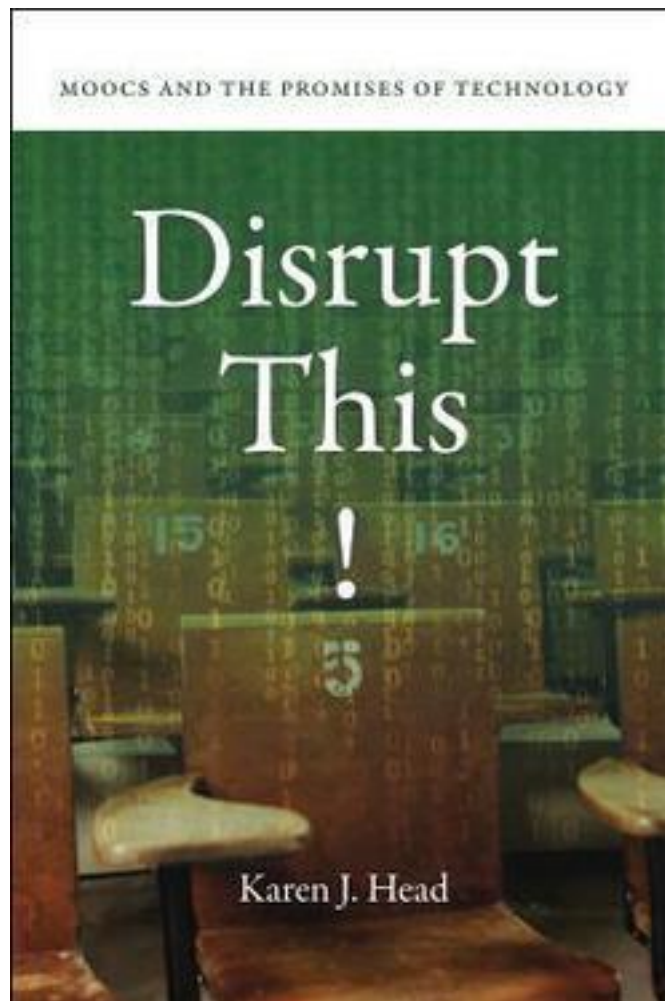


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review  
Disrupt This! MOOCs  
and the Promises of Technology  
by Karen J. Head

Reviewed By Nick Juravich



## Disrupt This! MOOCs and the Promises of Technology by Karen J. Head. (Boston. University Press of New England. 2017)

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In the fall of 2012, Karen J. Head, then an assistant professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, signed on to teach a massive open online course, or “MOOC,” in first-year composition. It was the “Year of the MOOC,” and Georgia Tech was eager to position itself at the forefront of this new trend in academia.<sup>1</sup> Head and her team received a sizable grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to re-invent first-year comp—one of the most common university courses, and typically one of the most teaching-intensive—on the Coursera platform. The course went live in the summer of 2013 with nearly 22,000 students enrolled.

Five years later, Head has published *Disrupt This! MOOCs and the Promises of Technology*. The book couples a detailed, instructor-level view of the experience of developing and teaching a MOOC—“a view from the inside”—with a critical analysis of the rhetoric of “disruption” in higher education. The latter is razor-sharp and unstinting; the book’s punchy title sets the tone for similar chapter titles (“Missionary Creep”), section headings (“Beware of Geeks Bearing Gifts”), and topic sentences (“Unrealistic depictions of teaching are culturally ingrained in the American mindset.”). MOOC skeptics will find most of their suspicions about these courses and their boosters confirmed as Head contrasts mushrooming layers of jargon-spouting promotional bureaucracy with depressingly paltry commitments to actual pedagogy and content.

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Head’s assessment of her own process, by contrast, is a nuanced meditation on pedagogy in the digital age. In spite of repeated and ridiculous battles with both Georgia Tech and Coursera’s MOOC-masters, Head managed to learn a surprising lot from the experience. Her reflections speak to a world in which online courses, if not MOOCs *per se*, will continue to expand, and in which digital tools more broadly will continue to proliferate in the classroom. In light of this reality, she closes with a call to arms: rather than resisting the invasion of MOOCs, faculty should seize these new means of pedagogical production from the “disrupters.”

Head is particularly well-positioned to interrogate the MOOC phenomenon. She began her postsecondary education as a “nontraditional student,” a twenty-seven-year-old first-year student at a local community college. Nontraditional students—meaning, typically, those who do not complete college between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four—comprise one quarter of American

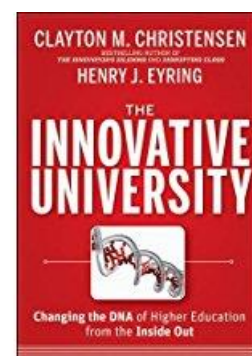
undergraduates. Their existence features prominently in discussions of MOOCs and “open” access to education, but their actual voices and needs do not. Additionally, Head has taught writing for nearly two decades and was, in this context, an early adopter of more prosaic technological tools, including computer-based classrooms and online videoconferencing.

