A Poverty and Inequality MOOC

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Abstract

We propose to develop a new course on poverty and inequality that introduces students to (a) the science of adjudicating among possible sources of poverty and inequality, (b) the science of assessing the effects of poverty and inequality, and (c) the science of evaluating interventions designed to reduce poverty and inequality. This will be the first available MOOC on poverty and inequality and should attract wide attention. We depart from typical MOOC offerings by moving beyond the single-professor format and instead exploiting the capacity of MOOCs to feature in one seamless package the range of professors, scientists, and policymakers whose scholarship has defined the field. It is perhaps surprising that so many MOOCs unquestioningly adopt the traditional single-professor approach even though the form is seemingly tailor-made for reaching beyond that convention and drawing on scholars from multiple universities. The multi-scholar format should yield an unusually engaging product: That is, rather than summarizing the research of others, the course will directly introduce students to the professors and policymakers who have themselves made the contributions. We will ask these leaders to describe the puzzle motivating their research, the process of discovery, the implications of the discovery, and the puzzles that remain unsolved. This format unleashes the potential of MOOCs to provide exposure to scholars and scholarship that goes beyond the usual boundaries of the university. We expect that undergraduates, non-traditional students, practitioners, and policymakers alike will benefit from a course that meets the rising demand for up-to-date information on poverty and inequality.
The purpose of this course is to lead students through the key scientific breakthroughs that are the foundation of our current understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and inequality. We anticipate substantial demand for this course because the rapid growth of income inequality over the last 40 years has generated a new national conversation about the “one percent,” about the fairness of our labor market institutions, and about the need for new tax policy. The demand for this course should therefore be substantial, yet our research shows that no comparable course yet exists in the MOOC space. Although we’ve located one course on poverty in the developing world on the EdX platform, our course will focus on poverty and inequality in the United States (albeit with frequent comparisons to other countries).

Despite the growing demand for information on poverty and inequality, existing online sources are a confusing amalgam of bad science, good science, and mere opinion. We propose to develop an authoritative course that fills the demand for a systematic scientific understanding of social and economic inequality. Instead of the usual oversimplified renderings, we will introduce rigorous and methodologically sophisticated material, focusing exclusively on the research by top scholars who drive the field and have the gravitas to drive policy as well. The result will be a course about (a) the science of adjudicating among possible sources of poverty and inequality, (b) the science of assessing the effects of poverty and inequality, and (c) the science of evaluating interventions that seek to reduce poverty and inequality.

The course will provide a corrective to the view that the field of poverty and inequality is “just normative” and that all opinions on poverty and inequality are accordingly equally valid. The latter position, however common it may be, is difficult to defend: It’s rather like claiming that all opinions on the four laws of thermodynamics are equally valid even when they’re predicated on a limited understanding of what those laws are. We will train students in the laws and dynamics of poverty and inequality in ways that then allow them to develop informed opinion.

It is perhaps surprising that most on-line courses are currently delivered with a conventional one-teacher format that doesn’t exploit fully the opportunities of the online form. It’s conventional to refer to online learning as “boundaryless,” yet despite that tag the typical online course doesn’t draw on resources outside a single university or even a single professor. The premise of our course, by contrast, is that the online model is best exploited by delivering top scholars from universities across the globe into the homes of our students each week. Although many Stanford University professors will appear in our course, we won’t privilege them solely because they happen to teach at our own university. We will incorporate them if and only if they’ve shaped and transformed the field. It fortunately happens that many Stanford University professors have.
The proposed course will, we hope, come to dominate the field precisely because it draws on the best and brightest scholars while also weaving their contributions into a coherent tapestry (and there will be more below on how that “weaving” will be undertaken). In principle, one could implement a “best and brightest” format in the traditional classroom setting (via invited lectures), but to do so would entail substantial transaction costs. These costs are not only more reasonably borne for a big online course with a long shelf-life, but it also becomes possible to minimize such costs in an online context (as we don’t need to bring the participating professors physically to Stanford University).

There are any number of advantages to our approach. Most obviously, by showcasing a series of short presentations (approx. 5 minutes) by different professors, we reduce the tedium factor that inevitably emerges when the same professor performs throughout an entire course. (We will of course ensure that each presenter adheres to a well-conceived format and then wrap their brief presentations around our own rather lengthier framing and concluding commentary. Second, there’s the credibility of learning from the leading scholars themselves, not from some second-hand rendition of their work. It’s a further advantage that, by virtue of bringing in these leading scholars, we will quite naturally feature diverse racial, ethnic, and national origin groups. We will ensure that each speaker delivers a captivating presentation. We will share with each contributor a sample lecture that adopts the right tone and style, carefully review and revise their preliminary outlines of the lecture contents, and watch the filming remotely as it occurs live in the professor’s home university, thus allowing for real-time corrections and revisions.

