Scenario

For the fall term, Margaret Lane decides to teach her course "Novel Writing" as a MOOC, a massively open online course. Each time the course is offered, it fills to capacity with students from the university, and there are always many requests from the community for slots to audit the course—after all, who doesn't want to write a novel? As a MOOC, the course still has a cap of 25 for-credit students, who meet in class and receive a grade for the course. However, another 1,600 students sign up for free as "open students," some from campus but most from around the world, including seven non-U.S. countries. These students have access to recorded class lectures and other course materials, and a set of social networking tools allows the group to interact with one another and form cohorts—including students from campus—around the type of novel they want to write. Although the for-credit students have priority for direct feedback from Lane, she provides as much guidance to as many students as possible.

Over the course of the semester, the many students in the MOOC organize themselves into self-selected review groups to provide feedback on others' writing exercises. This peer-review process follows the direction that Lane provides, but it takes place largely outside her direct supervision. Lane tries to develops course activities that allow all students to participate equally, whether they are for-credit students or any of the hundreds of open participants, who have diverse motivations for taking the course and similarly varied expectations of it. Due to the number of participants, the MOOC depends on a high degree of student-to-student interaction and self-directed learning, and some of the open students who need a more structured approach drift out of the course. For those who persist, the range of voices and perspectives on their writing samples is invaluable. Some students receive hundreds of critiques, and the opportunity to read samples from so many other budding novelists is itself extremely helpful.

The diversity and activity of the MOOC extend beyond what students in the course would typically expect, and most participants also leave with a list of contacts for ongoing feedback and support. Meanwhile, a lot more people become familiar with Lane and her novels, and the exposure provided by the MOOC means that writers and readers increasingly view Lane's university as one of the short list of institutions for aspiring writers.

1 What is it?

As its name suggests, **a massively open online course (MOOC) is a model for delivering learning content online to virtually any person—with no limit on attendance—who wants to take the course**. Participants can be students enrolled at the institution hosting the MOOC or anyone with Internet access. The "open" students, who pay nothing to participate, can join in some or all of the course activities, which might include watching videos, posting on discussion boards and blogs, and commenting via social media platforms, though anything hosted by the institution's LMS would likely be off-limits. Although "open" participants receive no credit for the course and may get little or no direct feedback from the instructor, their involvement can add a dynamic to the course that benefits all students. While a MOOC might accommodate enrollment in the thousands, some of these courses enroll far fewer—the "massive" part of the name speaks more to the potential to include vast numbers of students than to the actual size of the class.

2 How does it work?

Although the curriculum for a MOOC might be identical to that of a standard course, learning activities are typically restructured to better match the dynamic of a large and fluid group of participants. **Course activities could be scheduled or asynchronous, and a flexible structure is valuable because students can choose their level of participation and many will do so in an à la carte manner.** A MOOC is typically hosted on easily accessible sites such as a wiki, blog, or a Google site. In addition, course interactions might take place in blogs, tweets, and other public, online venues. Public announcements regarding the course are generally made on blogs, academic websites, or professional organizations. Open students register online so that they can receive information and announcements.

3 Who's doing it?

In 2008, George Siemens and Stephen Downes co-taught a class thought to be the first to use the term MOOC. The course, called "Connectivism and Connective Knowledge," was presented to 25 tuition-paying students at the University of Manitoba and offered at the same time to around 2,300 students from the general public who took the online class at no cost. Since that time, most MOOCs have been taught on subjects in the education or technology spheres, but a few topics have been designed for wider appeal. Early this year, for example, Jim Groom led a team of instructors in offering "Digital Storytelling" as a for-credit course at the University of Mary Washington and as a free online course to the public. Students in both groups set up online spaces, told their stories, and published them using assorted digital media. To date, those MOOCs that have drawn the largest crowds have been

taught by high-profile instructors on popular topics. A recent MOOC at Stanford University, "Introduction to Artificial Intelligence," taught by AI experts Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig, drew a world-wide open enrollment well in excess of 100,000 students.

4 Why is it significant?

A MOOC throws open the doors of a course and invites anyone to enter, resulting in a new learning dynamic, one that offers remarkable collaborative and conversational opportunities for students to gather and discuss the course content. To manage the often extremely large student base, instructors sometimes depend on social media tools to foster collaborative, participatory, and peer-to-peer learning. Such an approach has the benefit of distributing responsibility for teaching throughout the class rather than laying it wholly on the instructor. Because participants can include degree-seeking students, vocational learners, and people of all ages and locations, the course benefits from a rich diversity of ideas arising from many regions, cultures, and perspectives. At the same time, the MOOC allows the hosting college or university to open its curriculum to a wider audience, extending the institution's voice into the community at large as it removes barriers to learning.

5 What are the downsides?

The dynamic of a MOOC will likely make some students uneasy, particularly those who expect or thrive on a high level of contact with the instructor. A MOOC can be energetic and nonlinear, frequently presenting students with multiple data streams from discussion boards, Twitter, Google+, Ning, and any number of other online sources. The resulting high level of noise from simultaneous conversations can overload some learners. The open character of the MOOC, which offers so much opportunity, leaves it more vulnerable to inappropriate behavior, a problem that might be exacerbated where students have no financial stake in the course. At the same time, instructors need to rethink at least some of the elements of the course to take advantage of the benefits of a MOOC, giving consideration to the technical logistics and to the structural demands of a course with such a potentially large and diverse group of participants. Some courses, for example, have struggled to provide synchronous learning opportunities when large numbers of students attend. Student access can vary with connectivity and providers, which may limit the material that can be downloaded or watched in real time. And the distributed and networked technologies employed may be unfamiliar to participants, obliging them to negotiate a technical learning curve before they can focus on course content.

6 Where is it going?

The MOOC is an emerging model, presenting an intriguing set of challenges and opportunities for both instructors and students. **As it evolves, expectations and methods of presentation will likely crystallize, becoming more consistent and more predictable.** Because these open classes allow prospective students to sample what a sponsoring university has to offer, MOOCs may be used as outreach tools to boost future enrollment. Moreover, these widely attended courses can and sometimes do generate significant buzz, and their potential to raise the profile of instructor and institution is unlikely to be ignored. Certainly as MOOCs develop, the scale on which these courses can be taught and the diversity of students they serve will offer institutions new territory to explore in opening their content to a wider audience and extending their reach into the community.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

For the independent, lifelong learner, the MOOC presents a new opportunity to be part of a learning community, often led by key voices in education. It proves that learning happens beyond traditional school-age years and in a specific kind of room. Its low barrier to entry invites those who may lack the confidence to attend for-credit classes and those who cannot afford more traditional college opportunities. By providing a no-risk option for learning, MOOCs also encourage participation from those who lack time because someone facing a job change, a move to a new residence, or an upcoming project deadline has little to lose if they find they must end their participation midway through the course. But perhaps **the most significant contribution is the MOOC's potential to alter the relationship between learner and instructor and between academe and the wider community** by potentially providing a very large and diverse forum and meeting place for ideas. Those enrolling in a MOOC are likely to discover learning at its most open on a platform that invites the world not only to see and hear but also to participate and collaborate.