



# MOOCs, vending machines of learning

Universities hope users are attracted to a bricks-and-mortar education

GILLY SALMON

HERO of Alexandria (AD10-AD70) was a great inventor. He created a vending machine that dispensed holy water at an Egyptian shrine. In exchange for dropping a coin in the slot, your pilgrimage was rewarded with a small splash of welcome moisture.

Two thousand years later, vending machines are a positive, convenient and largely successful part of our lives, faster even than next-day delivery from internet shopping. Vending machines provide us with newspapers (US and Canada), batteries or electricity for charging your device (Japan), hygiene products and condoms (everywhere) as well as servicing those in need of the modern-day holy water: cigarettes, coffee, sweets and snacks. Many offer innovative just-in-time solutions; ballet flats to replace those high heels on a night out, for example.

Many people these days search long and hard, high and wide for a special, personalised “spritz” to enhance their careers, to easily lead them to greater achievement, to fulfil aspirations. I’m wondering whether Hero would have approved of massive online open courses. Maybe his penchant for innovation would have been tickled by the estimated hundreds of millions of students enrolled in MOOCs in recent years, most in the past 12 months.

The production of the “holy water” hasn’t changed but access to it certainly has. Like vending machines, MOOCs accommodate convenient access to small items required at that moment. There is a price to pay, but unlike the traditional coin to access your goods, MOOCs require some personal information about you and your educational preferences. You need to register online, which is just as valuable to the MOOC provider as a coin in the slot (noth-

ing is really free). And then gratification at your finger swipe, retina scan or presentation of your access credentials. The content delivered is typically well-presented and carefully shrink-wrapped, ready to be dispensed and consumed at will.

Ancient history texts did not record whether the Egyptian pilgrims were satisfied with their splash of holy water, or what steps they took if it failed to live up to their expectations. At Flinders Street station the other day, I witnessed huge frustration at the failure of a vending machine to deliver the required chocolate bars to a small group of people. I was glad my train departed before the machine landed on the track. There have been deaths as a result of vending machine attacks or malfunctions. No MOOC-related injuries yet, I believe, except perhaps to academic pride and institutional norms.

Like vending machines, MOOCs require little commitment to obtain the desired product. Many universities hope that these little tasters will transfer to commitment and loyalty by potential students to bigger, paid-for education. With MOOCs, we know that typically only 10 per cent to 30 per cent of participants complete the MOOC, and far fewer seek some form of credentialling to prove they have learned anything.

So what’s the appeal? Well, there’s the availability of mass commodities (knowledge) in an on-demand package (online 24/7 as you wait for your tram). It’s a way for generators of the knowledge to easily reach a mass audience, a form of marketing without having to identify the targets in a granular format.

There’s the instant gratification of choice but maybe, as with a convenient just-in-time snack, soon forgotten. And, once you understand the general principles of how vending machines work, your choice of commodity is limited only by how many vending machines are in your vicinity, the range of products they dispen-

se and ingenuity of the people who stock them.

There’s much innovation continuing in the vending machine industry to create and dispense more products in response to the desires of modern consumers. These include touch displays, digital signage and remote, cloud-based vending management. There is no evidence that increasingly sophisticated vending machines are about to replace supermarkets. But they coexist. MOOCs are still at the holy water starting gate and need some more substantial developments before they seriously challenge the bricks of the campus.

Some educational organisations are tinkering with the latest appealing technologies and others are nodding towards providing a human touch or assessment.

MOOCs are a disrupter to the 1000-year history of university education. The coin hasn’t yet dropped to evidence whether vended learning will lead learners back to more conventional suppliers, or whether MOOCs will feed into whole new and alternative ways of teaching and credentialling.

Vended learning is already leading to pathways to high quality, entirely digital education and accelerating the rush to incorporating and combining place with technology, often called blended learning. It’s offering true, low-cost, high-value experimentation in big data and new types of instant consumers—just as the vending machine did.

*Gilly Salmon is pro vice-chancellor (learning transformations) at Swinburne University of Technology.*

**Like vending machines, MOOCs require little commitment to obtain the desired product**



