

The online study option

“Hey Rakesh, did you attend Prof. Andrew’s Machine Learning lecture?”

The next time you hear someone asking thus, don’t be sure Rakesh is a Stanfordian. The world has changed, and so have avenues of education. The open education system called Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOC, has redefined traditional concepts. Since the last decade, top-notch universities such as Stanford, MIT and Harvard have been promoting open education through video-recorded lectures by renowned professors. Later, classes began to be conducted virtually – with assignments, periodic assessments, and so on.

High-quality education is today not the prerogative of the rich. What you need is an Internet connection to access material and videos on the course page. You attend the lecture, do the assignments, assess yourself or get assessed, and grow.

There have been many such ventures. Coursera.org, a private undertaking with the support of tutors from Stanford and similar institutions, has gained acceptance. Edx.org, a venture by a group of universities including Harvard and MIT are on the job, too. Also on offer are www.udacity.com, www.saylor.org, www.udemy.com... the list continues. You name it, they have it — that’s what makes MOOC a success.

IITs are the dream of many students. Unfortunately, the selection rate at IITs is less than 3 per cent of the total JEE applicants. This shows serious competition — for knowledge and excellence. Those who do not get in might believe they were not lucky enough to get into an IIT, and would wish they could attend lectures by IIT professors. This would never have become possible if the concept of MOOC had not been ushered into the cyber world. Today India has its own open courseware, being supervised by IITs and the IISc.

NPTEL, or the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (www.nptel.ac.in) is an open learning project funded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and maintained by the IISc and the IITs.

Recently, NPTEL decided to go online. It is providing courses in the Coursera model, where you can sign up, attend lectures, and attempt assignments. You will get the feel of directly attending classes, and that’s for free. For a nominal fee, you will be given in-person proctored online examination too. You get a certificate if you write the examination at select locations.

Currently the number of courses being offered is very few. But they will come up with more and more courses pertaining to different branches of engineering and science. In the time of knowledge explosion, India's own MOOC leads the journey. More information is at www.onlinecourses.nptel.ac.in