As Head explains in *Disrupt This!* “The idea of offering open access and free educational services isn’t a new one for those of us who work in writing centers,” but even as universities have embraced MOOCs, “our services have often been marginalized.” This points to a much larger tension in American higher education: teaching writing is simultaneously one of the most important things universities do and one of the least prestigious (and least funded). Teaching writing well requires small classes and constant feedback, work that is done by growing armies of adjuncts overseen by overworked administrators and the small core of committed faculty, like Head, who believe in the mission. Translating this process to “massive” form appears impossible (to anyone who’s done the job) and highly enticing (to administrators looking to keep cutting costs). Head’s decision to take part in Freshman Composition 2.0 was informed, in part, by the realization that the people pitching MOOCs to her department had no knowledge of the craft of teaching writing. What they did have was the promise of “disruption.”

In the book, Head intertwines her analysis of MOOC-speak with her discussion of the process of MOOC-making, but these two threads serve

distinct purposes. Head is a scholar of rhetoric, and she is skeptical of “disruption” from the start. For the sake of consistency, she dissects two representative books that were published in 2011 and recommended to her at the start of her own MOOC journey: *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, by Harvard’s Clayton Christensen and BYU-Idaho’s Henry Eyring; and *Abelard to Apple: The Fate of American Colleges and Universities*, by Georgia Tech’s own Richard DeMillo. Her message is clear: this is “the rhetoric of punditry” far removed “from the day-to-day experience of actually teaching many thousands of students.”

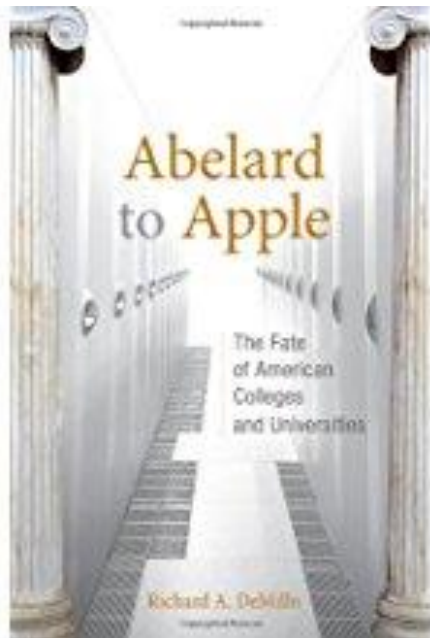
Christensen and Eyring are sunny in their predictions of democratized knowledge, but they offer utterly unrepresentative examples of change in the form of Harvard and BYU-Idaho (a small college reinvented by the enormous volunteer labor commanded by the Church of Latter-Day Saints). By the end, their work “sounds less like a critique of the higher education system and more like a self-help book.” Such optimism, Head notes, is the product of “elite networks” which “allow for a privileged few to take bold measures without personal risk.” Christensen and Eyring urge chaotic reinventions on other universities,



secure in the knowledge that their personal and institutional places in academia are secure.

Head builds on this observation to systematically dismantle the notion that there is anything open or democratizing about MOOCs in their current form. She shows how they have thus far “reinforce[d] the current tier structure” of universities. Platforms like Coursera have primarily promoted MOOCs created at Ivy league institutions, in extreme cases as replacements for the work of faculty at branch state universities.<sup>2</sup> Head shows, as well, that this reinforcement of the status quo extends to the traditional Western canon, and amounts to “academic colonialism” when exported globally in MOOC form.<sup>3</sup> Christensen and Eyring are untroubled by these inequalities; “Disruption is something that happens to other people.”

Richard DeMillo’s work is more critical; he lambasts universities as bastions of hidebound groupthink and positions himself as a Cassandra prophesying their



demise. In service of this, as Head shows, he opens his book with a “bizarrely tasteless reference” that seems to suggest that the castration of Pierre Abelard, the twelfth-century theologian, resulted from his hubris as an “insular academic.” As Head observes, this wildly inaccurate and sexist reading of the source reformulates and genders the old canard that teachers are failed do-ers. Head exposes the irony of setting up such a dichotomy while claiming to know how to improve, of all things, teaching itself. This does not bother DeMillo, who, like Christensen and Eyring, is not primarily a teacher, either traditionally or online. Disruption is not just something that happens to other people; the actual work demanded by these virile “disrupters” is done not by them, either.

