Why GIS Users (Still) Need to Know About MOOCs

Need to update your skills? Want to learn a new GIS? Adena Schutzberg has sound advice for those turning to the online world to learn new skills.

The topic of this issue's column comes from an email exchange with GiSPro Publisher, and my longtime friend, Stephen Booth. I shared news with him about my new position on the education team at Esri and I noted that I'd be working on MOOCs and with universities. He replied that he was unfamiliar with MOOCs until he looked up the acronym.

I suspect a reasonable number of readers are in the same boat. Further, I'll guess that those who could quickly expand MOOC to "massive open online course" haven't reconsidered this form of teaching and learning for a few years, since the hype has waned. I want to address both groups to highlight why MOOCs matter to GIS professionals in 2016 and beyond.

First, let's get back to the acronym itself. Conversations using the term MOOC have become less and less aligned with the original meaning. "Massive" might be thought of as "optional." Is a MOOC with 300 students just an OOC? Is one with 3000? 30,000? These days, the term seems to apply to all of those. "Open" is widely variable in meaning, as many of us in GIS know. In the context of MOOCs it tends to refer to "accessible to all," "without a fee" and "with open access content." In these times I'll suggest it too can be considered optional for some providers. I'm pleased to report that "online" and "course" have straightforward meanings.

Why MOOCs Matter

Things change new GIS (and related) products are being released all the time. MOOCs can be a great way to get your hands on them and see how they can be used. Want to play with ArcGIS Pro within a class? It'll be front and centre in the upcoming Earth Imagery at Work MOOC.

No pocket money? "Real" MOOCs are free, and those with a fee often also have a "free option" that has fewer bells and whistles. Coursera now has fees for the vast majority of its courses, but it also offers free versions.

Limited time commitment? How long are MOOCs? Google early GIS MOOCs (2013) Mapping with Google, covered the material in just two weeks. Another one, from Pace University, GIS Basics, which tackles ArcGIS for Desktop, runs 16 weeks. Most other courses fall somewhere in between.

Wide variety There are now companies, universities, nonprofits and others offering MOOCs that include GIS. A well rounded professional needs more than technical ability. Are you considering starting up a GIS consulting business? How about a business MOOC?

Credentials While a number of organizations are working on ways to turn MOOCs into credit-bearing college courses, companies and nonprofits are offering other credentials such as certificates of completion and badges. Do these matter? I think they do; I note the three MOOCs I've completed on my résumé.

Advice for Today's MOOC

students Search widely and vet EdX and Udemy are less well-known than Coursera, but all three and others of which you have not heard, host MOOCs. Don't be put off by organizations that are new to you, just vet them. Read course reviews; CourseTalk is a good place to start.

Law of "Two Feet" applies to into MOOCs expecting a good to great experience, but don't feel bad if it doesn't work out. Remember that only 7% or so of students complete most MOOCs, so it's no big deal to drop out.

Document your learning Document your work on a publicly accessible blog or portfolio, especially if you want to use MOOCs to enhance career options.

Commit Like most learning opportunities, what you get out of it depends on what you put into it. Decide what your goal for the class is and set aside the time to reach it.

This article was published in GIS Professional August 2016