We will ask each speaker give their lecture on an auditorium stage at their home university. Because the proposed contributors (see Appendix A) are concentrated in a small number of universities (e.g., Stanford University, UC-Berkeley, University of Chicago, Princeton University, Harvard University, Columbia University), it will be cost effective to send our producer to each of these universities for several days of concentrated shooting. We will then make use of post-production editing to seamlessly move between shots of the speaker and shots of their visual materials (e.g., graphs, figures, photos, PowerPoint slides). Although we will aim for a TED-style lecture with real energy and dynamism, we will not sacrifice content and reach. The content that we showcase will be captivating mainly by virtue of its intrinsic importance. But a good show can’t hurt.

Although we’ll keep the course lively in this way, we appreciate that continuity is also an important part of a student’s classroom experience. Before each presentation, we’ll lead off with Grusky and Owens, the objective being to introduce the topic by setting up the key social science question that will be resolved. At the end of the session, Grusky and Owens will then reappear with concluding commentary that (a) summarizes the material, (b) poses pregnant questions that reveal that, however groundbreaking the presented research was, there remain
various unresolved puzzles, and (c) engage in a vigorous point-counterpoint that highlight these unresolved issues and how one can interpret the presented research in various ways. By prearrangement, Grusky and Owens will not always agree, instead they’ll be engaging one another in a lively discussion, thus exploiting the two-person format. This format will be entertaining but also intellectually challenging and stimulating.

**Oversight**

The course will be overseen by Grusky and Owens (for whom brief biographies are provided below). In addition to designing the syllabus, inviting the outside speakers, and managing the content produced by the outside speakers, Grusky and Owens will be responsible for (a) delivering the stage-setting lecture for each module, and (b) delivering the concluding lecture and debate that put the results into context. Also, Grusky and Owens will design, implement, and oversee the research component of the project, which is discussed in the next section.

The teaching assistant will be responsible for supervising the discussion boards, answering student questions, managing the course website, grading the Stanford University student assignments, and creating and posting answer keys for the online assessments. We will also have the assistance of CPI’s administrative assistant for logistical matters (e.g., assistance with the budget, scheduling outside speakers). We have been in close communication with Wes Choi about assistance with filming a pilot lecture to send to outside speakers as the template.

We are currently deciding between two candidates who would direct both the filming and editing of our video lectures. Both candidates are former Stanford MFA students from the documentary film program with extensive experience filming educational videos.

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Significance of Gender? (with Francine Blau & Mary Brinton, 2006), and Inequality (with Szonja Szélényi, 2006).

Lindsay Owens is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology, a National Poverty Fellow at the Center on Poverty and Inequality, and a Graduate Research Fellow at the National Science Foundation. She is a frequent author of opinion pieces and editorials, coeditor of a chartbook of 100 facts and figures on inequality (Inequality in the US: Understanding Inequality with Data), contributing author to the 2011 book, The Great Recession, and author of “Confidence in Banks, Financial Institutions and Wall Street, 1971-2011” (Public Opinion Quarterly, 2012). Her research interests are in inequality, housing, debt, consumption, and political attitudes.

Assessment

We will follow each module with a student assessment, to be developed by Grusky and Owens, that speaks to (a) mastery of the materials, and (b) the capacity of students to creatively apply them to new problems. The latter capacity to apply will always be stressed and thus lead to engaging and challenging assessments.

We will also carry out an experimental assessment of the effects of the course on attitudes toward poverty and inequality. In a now classic study, Marwell and Ames (1981) found that students exposed to economic principles in introductory economics courses performed more selfishly in public goods games than those who had not yet taken introductory economics courses (see also Frank and Schulze 2000; Wang, Malhotra, and Murnighan 2011). We don’t know much, however, about whether courses that present different approaches to the sources of social order and disorder yield different types of behavior and attitudes. We suspect that teaching a course on poverty and inequality may, like teaching a course on economics, have subtle consequences on behavior, albeit consequences that are quite different in valence. For the research component of this course, we will therefore examine the effects of teaching poverty and inequality on (a) attitudes and behavior toward the poor, (b) understandings about how inequality and poverty are generated, and (c) larger and more abstract narratives about the forces and motivations underlying human behavior. We will conclude by administering a short survey to assess student satisfaction with the course and to garner suggestions for improvement.

Implementation and reporting

The course will be rolled out in the Winter of 2014. The framing lectures, invited lectures, and concluding lectures will be produced during the Spring, Summer, and Fall quarters of 2013. We will edit and caption these videos during these three quarters as well. During the Fall quarter of 2013, we will finish the framing and concluding lectures (as these are best produced with the invited lectures in place), design the course website, publish course materials to the website (videos,
assignments, readings), and pre-test the course with a small group of Stanford summer students.

We have designed two six-week courses (see Appendix A for the provisional syllabus). In each week, we cover a new key area of research on inequality or poverty, an area that in each case can stand on its own. This modular design allows students to participate without any prior knowledge from the previous course (or even the previous week).