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**SMALL PRIVATE ONLINE COURSES (SPOC) AS A NEW APPROACH TO
HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Abstract: Small Private Online Course (SPOC) are a new type of online class that allow anyone, anywhere, to participate via video lectures, computer graded tests, and discussion forums. This article will give a basic overview of what SPOCs and how they work.

Keywords: Small Private Online Course (SPOC), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), EdX, higher education, blended learning.

The field of higher education can be safely called one of those that the pandemic has had the greatest impact on a global scale. Moreover, the higher education industry has become one of the few prepared to translate most of its processes online. For a year or two there, free online classes seemed like they just might be the future of higher education. For a long time, technological advances have meant a major challenge and transformation for universities, which are trying to take advantage of the advances offered by technology.

Why, some influential computer scientists wondered, should there be thousands of universities around the country all teaching the same classes to small groups of students, when you could get one brilliant professor to teach the material to the whole world at once via the Internet? As much as everyone wants to see college costs reined in, replacing thousands of professors and classrooms with a handful of websites populated by remote talking heads cannot be the answer. But before we throw the whole idea out the window, it's worth asking: Mightn't there be a way that online lectures could complement the traditional higher-education experience rather than replace it?

Anant Agarwal, president of EdX, believes there is. Like Coursera and Udacity, EdX began by offering full-service online classes for free, taught by professors at Harvard and MIT, the initial partners in the venture. One of those experiments calls SPOCs — “small private online classes,” as opposed to massive open ones. The approach is also known, less acronymically, as “hybrid” or “blended learning.” [1].

A Small Private Online Course (SPOC) refers to a version of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) used locally with on-campus students. University of California Berkeley Professor Armando Fox coined the word in 2013 to refer to a localized instance of a MOOC course that was in use in a business-to-business context [2]. In this regard SPOCs are focused on certain groups of students, which are qualified to take the course and ready to interact with others throughout the learning process. Even though most institutions do not yet award formal recognition of SPOCs, Robert Lue, who runs HarvardX, the university's digital arm, says that it is becoming more likely that prestigious universities begin to create SPOCs for course-credits [3].

When a SPOC is implemented at an institution, in concert with students, faculty determines which features and course content to utilize. This can include video lectures, assessments (with immediate feedback), interactive labs (with immediate feedback) and discussion forums used in MOOCs. Using MOOC technology allows the faculty to organize their time with students in different ways,

such as allowing more time in class for project-based work instead of grading assignments or preparing lectures. SPOCs have been analogized to “next generation textbooks,” by allowing faculty to decide how to use some or all parts of the SPOC [4]. In a SPOC as in a MOOC students typically access interactive content at their own pace. Instructors set their own grading scale.

By 2015, the technology of blended learning in the form of organizing distance learning through massive open online courses had acquired a worldwide practice in the field of non-formal education and firmly entered the list of promising areas for the development of education according to many experts, researchers, educators, and scientists.

The basic idea is to use MOOC-style video lectures and other online features as course materials in actual, normal-size college classes. By assigning the lectures as homework, the instructors are free to spend the actual class period answering students’ questions, gauging what they have and haven’t absorbed, and then working with them on projects and assignments. In some cases the instructors also use some MOOC-style online assessments or even automated grading features. But in general they’re free to tailor the curriculum, pace, and grading system to their own liking and their own students’ needs.

The notion isn’t entirely novel. A similar approach has been popularized at the high-school level in recent years by Salman Khan, who encourages teachers to use his free online lessons to “flip the classroom”: Students watch lectures at home and then do their “homework” in class. Freed from the need to prepare a lecture for each class session, instructors can focus their time on the rest of the educational experience — the individualized, hands-on instruction and collaboration that no MOOC can provide. In this model, as I’ve noted in the past, the online lecture starts to look less like a poor substitute for traditional classes and more like a 21st-century twist on the traditional textbook.

Based on the conviction that students’ needs and interests must take centre stage in university teaching, we consider it worthwhile to carry out studies on the impact of the SPOC on teaching components such as: the use of time dedicated to

training, the channels of student participation, their motivation or the academic performance they achieve. Whether or not SPOCs amount to some sort of pedagogical revolution, it seems clear that they hold more promise than pure MOOCs when it comes to delivering students a full educational experience—not to mention saving academics' jobs.

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