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Making His MOOC an ‘Outreach for Poetry’

By STEVE KOLOWICH

Teaching students how to read and analyze experimental poetry can be hard enough in a small seminar class. Leading the same class in an online classroom of 36,000 far-flung learners might strike some as a fool’s errand.

Al Filreis, a 57-year-old professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, disagrees. Many believe that massive open online courses are more suitable for teaching mathematics and hard sciences, ruled as they are by laws, formulas, and right-or-wrong answers.

But Mr. Filreis, an early pioneer of MOOCs in the humanities, believes the MOOC format is in many ways ideal for his course, “Modern & Contemporary American Poetry.” In fact, he thinks the MOOC version of his course is just as academically rigorous as the classroom version he has taught for 25 years.

The key, he says, is being willing to get your hands dirty.

“I learned everything that I know from teaching at summer camp,” says Mr. Filreis. One day, decades ago, when the professor was a camper at a YMCA in upstate New York, a sewage pipe on the grounds began to leak.

By the time Filreis and his peers woke up, the head counselor was “a good couple feet into the ground, shirtless and shitty,” the professor recalls.

Nearby, the counselor had laid out additional shovels—a wordless invitation to Mr. Filreis and his fellow campers. Soon they were all digging in the muck.

That experience, plus several decades of teaching college students, has left Mr. Filreis with a somewhat postmodern view of his role as the head of the class. The Penn professor does not “lead” his MOOC in the traditional sense.

He does not lecture. He does not give grades. He assigns quizzes, but only because the founders of Coursera “begged” him to do so. (He calls the quizzes “silly,” although he admits that students seem to like them.)

Those gestures of professorial authority are not what make students learn, says Mr. Filreis.

He argues that the peer-review system in his MOOC gives better feedback than he could provide if he read every student’s writing assignments. “I read hastily,” Mr. Filreis says. “It’s not my best moment, writing notes on essays.”

Instead, Mr. Filreis holds weekly readings and discussions at the Kelly Writers House, on the Penn campus, with students taking his MOOC who live nearby. When he last taught the course, eight to 30 students showed up each week, says Mr. Filreis. The professor then broadcasts those salons to the far-flung students in the course. The idea is to teach his online students about reading and discussing poetry by showing them what that looks like.

“I lay out the shovels there,” Mr. Filreis says, “and I imply that the only way you’ll be able to come do this is you have to pick up the shovel and do it.”

In that way, he says, teaching critical reading to thousands of online students is not that much different from teaching students in the classroom. It just requires more intervention.

How much more? During his MOOC’s 10-week run last fall, plus the two weeks after its conclusion, Mr. Filreis posted on the discussion forums 4,356 times.

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That’s 52 posts per day, seven days a week.

“Nobody had ever done that,” says Mr. Filreis. “They still haven’t done it.”

Sometimes the professor weighed in with a substantial insight; other times, he chimed in with light praise or encouraging words, just to let students know he was paying attention. And it was not just Mr. Filreis digging into the forums. The professor hired 12 teaching assistants to help him cheerlead and guide discussions.

Mr. Filreis got to know some of his MOOC students well enough that he wrote individual recommendations on behalf of several who were applying to undergraduate programs.

Given a MOOC format, which uses automation to meet the challenges of teaching at scale, Mr. Filreis’s efforts to make himself personally accessible to students were extraordinary. But that might be what it takes to run a course that relies on buy-in from participants while offering no formal credit.

One of the challenges of building a sense of community around a MOOC is that massive online courses are landless, says Mr. Filreis. In this respect, the Kelly Writers House anchors his MOOC to the university in an uncommon way. In addition to modeling discussions there, Mr. Filreis and his assistants have staged virtual tours of the house, a cozy yellow building nestled among trees off a campus walkway. The writers’ house is open to the public, and the professor extends an open invitation to any MOOC participants who happen to be in the area; he says “many” have visited.

“There isn’t a single MOOC, of the hundreds, that has an identifiable space ... a home, with an open invitation to anyone who has ever taken the course to walk in and participate,” he says.

Did these extraordinary engagement efforts work? It depends on how one defines success. Two thousand students completed “Modern & Contemporary American Poetry,” out of 36,000 registrants—a 5.5-percent completion rate. That figure may elicit cackles from some skeptics, but Mr. Filreis is not particularly interested in completion rates or the debate over how MOOCs might disrupt the existing credentialing system in higher education.

“This is outreach for poetry,” he says. “I care about the poets. I care about the living, contemporary poets whose poems I teach, and I care about the fact that 36,000 people—or some number of people, many more than before—are reading these poems, and taking them seriously, and possibly buying their books. That’s what I’m doing, primarily.”