

Discussion on McGill's Innovative Learning Environments 23/01/13

The Provost, Senator Bell and Senator Dinel facilitated this discussion. The Provost began by telling Senate that McGill needed to constantly innovate in all facets. He provided examples of recent innovations in the classroom experience, teaching and learning, and the library. He said that any discussion about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) must treat them as an additional innovation to be considered. Senator Dinel said that students generally found online resources helpful and hoped that they could be implemented without burdening professors. She added that McGill's implementation of MOOCs would have to enhance McGill students' education and not devalue the McGill experience. Senator Bell told Senate that in the 19th century, Principal Dawson taught courses in the Redpath Museum by displaying pictures of extinct reptiles affixed to a sheet of cloth. Whereas technological advances such as PowerPoint have essentially kept this model intact, MOOCs would involve far more fundamental change to the McGill experience. They then opened the discussion by asking Senate to consider the following questions:

1. Assuming we should be involved in MOOCs, how quickly should we enter this space?
2. How do we maintain quality assurance if we develop MOOCs?
3. What will be the relation between MOOCs and on-campus course offerings?
4. If McGill MOOCs become "exportable", what evaluation criteria will we use to "import" others?
5. Given the costs associated with developing, delivering, and perfecting MOOCs, what should McGill's position be vis-à-vis the present configuration of consortia (Coursera, Udacity, edX, BVA, etc.)?

Senators spoke about the impact MOOCs would have on teaching and learning at McGill. Several Senators encouraged the University to look at MOOCs as a complementary pedagogical tool to the many already employed, including the somewhat similar COOL system. Senator Xu pointed out that McGill already had many large, impersonal classes and would benefit from the additional online support that MOOCs offer. Senator Gutman said that MOOCs would allow McGill to offer courses in a manner more consistent with the principles of universal design.

Several Senators spoke against MOOCs, suggesting that the best pedagogy refrains from talking at students and encourages questions

and answers between students and professors. Senator Lennox said that students in MOOCs could only be assessed by multiple-choice exams, which would constrain teaching and learning options. Senators added that technological innovation would not address the more pressing issues of students' motivation and effort. Senator Ferrie told Senate that professional accreditation boards were typically slow to innovate and might not recognize such courses.

Senators asked whether MOOCs would allow professors to rely on a single lecture for multiple years: some felt this would free professors' time for more productive ends while others feared it would jeopardize the relevancy of courses. Senators also discussed whether MOOC consortium partners would offer the same classes and how this would impact the University.

Additional concerns were raised about MOOCs' technology and its constraints. Senators raised concerns about the amount of technological and pedagogical support such an endeavour would necessitate. Senator Hurtubise suggested that professors utilized many styles of teaching and many media of interaction that MOOC technology would not permit. Senator Redel raised concerns about the viability of a turnkey system on the one hand, and about McGill's ability to adapt to an evolving interface on the other.

Senators also spoke about the University's strategic interests in such a project. Senators asked whether MOOCs might provide revenue. Senator Srinidhi suggested that McGill base its approach to MOOCs on data collected from other universities' experience and analyse its own metrics before deciding to go forward.

Senators spoke in support of the outreach possibilities of MOOCs. Senator Zidel suggested that first year courses could be provided to high school students as advanced credit. Senator Hebert thought that MOOCs could provide a good pipeline to University education, but would not adequately replace classroom teaching. Senator Dinel told Senate that MOOCs would be able to extend McGill's reach to audiences around the world. Senator Kirk said that MOOCs would be a great way to export the McGill brand abroad and encourage partnerships with peer-level institutions. The Chair agreed, adding that McGill could build on its expertise in teaching and learning.