

An Open Letter to Professor Michael Sandel from the Philosophy Department at San José State University

April 29, 2013

Dear Professor Sandel,

San José State University recently announced a contract with edX (a company associated with MIT and Harvard) to expand the use of online blended courses. The SJSU Philosophy Department was asked to pilot your JusticeX course, and we refused. We decided to express to you our reasons for refusing to be involved with this course, and, because we believe that other departments and universities will sooner or later face the same predicament, we have decided to share our reasons with you publicly.

There is no pedagogical problem in our department that JusticeX solves, nor do we have a shortage of faculty capable of teaching our equivalent course. We believe that long-term financial considerations motivate the call for massively open online courses (MOOCs) at public universities such as ours. Unfortunately, the move to MOOCs comes at great peril to our university. We regard such courses as a serious compromise of quality of education and, ironically for a social justice course, a case of social injustice.

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF A GOOD QUALITY EDUCATION IN A UNIVERSITY?

First, one of the most important aspects of being a university professor is scholarship in one's specialization. Students benefit enormously from interaction with professors engaged in such research. The students not only have a teacher who is passionate, engaged and current on the topic, but, in classes, independent studies, and informal interaction, they are provided the opportunity to engage a topic deeply, thoroughly, and analytically in a dynamic and up-to-date fashion.

A social justice course needs to be current since part of its mission is the application of conceptions of justice to existing social issues. In addition to providing students with an opportunity to engage with active scholars, expertise in the physical classroom, sensitivity to its diversity, and familiarity with one's own students are simply not available in a one-size-fits-all blended course produced by an outside vendor.

Second, of late we have been hearing quite a bit of criticism of the traditional lecture model as a mismatch for today's digital generation. Anat Agarwal, edX President, has described the standard professor as basically just "pontificating" and "spouting content," a description he used ten times in a recent press conference here at SJSU. Of course, since philosophy has traditionally been taught using the Socratic method, we are largely in agreement as to the inadequacy of lecture alone. But, after all the

rhetoric questioning the effectiveness of the antiquated method of lecturing and note taking, it is telling to discover that the core of edX's JusticeX is a series of video-taped lectures that include excerpts of Harvard students making comments and taking notes. In spite of our admiration for your ability to lecture in such an engaging way to such a large audience, we believe that having a scholar teach and engage his or her own students in person is far superior to having those students watch a video of another scholar engaging his or her students. Indeed, the videos of you lecturing to and interacting with your students is itself a compelling testament to the value of the in-person lecture/discussion.

In addition, purchasing a series of lectures does not provide anything over and above assigning a book to read. We do, of course, respect your work in political philosophy; nevertheless, having our students read a variety of texts, perhaps including your own, is far superior to having them listen to your lectures. This is especially important for a digital generation that reads far too little. If we can do something as educators we would like to increase literacy, not decrease it.

Third, the thought of the exact same social justice course being taught in various philosophy departments across the country is downright scary – something out of a dystopian novel. Departments across the country possess unique specializations and character, and should stay that way. Universities tend not to hire their own graduates for a reason. They seek different influences. Diversity in schools of thought and plurality of points of view are at the heart of liberal education.

WHAT WOULD OUR STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT JUSTICE THROUGH A PURCHASED BLENDED COURSE FROM A PRIVATE VENDOR?

First, what kind of message are we sending our students if we tell them that they should best learn what justice is by listening to the reflections of the largely white student population from a privileged institution like Harvard? Our very diverse students gain far more when their own experience is central to the course and when they are learning from our own very diverse faculty, who bring their varied perspectives to the content of courses that bear on social justice.

Second, should one-size-fits-all vendor-designed blended courses become the norm, we fear that two classes of universities will be created: one, well-funded colleges and universities in which privileged students get their own real professor; the other, financially stressed private and public universities in which students watch a bunch of video-taped lectures and interact, if indeed any interaction is available on their home campuses, with a professor that this model of education has turned into a glorified teaching assistant. Public universities will no longer provide the same quality of education and will not remain on par with well-funded private ones. Teaching justice through an educational model that is spearheading the creation of two social classes in academia thus amounts to a cruel joke.

