At long last, a year into the MOOC frenzy, here comes Thomas Friedman with an oped in yesterday's *New York Times*, *Revolution Hits the Universities*. This breathlessly enthusiastic endorsement from Mr. Friedman (*The World is Flat*) should mark the high tide of the MOOC craze, and for all of us, I hope, the beginning of a more reasonable discussion of these new courses and the future of higher education. With Friedman's late entry, perhaps we can safely say the MOOC bubble is about to burst.

One reason this seems likely is that his high profile piece in *The New York Times* elicited barely a whimper from the digital humanities community. Friedman's oped came on a day in which the twitter stream among digital humanities lit up over MOOCs, but not one of these scholars paid attention to Friedman's pandering sycophancy. Instead, the real issues came up in Cathy Davidson's "Why MOOCs Are Not a BandAid For Higher Education's Budgetary Woes," "Spy v. Spy: A Response to the Chronicle of Higher Education", and "If We Profs Don't Reform Higher Education, We'll Be Re-Formed (and we won't like it)." (see #highered, #MOOC)

Friedman's piece was just one of a string of "disruptive" "transformative" "revolutionary" flavored assessments about how MOOCs will "reinvent" the future of higher education. To get a sense of the panic MOOCs have brought on, we only need to look to the other side of the pond yesterday and see the *Times Education Section*'s report on Cambridge University's chancellor fretting that MOOCs will transform "the nature of higher education." ("V-c warns of massive threat posed by MOOCs")

Because of his public audience, Friedman certainly gets attention. His piece generated over 285 comments before the day was over. But it seems that the hard, serious questions about how to transform higher education with technology are taking place in the digital humanities twittersphere and other similar venues. Ryan Cordell at Northeastern (@ryancordell), Cathy Davidson at HASTAC (@CathyNDavidson), Adeline Koh at Duke (@adelinekoh), Siva Vaidhyanathan at the University of Virginia (@sivavaid), and Edward L. Ayers at Richmond (forthcoming piece on a "more radical online revolution") among many others in digital humanities are writing thoughtful and fascinating pieces on the real changes underway in higher education-in teaching and learning using technology, of which MOOCs are a part but perhaps not necessarily the most important.

I could not ignore Friedman however. He does at least two things in yesterday's piece that are very troubling. The first is his hook-line-and-sinker acceptance of Coursera's sugary story that an autistic student and his parents appreciated the MOOC environment. Friedman and Coursera imply that the MOOC environment could transform opportunities for special needs students. But neither he nor Coursera seem willing to admit that such technologies
could be used to exclude or profoundly limit access.

Before going further I should say that my youngest daughter has Down syndrome and so while I do not doubt that this autistic student found great value in the MOOC experience (and applaud that), I want to point out the subtle manipulation of those with disabilities at work in Friedman’s piece. He uses this story in the service of another agenda without any apparent concern for the implications. This sort of scenario occurs daily in the life of my daughter, and it has been discussed among parents of children with special needs regularly from Michael Berube’s brilliant and inspired Life as We Know It to yesterday’s thoughtful New York Times piece by George Estreich “A child with Down syndrome keeps his place at the table.” The frightening and retrograde idea that people with special needs can be set apart (to be special somewhere else) should be seen for what it is—exclusionary. The trade-offs are vastly unequal: instead of school, here is an online link; instead of a professor, here is a video, instead of a place at the table, another table is set. Will the MOOCs mean less diversity in our institutions of higher learning? Perhaps. Does Coursera or any current MOOC provider seek to serve students with special needs in any real or meaningful way? Probably not—so why does Friedman bring it up? Why does Coursera offer this particular story to him? It makes those who do not confront the daily challenges of navigating the world with disabilities feel good about something they otherwise might find vaguely threatening—a revolution in higher education. It desensitizes us, however perversely, to the very issue we should be more alert to in this drama: access and equal opportunity.

Second, one of the real issues of concern is that privately capitalized corporations running MOOCs through consortia of elite institutions, as presently described by Friedman, might flatten the landscape of higher education in ways that limit, rather than expand, access to quality instruction. In the name of efficiency public higher education might be stripped of resources. Using the technology to appear accessible, the elite institutions secure their positions by placing the real engagement on campus ever further from the reach of other students. Across the broad second and third tier of institutions, students might find fewer pathways, not more, into the system of higher education, as all sorts of courses are cut from campuses. Then these courses would only be available virtually, “at scale.”

What is needed in this discussion, as Cathy Davidson, Siva Vaidhyanathan, and others in digital humanities so clearly recognize, is first and foremost to acknowledge the wider scope of online research and practice which the MOOC bubble has obscured. To the amazement of the digital humanities scholars who have been thinking about and building mechanisms to teach more effectively using technology for over fifteen years, the current MOOC model appears to be a puzzling throwback, like suggesting we all take up closed circuit television or organize correspondence courses.

In an episode of Seinfeld, Jerry assesses Kramer and Newman’s never-ending game of Risk as “a game of world domination being played by two guys who can barely run their own lives.” The character and tenor of MOOCs—their potential for realigning credit hours and their hundreds of thousands of “students”—might remind us of the game of Risk, and perhaps some of the leaders involved could appear to be a little bit like Kramer and Newman.

In higher education at the moment we find it difficult to see beyond the next budget cut, the next course enrollment
battle, the next assessment strategy. But the debate over MOOCs in our departments and disciplines suggests a much broader opportunity and challenge before us: in the humanities we need to begin building pedagogy for the digital age. We have seen rapid growth in the availability of digital archives and digital projects, yet our classroom practices have changed little. Students are confronted with millions of digital texts, yet they need skills to navigate the World Wide Web and numerous proprietary databases. They need the disciplinary habits of mind in the humanities to interpret and evaluate digital information, yet they are given few opportunities to participate in the creation of new knowledge. Imagine if we reorganized our classroom experience both in large lecture courses and more intensive seminars to create less anonymity and more dynamic learning, to allow students truly to participate in a “community of scholars.” We will be doing precisely this in The History Harvest course soon—at least we are in the planning stages now for a MOOC-like distributed course next year with participating classes from all over the U.S.

The vast changes in our classrooms and information technology have led to fundamental questions about our higher education enterprise, ones we should be asking. Why go to college when information is at your fingertips? What will we do with ten million books digitized online and searchable? What is a lecture course for? How can we use technology more effectively? The emergence of the MOOC offers another opportunity, one that humanities and STEM faculty should embrace. But the justifications Coursera and Friedman have offered ring hollow and the unrestrained hyperbole about the “reinvention” of higher education could have the reverse effect of shutting down experimentation with MOOCs, just when we need it most. That would be a shame.

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