

# MOOCs and Archaeological Advocacy

## The Interpretation of Past Societies in the Digital Era

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*Archaeology is fascinating to people when it is communicated to them in plain language.*

William H. Marquardt

This review assesses the capabilities of the technology of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as tools for increasing the presence of archaeology in our digital society. Instead of focusing on the academic value of the content of these courses, I explore their usefulness as promoters of rigorous archaeological practices and ethics, as well as the protection and preservation of cultural heritage. After enrolling as a student in six MOOCs, I have analyzed whether these courses successfully provided students with an informed and critical understanding of the field, as well as creating networks of advocates that can share this knowledge across their communities.

### MOOCs AS LEARNING PLATFORMS

Despite a relatively short life span for MOOCs, we already have an extensive number of publications on their instructional value in academia and the role they might play in higher education. The literature shows two clear, although conflicting, positions about their usefulness. On the one hand, there are those who see MOOCs as the ultimate teaching tool with their capability to make education available to everybody. On the other hand, there are those who see MOOCs as a menace to traditional in-class education. The reality probably lies somewhere in the middle. Issues related to lack of student commitment, completion rates, and problematic peer-reviewed assignments divide those who consider MOOCs an important tool for teaching (e.g., Emanuel 2015) from those who consider them a short-term phenomenon that has passed its peak (e.g., Zemsky 2014).

Both arguments share a common weak point: they try to fit MOOCs into the traditional academic model. Online courses in archaeology are not substitutes for on-the-ground experience, especially at a college level. In a discipline based on the study of past societies through their material remains, direct contact with

artifacts becomes essential and indispensable (Alcock et al. 2016). This does not mean that MOOCs are inefficient at teaching archaeological content or adequate only for non-degree seekers. Various individuals have commented on the quality, level, and workload of these courses, and many are considered equivalent to advanced undergraduate classes (Connolly 2012). This should not come as a surprise, since MOOCs are just a tool—a way of sharing content—not the content itself (Jones et al. 2014). Courses vary in quality depending on their design and the proficiency of their instructors. MOOCs cannot offer on-site lab or fieldwork experience, but that does not prevent them from providing a successful learning experience in other aspects of the field.

### MASS MEDIA AND PSEUDOARCHAEOLOGY

The democratization of access to information via the Internet has, however, caused problematic outcomes in terms of the spread of dubious information and interpretation. In this environment, pseudoarchaeological fallacies have arguably found the perfect medium to reach their audiences. The traditional response of the academic world to such fallacies has been mild at best. With some exceptions (Fagan 2003; Rathje 1978), only in recent years have mass media phenomena like *Ancient Aliens* or *American Digger* been directly criticized for contributing to the destruction of heritage and the commercialization of finds. Yet in these cases the emphasis is put on materialistic rather than cultural values (Carter 2012; Greenberg 2012; Switek 2012).

The script of these books and television shows is rather repetitive. Typically, the author has a secret to reveal to the audience that will change history as we know it. Then, this truth-seeker uses common sense and shiny computer graphics to uncover the hidden truths. In such a format, basic concepts like context, relative dating, validity of the data, respect for the evidence and for other cultures, which students learn in introductory archaeology courses, are usually ignored. Thus, viewing audiences who have never studied archaeology or anthropology are not likely to have the tools for interpreting the evidence that

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TABLE 1. List of MOOCs Taken for the Review.

Course Title	Instructor	Institution	Platform	Weekly Workload	Weeks
The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem	Prof. Lipschits	Tel Aviv University	Coursera	90 minutes	6
Recovering the Humankind's Past and Saving the Universal Heritage	Prof. Matthiae (PI)	Sapienza Roma	Coursera	60 minutes	8
The Ancient Greeks	Prof. Szegedy-Maszak	Wesleyan University	Coursera	90 minutes	7
N. America before European Colonization	—	Khan Academy	Khan Academy	120 minutes	1
The Big History Project	—	Khan Academy	Khan Academy	120 minutes	10
Archaeology	Prof. D. Garrow et al.	Reading University	FutureLearn	180 minutes	2

is presented to them, even if this evidence ranges from devious to plainly false.

## EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT

In order to explore the student experience of MOOCs, and the nature of the information being presented within them, I enrolled in six separate courses. I aimed for diversity in topics, institutions, and platforms to explore whether nationalities, business models of the platforms, or subfields conditioned the content and/or the ways of addressing archaeological practice (see Table 1). The selection of archaeology MOOCs was smaller than expected: despite using a wide range of keywords and key terms (*anthropology, Rome, Greece, Egypt, Ancient, Inca, Maya, ancient China, human evolution, prehistory, and precolumbian*, among others) it was possible to find only five relevant courses in Coursera, ten in FutureLearn, and two in Khan Academy, a much smaller selection than in STEM related courses (Table 1).

Some features were common to all courses listed. Despite the fact that MOOC discussion forums are considered by many reviewers to be one of the best aspects of the online experience (Alcock et al. 2016; Conolly 2012), in my courses these forums remained silent most weeks. The course creators were not actively present either, so despite the quality of the video lessons and the content, my learning experience was passive, and engagement with concepts depended entirely on the student. This caused some problems, especially in *Recovering the Humankind's Past and Saving the Universal Heritage* (RHP) (Matthiae et al. 2016), where instructors did not respond to student doubts concerning mandatory tasks for fulfilling the course requirements.

Most MOOCs devoted some time, whether in their introductions or in specific lessons, to the interpretative tools of the archaeologist. The only exception was *The Ancient Greeks* (Szegedy-Maszak 2016), which, in spite of the historical period it encompassed, ended up being a traditional history course with no presence of archaeology. The other two courses from Coursera, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (FRJ) (Lipschits 2016) and *Recovering the Humankind's Past and Saving the Universal Heritage* (RHP) (Matthiae et al. 2016) were much more efficient at addressing these issues. Of special interest were lessons devoted by FRJ to illustrating how the excavations of the instructor at the site of Ramat Rahel, and the analysis of the archaeological

remains recovered there, help us to understand and reconstruct the history of Judea in the sixth century B.C. Concepts like context, relative and absolute dating, and typological classification were explained and used in detail. On the other hand, RHP had as one of its goals to educate about the preservation of heritage, devoting several lessons to the history of archaeology as a discipline and the evolution of its interpretative paradigms. The debates generated around the preservation of heritage in war and conflict zones deserve particular recognition, as they were among the few in which students engaged actively.

Among platforms, the Open University's FutureLearn offers the largest selection of archaeological courses. This range could be related to Britain's longtime interest in archaeology, reflected in the discipline's wide coverage in the mass media. In fact, among students in *Archaeology* (Garrow et al. 2016), who provided detailed information about their background and interests, the Channel 4 show *Time Team* was identified as an important trigger for their enrolment on the course.

Despite being a two-week course, *Archaeology* covers a wide range of topics, from the field to the lab, and is able to engage a broad audience. Enrollees ranged from high-school students interested in pursuing archaeology as a career to retired seniors involved in local heritage societies. The course takes advantage of the technological possibilities of the digital era, creating a more dynamic narrative. Its presentation of the work of the University of Reading's fieldschool, and specifically Professor Mary Lewis's video introducing osteological analysis to students, is a model to follow when designing any MOOC. The lecturer handles real finds and uses them to introduce and illustrate basic concepts related to the topic, bridging at once the visual and narrative aspects of the course. Knowledge becomes not an abstract but an applied concept for the viewer. This dynamic narrative is also present in *The Big History Project*. Materials are presented here in a more interactive manner, with a game-oriented pedagogy that does not diminish the quality of the content. In my opinion, such an interactive design wherein students are actively addressed and encouraged to express their opinions is the reason why these two MOOCs turned out to be more active than others. Over the two weeks of *Archaeology*, 7,548 comments were posted, as opposed to just 192 in the eight weeks of RHP. Future MOOCs would benefit from a design closer to *Archaeology* or *The Big History Project*. Both of them get away from a traditional in-class narrative to create their own digital teaching style, which is more active and appealing without losing content or quality.

## CONCLUSION

This experience has shown that, when properly designed and maintained, MOOCs can not only attract large audiences but also provide an enriching learning experience. Most students have in common a previous interest in the field and arrive at these courses expecting to learn how archaeology actually operates as a science. An engaging experience can not only fulfill these interests but also expand the social base of knowledgeable, critically aware advocates in archaeology. Local associations, museums, and traditional classroom-based courses will always remain an essential part of archaeological training and advocacy. However, well-designed MOOCs offer an opportunity for reaching audiences at a scale not considered possible two decades ago, while simultaneously transmitting the values that are at the core of our professional ethics.

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