So what does that work look like? As Head notes, MOOC providers like Udacity, EdX, and Coursera (with whom she worked at Georgia Tech) are concerned primarily with their platforms, not pedagogy. Head’s work on Freshman Composition 2.0 was monitored by representatives from Georgia Tech, the Gates Foundation,

and Coursera, all of whom focused primarily on maintaining their brands, not producing a high-quality course. When the time came to teach, Head observed that “development staff who lack the necessary perspective are making significant decisions that embed assumptions about the nature of successful teaching and learning,” driven in large part by the need to quantify and measure platform usage. Despite promises about innovation and excoriations of “insular academics” and their hidebound ways, Head “did not see flexibility reciprocated by [her] MOOC technology team.” The infinite promise of the internet, without actual input from pedagogues, Head observes, quickly becomes reduced to a “one-way” stream of taped lectures beaming out to students taking multiple-choice tests. In short, this is no way at all to teach first-year composition, and when Head confronts the question of “success”—one frequently posed by eager spokespeople and skeptical colleagues alike—she is clear that the course she taught was no replacement for first-year comp.

Once the rhetoric is dissected and the platforms exposed for their limits, what remains for MOOCs to offer teachers and their students? A surprising lot, shows Head, and this is an unexpected joy of *Disrupt This!* A skilled pedagogue herself, Head observes early on that anyone teaching a MOOC should first consult distance-learning professors, who know far more than software developers about effectively teaching and evaluating far-flung students. In the age of MOOCs, distance-learning is quickly being repackaged and overtaken by schemes ranging from privatized online education to cash-cow programs for more traditional universities. However, Head’s contacts appear to be from an earlier era, the committed group of state university professors who worked with nontraditional students like her to realize the promise of public education for workers, parents, and others without the time to study on campus. These teachers, who have thought long and hard about how much individual attention students need within the confines of limited-residency study, would be essential resources if MOOC developers actually cared about such things.

Head walks her readers through the huge amount of work that MOOCs actually entail (rarely advertised by their on-campus evangelists). These include writing, shooting and re-shooting lectures; designing new learning activities; and monitoring enormous amounts of student feedback. She also shares lessons from her own experience, everything from the need to create glossaries of idioms for non-native speakers of English to the importance of making videos downloadable as audio for students whose internet connections do not allow streaming.

Head productively expands her conclusions beyond MOOCs and MOOC platforms—which have already “pivoted” away from traditional courses, as those have not proven as profitable as promised back in 2012—to technology in teaching more broadly. Faculty, she notes, typically experience technology as something foisted upon them by administrators, whether online courses, learning management systems, or “smart” classrooms. Head argues that involving teachers from the start would improve these systems immeasurably, and moreover, that becoming involved in this process as a professor has improved her

own teaching. It seems an almost contradictory statement, but Head explains that the process has not only improved her use of technology in more “traditional” settings, but has also taught her how to talk to platform developers to get the most out of the tools they build and sell.

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However, at present, there are few rewards and incentives for faculty to get involved in these processes, which take time and energy away from research and traditional teaching (the backbone of tenure reviews). As we learn at the beginning of the book, Head took on the immense task of reinventing first-year comp on a massive scale as an untenured assistant professor. It is a credit to her that she managed to turn the experience into tenure-supporting publications, but she did not, at the start of the project, receive credit or time commensurate with the work involved. This must be changed, and Head argues particularly that departments and universities must give true and extensive release time and credit toward tenure to faculty members who do this work, rather than treating it as experimental or auxiliary. Her closing message is a call for involvement; professors must become participants in the evolution of this technology, both to improve it for their students and to improve their own teaching.

Readers of *Disrupt This!* may long for a broader analysis of the forces of austerity and privatization that have made MOOCs so attractive in higher education in the first place, but this is not a question the book sets out to answer.<sup>4</sup> What Head does deliver is a highly readable, deeply thoughtful, and pedagogically serious look at the use and abuse of technology in academia. Even as she unmasks the ludicrous rhetoric and limited platforms of MOOCs, Head remains determined to push pedagogues to the center of technological development in higher education. The disrupters, left unchecked, will wreak havoc, not through any of their promised radical changes, but by redirecting resources to ineffective tools and shiny toys, and away from the liberatory processes of teaching and learning.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Laura Pappano, “The Year of the MOOC,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The most notable example here is the effort, by administrators at San Jose State University, to use a MOOC by Harvard’s Michael Sandel as a replacement for philosophy classes. See Steve Kolowich, “Why Professors at San Jose State Won’t Use a Harvard Professor’s MOOC,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* May 2, 2013. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Professors-at-San-Jose/138941>.

<sup>3</sup> Head discusses this issue at greater length in “The Single Canon: MOOCs and Academic Colonization,” a chapter in *MOOCs and Open Education Around the World*, edited by Curtis J. Bonk, Mimi M. Lee, Thomas C. Reeves, and Thomas H. Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> For such an analysis, see Michael Fabricant and Steven Brier’s *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2016), reviewed in *The Radical Teacher* (Vol 128).