

## Making the most of the MOOC experience

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In mid-2012 I completed my first massive online open course, or MOOC, the kind widely offered by Coursera, EdX, Udacity and so on in partnership with different educational institutions. It was on clinical trials and ethical practices, offered by Johns Hopkins, on Coursera.

This was shortly before the MOOC sensation hit India, and when Coursera itself was just a few months old. The MOOC bug had bit me.

The course I'd completed was mainly designed for health care professionals who would be involved in actual clinical trials, not college students who had no prior knowledge of that area. I decided to enroll in the course because it was the only biology related course open at the time. However, I did see hope in that sometime in the future I'd be able to get a glimpse of what classes are like in the hallowed halls of major educational institutions around the world.

By early 2013, Coursera and EdX had partnered with so many educational institutions and expanded their course offerings to include everything from food and nutrition to Greek mythology to business, that I was spoilt for choice. I spent hours going through course catalogues and poring over course descriptions, almost delirious with excitement at the fact that I was actually going to be able to take classes offered by universities I had only dreamt of attending.

Predictably, I signed up for more courses than I could handle. Even a 'Time Turner' couldn't have helped. I had brought upon myself the painful task of deciding which courses to proceed with and which I should put off for a later date. Internal battles raged: career goals versus hobbies, science versus arts, refreshing existing skills versus acquiring new ones... In the end, I decided to stick with a couple of science-related courses that would directly help in professional development, and a couple of courses just for fun.

All was well for a while. I was enjoying the MOOC experience; watching every lecture, religiously taking notes, solving problem sets well before the due dates, doing assigned readings and getting into intense but enjoyable debates with my classmates on discussion forums.

Soon, however, life outside the virtual world caught up with me. Towards the end of my life as an undergrad and in the middle of my MOOCs, I was so overwhelmed with lab work in a desperate attempt to cobble together a coherent thesis that I was physically and mentally exhausted and had no time for my MOOCs.

By the time I had time to breathe again, I had missed many important deadlines and had way too much material to catch up on. I had completed none of the courses I'd started with. I chose to

quit rather than to end up without a Statement of Accomplishment. In hindsight, it was not a wise thing to do.

My first MOOC binge debacle was followed by a second one and a third one. Soon after that, I learned not to overload myself, no matter how exciting the courses sounded. I decided to take one course at a time. There'd always be time for the rest later. I set aside a small amount of time for it each day, in order not to fall behind. I tried to keep myself motivated, especially when I took courses in subjects that I had no background in. I began learning programming properly for the first time, something that I had resisted for as long as possible with the argument that "biologists don't need to know programming." (Turns out, they do.)

Two years and a series of dropped courses later, I've successfully completed a bunch of courses across various disciplines, expanded my knowledge base, discovered new interests, learned to make the most of the MOOC experience and acquired life skills along the way.

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