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■ AQ FEATURE

MOOCs in Development: Fad or Future?

BY [Juan Cristóbal Bonnefoy](#)

Is online education a fad—or a tool?

Those following tech and continuing education news have been surprised by the rising popularity of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).¹ The basic promise for professionals in Latin America and the Caribbean is quite alluring: free online access to a world-class knowledge base. But questions remain. Will this new learning methodology last, or fade quickly once the novelty is gone?

Access to MOOCs—and participation in the courses—could eventually enhance capacity and performance, particularly for underserved audiences who seek continuous learning, whether for personal or professional reasons. As an added bonus, participants are able to learn under a flexible schedule suitable for working adults, freed from having to travel to a physical classroom.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is facing the same dilemma that other knowledge-intensive institutions are confronting: join the cause of MOOCs, or wait and see how other early adopters fare to see how the market evolves.



A new form of education: Stephen Conway (left) helps fellow student John Blkey in an online computer science class. Photo courtesy of Melanie Stetson Freeman/The Christian Science Monitor/Getty

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The ability to train government officials ultimately helped the IDB see the potential impact of MOOCs. Despite substantial public sector reforms in the past two decades, government effectiveness remains very low in most countries across the region.²

There's no time to waste. Budgetary constraints and a limited supply of continuous training opportunities mean that a very low percentage of public officials have access to the requisite

continuing education needed to understand and adapt to the region's development challenges. These public servants face complex and highly dynamic social and economic problems, which demand an ongoing effort to update skills.

In the face of these demands, the IDB began to look for a partner with solid MOOC experience. In March 2014, the IDB signed an agreement with edX—the online education platform founded by Harvard and MIT—creating IDBx, which allows the IDB and its partners to offer free online training programs accessible worldwide.

National and subnational governments in Latin America employ roughly 28 million individuals, not including the employees of public utilities or outsourced activities. Within this group, there are approximately 9 million managers and professionals who could be the target population for MOOCs on development issues.

Yet the model is not without its challenges. Discounting the obvious preconditions, such as offering quality and up-to-date content, there needs to be built into the effort effective ways of reducing dropout rates. Recent MOOC experiences have shown retention rates below 5 percent of registered participants. Since there are often several thousand registrants in these classes, a 5 percent retention rate still translates to a high number of people completing the course. In contrast, traditional, non-massive online courses offered previously by the IDB had completion rates of over 90 percent of registered participants, with the assistance of online expert tutors. We decided to combine our strategy for retention in these courses to our MOOCs initiative.

Further, working adults—particularly those in the public sector—have difficulty following a 12-week course, which is the norm for MOOCs led by universities. “Modularity” or “micro learning” has been proposed as a solution to this constraint. The IDBx platform produces shorter courses dealing with a single subject or problem set. In this case, the challenge will be avoiding fragmented knowledge and ensuring that participants access all the relevant units of a given topic.

Lastly, a significant challenge is to ensure that the participant is able to apply the acquired knowledge in her or his work context. For development institutions like the IDB, the capacity-building activity should have an applied component. It is not enough to teach the theoretical aspects of a problem; the contents must also have a policy or management dimension that addresses development problems in Latin American and Caribbean countries. The ability to implement the proposed solutions, or avoid the common mistakes, is the true test of effective learning in this context.

Will MOOCs be able to revolutionize public officials' response to the region's development challenges? The collaboration is too new to test any differences so far. But at least these professionals will have access to these open-access courses, and will continue to learn from them.

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