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Tech/Program Presentation-Coursera

Coarsera is start-up based in Mountain View, California. The company was founded earlier this year by two Stanford scientists. Essentially, Coursera’s mission is to increase access to higher education by providing participants with an interactive online learning system. Last year, the founders performed an experiment in higher education and taught free Web-based courses through Stanford. The courses generated a huge response, reaching over 100,000 students from across the globe. Excited by such success, the professors have developed their idea further, and [Coursera](https://www.coursera.org/) now functions as an international ‘webiversity,’ connecting students from over 190 countries with a host of interactive courses in the humanities, social sciences, physical sciences and engineering. Recently, the company has secured an impressive $16 million in venture capital and is now partnering with 5 major universities, including UC Berkeley, Stanford, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, and Princeton.

Accessibility wise, Coursera has three major things going for it: It is global, free, and interactive. These qualities result in a broad and diverse number of potential beneficiaries for the company. One can imagine a number of people that, for a range of reasons had not before considered enrolling in a university course, and who will now be able to through a free online program. The potential of internet technologies to reach hundreds of thousands of students is, in fact, what had originally inspired both founders to pursue such an enterprise. Because of this inventiveness, students around the world now have access to some of the highest ranked institutions in the United States. Enrollment is automatic. There is no application process, and one does not have to prove that he or she has graduated from high school, nor does one have to go through the process of obtaining permission to attend a US university. Students can participate at their own pace. This frees those with other obligations to participate fully, at their convenience.

Obviously, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that the courses are free broadens the company’s audience. Socio-economic factors are one of the greatest hurdles standing between potential students and their participation in higher education. The fact that anyone, regardless of their ability or inability to pay for a class, can take the same courses taught by the same professors that students at prestigious universities would have been unfathomable only a short while ago. One might wonder how Coursera can continue to be a financially sustainable business, garnering millions in investment even though they are not for profit. One explanation is explained in a recent New York Times article : ‘From a community of millions of learners some should ‘opt in’ for valuable, premium services. Those revenues should fund investment in tools, technology and royalties to faculty and universities” (Markoff 2012).

Not only are students who would otherwise be unable to afford to take courses at the five partnering institutions given access to video classes, but the courses are made interactive for all participants. All Web based learners can communicate directly with professors, and are given the same quizzes and assignments as those enrolled directly through the university or college. Universities have shown previous interest in providing free online courses, like those that have been offered by UC Berkeley on iTunes, but ‘unlike previous video lectures, which offered a “static” learning model, the Coursera system breaks lectures into segments as short as 10 minutes and offers quick online quizzes as part of each segment’ (Markoff 2012).

While the goal of Coarsera is seemingly to broaden access to quality higher education, some accessibility issues remain. The program is free, but there is a slight hitch. Yes, Coursera courses are the same as the ones being offered to students directly enrolled at the partnering institutions, but Coursera students do not earn credits. The promotional video notes that all participants are given the chance to ‘improve your resume, advance your career, expand your knowledge, or gain confidence from successfully completing a challenging university course,’ which is fantastic. However, it is unfortunate that the opportunity to earn a degree is largely a privilege of those who can pay. Because this is a web based program, Coursera may alienate those without home internet access, as well as those potential students who live in rural locations where access to high speed internet is limited. Non-native English speakers may also have trouble with this course considering that courses are taught in English, and all course work is presented in English. Those with physical disabilities may find this program difficult. For instance, it is video based, and not all lectures have captioning option. While the course offers students the opportunity to go at their own pace, people with cognitive disabilities are at a relative disadvantage because they do not have the same access to resources available at traditional institutions of higher education.

Considering the fact that the public library has historically existed as ‘The People’s University,’ a relationship between these two very different institutions, but with incredibly similar missions seems natural. The services that Coarsera offers are free of charge, and may be re-used under re-issuing licensing, so a partnership with museums, schools and libraries, particularly those in economically challenged areas, which typically do not have fantastically large budgets, are optimal. Two barriers to access that has been mentioned earlier in this paper, are those of socio-economic status and location/geography disadvantage, specifically how these issues relate to access to computers and high speed internet. Public libraries would be a fantastic point of access for those interested in taking classes, and without internet at home. Public libraries equipped with computer labs could host Coursera ‘labs’ as part of their scheduled programing. A library could also promote the use of Coursera through literature, fliers, or perhaps hold a library event detailing the services offered by the company. Included in all promotional materials/activities, the library should remind all patrons that they are, regardless of their home internet access, welcome to participate in this program at the library. The library could also arrange special exhibits with library holdings on display that relate to the courses currently offered, and promote itself as a resource for relevant material. One could imagine a similar relationship between Coursera and a number of museums.

Museums and special libraries might also find Coursera of interest. Healthcare facilities and medical libraries could encourage medical staff to take courses for professional development. Correctional libraries could engage inmates, for which the library is often a haven, by offering courses. Museum staff could promote the use of Coursera for patrons interested in developing their knowledge of subjects covered by the museum. If the libraries are equipped with assistive technologies, these might be useful in helping disabled patrons participate.

Furthermore, high schools and school libraries could encourage student participation in courses offered by Coursera as part of a college/university readiness campaign. Enrollment in these classes would provide high school students approaching graduation with some experience and insight into the kind of course work to expect on a college level, and some exposure to college level course work might help and inspire students to develop a sense of what academic interests they may want to pursue in the future.

Coursera seeks to transcend boundaries by providing free and global university education, reaching students from diverse socio-economic and international backgrounds. With the help of cultural institutions like libraries, Coursera may have a greater chance of achieving its goal.

Sources:

*Coursera*. (2012). <https://www.coursera.org/>.

Markoff, John. (April 18, 2012). Online Education Venture Lures Cash Infusion and Deals With 5 Top Universities. *The New York Times*.

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