CAN TECHNOLOGY BE USED TO IMPROVE EDUCATION?

Absolutely. Blended courses provide the opportunity to listen to lectures for a second or third time and enable class discussion sessions outside the usual constraints of time and space. For these very reasons many of the faculty in our department offer very high quality online and blended versions of a number of our offerings, including video-taped material we ourselves have developed. All of these offerings are continuously updated and their use includes extensive interaction among students. In addition, they also involve extensive interaction with the professor teaching the course, something that is not available in MOOCs, which rely on videotaped lectures, canned exercises, and automated and peer grading.

When a university such as ours purchases a course from an outside vendor, the faculty cannot control the design or content of the course; therefore we cannot develop and teach content that fits with our overall curriculum and is based on both our own highly developed and continuously renewed competence and our direct experience of our students' needs and abilities. In the short term, we might be able to preserve our close contact with our students, but, given the financial motivations driving the move to MOOCs, the prognosis for the long term is grim.

The use of technology, as history shows, can improve or worsen the quality of education -- but in a high quality course, the professor teaching it must be able both to design the course and to choose its materials, and to interact closely with the students. The first option is not available in a pre-packaged course, and the second option is at grave risk if we move toward MOOCs.

IT IS TIME TO CALL IT LIKE IT IS

We believe the purchasing of online and blended courses is not driven by concerns about pedagogy, but by an effort to restructure the U.S. university system in general, and our own California State University system in particular. If the concern were pedagogically motivated, we would expect faculty to be consulted and to monitor quality control. On the other hand, when change is financially driven and involves a compromise of quality it is done quickly, without consulting faculty or curriculum committees, and behind closed doors. This is essentially what happened with SJSU's contract with edX. At a press conference (April 10, 2013 at SJSU) announcing the signing of the contract with edX, California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom acknowledged as much: "The old education financing model, frankly, is no longer sustainable." This is the crux of the problem. It is time to stop masking the real issue of MOOCs and blended courses behind empty rhetoric about a new generation and a new world. The purchasing of MOOCs and blended courses from outside vendors is the first step toward restructuring the CSU.

Good quality online courses and blended courses (to which we have no objections) do not save money, but purchased-pre-packaged ones do, and a lot. With pre-packaged MOOCs and blended courses, faculty are ultimately not needed. A teaching assistant would suffice to facilitate a blended course, and one might argue, paying a university professor just to monitor someone else's material would be a waste of resources. Public universities that have so long and successfully served the students and citizens of California will be dismantled, and what remains of them will become a hodgepodge branch of private companies.

Administrators of the CSU say they do not see a choice; they are trying to admit and graduate as many students as they can with insufficient funds. Whether they are right in complying with rather than resisting this, the discussion has to be honest and to the point. Let's not kid ourselves; administrators at the CSU are beginning a process of replacing faculty with cheap online education. In our case, we had better be sure that this is what we want to do because once the CSU or any university system is restructured in this way it will never recover.

Industry is demanding that public universities devote their resources to providing ready-made employees, while at the same time they are resisting paying the taxes that support public education. (California is the ninth largest economy in the world, yet has one of the most poorly supported public education systems in the nation.) Given these twin threats, the liberal arts are under renewed attack in public universities. We believe that education in a democracy must be focused on responsible citizenship, and general education courses in the liberal arts are crucial to such education. The move to outside vendor MOOCs is especially troubling in light of this--it is hard to see how they can nourish the complex mix of information, attitudes, solidarity and moral commitment that are crucial to flourishing democracies.

We respect your desire to expand opportunities for higher education to audiences that do not now have the chance to interact with new ideas. We are very cognizant of your long and distinguished record of scholarship and teaching in the areas of political philosophy and ethics. It is in a spirit of respect and collegiality that we are urging you, and all professors involved with the sale and promotion of edX-style courses, not to take away from students in public universities the opportunity for an education beyond mere jobs training. Professors who care about public education should not produce products that will replace professors, dismantle departments, and provide a diminished education for students in public universities.

Sincerely and in solidarity,
The Department of Philosophy
San José State University