

THE FUTURE OF LEGAL EDUCATION?
NORTHWESTERN LAW'S FIRST MOOC: LAW AND THE ENTREPRENEUR

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Distance learning and online classes have become a fundamental component of higher education, and education experts expect them to continue to grow in popularity and expand going forward. One of the earliest Massive Open Online Courses (or “MOOCs” as such courses are commonly called) was offered in 2012 by two Stanford professors, Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig. Their course, “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence”, was a free online class and attracted more than 160,000 students from more than 190 countries.¹ The success of this class encouraged these Stanford professors to launch a new business for online courses--Udacity.

The trend has since taken off in academia with several more MOOC platforms on the market, including Coursera, edX and others, collectively offering thousands of MOOC choices to students. Even Wall Street is paying attention to educational technology startups. Many investors are monitoring the recent initial public offering of 2U Inc. which helps nonprofit colleges and universities enhance curriculum through digital media and online classes.²

Law schools have also begun to explore the value of distance learning as a meaningful educational tool for their own students and as a mechanism to reach prospective students. Law schools recognize the importance of providing access to legal education to people who are unlikely to become enrolled students (based perhaps on geographic, economic or other barriers), but who have an interest in learning. Additionally, recent declines in law school applications have encouraged law schools to consider creative and innovative approaches to attract more students as well as to distinguish themselves among their peers. Although the future value of these educational endeavors is yet to be seen, certain law schools and educators recognize the significant potential and are placing a bet on distance learning and MOOCs. Law schools and law professors, undoubtedly, have a combination of motives driving their interest in dipping their legal toes into this MOOCy water.

Last year, my colleague Stephen Reed and I taught Northwestern Law's first MOOC, Law and the Entrepreneur, offered on the Coursera platform [<https://www.coursera.org/course/law>]. The course was first offered in fall 2013 and Northwestern plans to offer it again in early 2015. The initial MOOC had enrollment of over 35,000 students and approximately 1,400 of those students completed and passed the course.

One concern that we had prior to launching the course was that students would not be engaged and that the course would provide little more than static videos. To address this, we

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¹Tamar Lewin, Instruction for Masses Knocks Down Campus Walls, The New York Times (March 4, 2012)

² Lora Kolodny, Education Investors, Startup Hopeful Following Solid IPO by 2U, WSJ (April 3, 2014)

required class participation in the form of commenting on the online discussion boards. We posted questions each week asking students to analyze issues that we had covered in the videos. The online conversations were dynamic and showed excitement from the students as well as an impressive understanding of the material we covered. The students argued, persuaded and generally analyzed the issues in a way that is similar to what we experience in live class discussions. We also introduced weekly challenges the last few weeks of the class and were surprised that of the 12 competition winners, only two lived in the United States. Additionally, although the class was online, we did offer several meetups across the country where we had the opportunity to have live, in person conversations with our students. We met students in Chicago, New York City and Boston. We plan to have meetups on the west coast when the course is offered again next year.

The substance of the course reviewed the critical legal and business issues entrepreneurs face as they contemplate and launch new ventures. We introduced hypothetical entrepreneurs who had an idea for a new subscription-based business to our online students and then discussed the fundamental legal issues that the hypothetical entrepreneurs faced from idea to launch. Our course included pre-recorded lectures on substantive legal topics, weekly interactive exercises, robust online conversations, and weekly quizzes.

Among other subjects, we covered American law on choice of entity (corporation, limited liability company, partnership, sole proprietorship), company name selection, intellectual property protection (including patent, trade secret, trademark and copyright law), structuring agreements among owners, venture capital investments and other equity and debt financing arrangements. We also highlighted the relationship between attorneys and entrepreneurs, provided thoughts on selecting an attorney and even discussed when might be the appropriate time for an entrepreneur to initially retain an attorney. We created the course for both entrepreneurs and lawyers who represent entrepreneurs and our goal was to help our students imagine and understand practical ways to protect a new venture and spot potential issues from both a business and legal perspective.

Although we initially did not know what to expect, the experience proved to be rewarding to both faculty and students, and for the Northwestern Law School community as a whole. Producing the MOOC not only taught us a great deal about distance learning but also generated new ideas about integrating certain MOOC components (such as online discussions) into our traditional classes for Northwestern Law students. We are even considering using our videos as a mini-review course for law students before they represent live clients in our transactional legal clinic. The MOOC also provided an opportunity to showcase some of the programs at Northwestern Law, to connect with alumni (many of whom enrolled in the MOOC) and to demonstrate Northwestern's commitment to staying on the cutting edge of legal education.

There is certainly room for improvement and innovation in distance learning and the MOOCs and other online courses of next year will likely look very different and be even better than the MOOCs we are seeing and teaching today. MOOCs offer a great opportunity for law schools, law students and law professors to enhance and improve traditional education.