hopes and claims, and now was pitched against those who saw the moment as a chance to explore another ‘silver lining’ inside the severe social and intellectual restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The resistance came, distinctly to be sure, and variously, from both progressives and conservatives, from people who accepted the true health dangers caused by the virus and tolerated most mitigation strategies and people who could not abide any sort of top-down dicta. MOOCs already existed, of course, and were not a particular target of the new anger, which was directed generally at modes of remote instruction being hastily assembled at middle and upper schools primarily, and at colleges and universities. Few leaders in education at any level had had the sufficient resources set aside to make such a rapid shift and few teachers had had the experience, for instance, in leading a productive discussion using remote technologies.

ModPo had existed for eight years by then and had gathered around it a boisterous supportive community of current and former participants who, here and there, were now telling sceptical parents, teachers, family members, children and grandchildren about a massive online educational community that had been successful at maintaining itself and somehow encouraged intimacy as a prerequisite social trait of learning among others. Enrolments soared through the spring and summer of 2020, even though it was ModPo’s annual off-season and in spite of my making no special effort to announce the year-round availability of the course. Many new enrollees told us they were there not for poetry but to see how the community constructed itself. The discussion forums began to fill with insightful meta-commentaries about which aspects of ModPo’s collaborative approach could serve as models in response to the apparent dysfunction of so much online instruction (and workplace interaction) that nearly every family was experiencing. Much can be written—and will be, by me, when I have the time and page-space—about this erratic moment. And about the crucial differences between the backlashes of 2012–13 and 2020–21. And about

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why the sort of poetry presented in ModPo—open-ended and unresolved, supposedly difficult, requiring collaborative close reading—was and is especially pertinent to the crisis. Yes, I am certain that poetry has had something to say about all this.

‘Crisis.’ Of course we are talking about convergent plural crises, since many in 2020 began to face three urgent issues at once: the risky future of education, the effects of racist brutality, as well as of course the pandemic. Until I happened upon a speculative essay titled ‘What Do College Students Think of Their Schools’ Reopening Plans?’ written by Masha Gessen for the July 11, 2020, issue of The New Yorker, I hadn’t sufficiently appreciated how things had changed, nor how much the emergencies needed to be synthesised. Before contemplating that turn, we need to recall the early spring. NPR ran a story in which Anya Kamenetz coined the term ‘Panic-gogy’ to describe ‘Teaching Online Classes During the Coronavirus Pandemic,’ and the date of the piece is March 19. ‘Online School Demands More of Teachers. Unions Are Pushing Back’ is a New York Times headline of that moment. A far cry from Friedman’s euphoria in 2012-13 over the coming new golden age of learning, Frank Bruni opined on June 4 in a column titled ‘The End of College As We Knew It,’ seeing restaurants and airlines as moving over the edge toward which higher education now also veered. ‘Shakespeare gets kicked when he’s down,’ mused Bruni.7 In the ‘Recode’ section of Vox: ‘Paranoia about cheating is making online education terrible for everyone.’ Jeffrey Young in EdSurge asked on March 25, ‘Will COVID-19 Lead to Another MOOC Moment?’ Rebecca Barrett-Fox outlined a new practical form of faculty resistance to administrators in a much-discussed blog post titled ‘Please do a bad job of putting your courses online.’ (Her opening line is ‘I’m absolutely serious.’)

Then, for many faculty, frustrations directed against the modes of remote instruction as they were hurriedly deployed in March, April, and May of 2020, gave way in the summer and early autumn to anger directed against administrators who by that point seemed much too eager to send everyone back into the classrooms for the new school year. The latter argument depended not on teachers’ comfort or satisfaction with online teaching, nor upon the arguments in favor of the exploration of these astonishingly accessible pedagogies that could and perhaps should have been made by these same people in 2012-13. Which was now more despicable: remote teaching or educational leaders demanding that we quit remote teaching as soon as the exigent reason for it had begun to abate? The loaded institutional term for all this was of course ‘reopening,’ and Masha Gessen, investigating various easily ridiculed ‘defense[s] of campus life in

the pandemic’ being now promulgated by colleges and universities, came upon the vital synthesis of social response to dysfunction that I realised only belatedly I had been seeking in the MOOC for a decade.

I will conclude here by summarising and endorsing the stunning point Gessen makes at the end of her New Yorker essay, adding assurances that I will explore it further in a longer study of learner-centred learning. Quoting a university president speaking sternly and with uncharacteristic conservatism about stern rules that would need to be imposed on students returning to campus while a pernicious disease was easily spreading (months prior to available vaccination, of course), Gessen observed the ideological irony of the authoritarian rhetoric: ‘we have the authority to put all kinds of expectations and requirements on our students’ and to design ‘a series of escalations for dealing with misbehavior.’ Then, turning slightly toward an exactly contemporaneous situation, one involving many people of college age, Gessen described her research on the responsible and remarkably COVID-safe activities associated with mass anti-racist protests that had been happening in late spring and all summer in response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Gessen, a veteran of protests (and long a journalist reporting on them), had never seen ‘this level of detailed, organized, and consistent mutual care,’ and quoted a call-and-response chant from the mass demonstrations—‘Who keeps us safe? / We keep us safe!’—in such a way as to cause the renewal of antiracism activism, fears of the pandemic’s effects, and frustration over the failures of 21st-century education to seem vitally convergent. Pivoting back to the situation of pandemic-era teaching and learning, she began tentatively to outline a learner-centred pedagogy, one that took its cue from people of the same age who made an effort to take the new politics into their own hands—a pedagogy that could begin with the ‘community [that] students seek [pandemic or no pandemic] when they attend college in person.’ She urged those in authority at schools to ask the students themselves, those subject (after all) to the old and suddenly outmoded (and, despite the shift to online, largely unchanged) methods of teaching, to create, as it were, a syllabus that included, rather than set aside, a fresh ‘rethink[ing of] how colleges are interacting with students who are staying home.’

The people who have joined me for the ModPo experience, some of whom even admit to not liking poetry very much, are ipso facto ‘staying home’ for a variety of reasons, and the empathy Gessen briefly observed in young people during the summer of 2020 generally obtains. Just one reason for teaching ourselves to care about those who are staying home, since 2020, is obviously COVID-19. There are others, and they are relevant: no proximate access to a college or university; lifelong learning differences that made classroom learning impossible or at any rate disheartening and unproductive (witness Dan Bergmann); poverty in general and mass student
debt in particular; overwhelming domestic responsibilities; chronic illness. Still another reason has to do with an emergent Connectivist sensibility, which, like the idea of the cMOOC still wandering in the wilderness, pushed even farther to the edges by the rush of ‘Panic-gogy,’ is what Gessen observed of learners realising their reasonable right to expect that the learning environments they enter, and indeed help create, will be built upon detailed, organised, consistent mutual care.

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