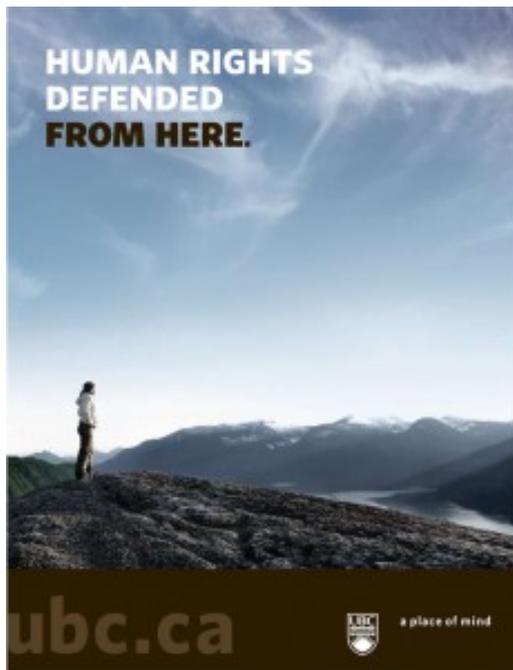


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"From Here: 'Flexible Learning,' the Specter of MOOCs,
and the University's 'New Business Model,'"

A few years ago my university rebranded itself, adopting the slogans "From Here" and "A Place of Mind." The marketing whizzkids came out with a series of posters that consisted of full-colour photos of scenes from Vancouver and around the British Columbian mainland with the tag-line "From Here." Few of these images illustrate the university campus or indeed any other recognizable academic premises. So, for instance, one poster depicts a solitary young woman in the middle of what is apparently verdant wilderness, looking out towards mountain peaks in the mid-distance. Printed prominently above her is the declaration "Human Rights Defended From Here."



I used to pass this poster every Monday evening as I taught a class on "Human and Civil Rights in Latin America" at the university's downtown campus, not in some solitary idyll but with a full complement of garrulous students. Each week, the purpose of the poster would bewilder me more. My students equally had no idea. If anything, it seemed (and seems) a bizarrely ethereal conception of the university as a place that (despite the slogan) has no actual physical location, and thus no need of material resources. Who needs buildings? Or even teachers? Or fellow students? A "place of mind" is not, apparently, a place in the real world of human interaction and sociability, even if is a vantage point from which (supposedly) pressing social issues such as human rights

might be somehow addressed. A "place of mind" is an idea of the university emptied out. It is the endpoint of the process presciently described by Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins* when he argues that the university is now organized around a conception of "excellence" that "no longer has a specific content" (17). As Readings puts it, "what is crucial about terms like 'culture' and 'excellence' (and even 'University' at times)"--I would add, today especially "University"--"is that they no longer have specific referents; they no longer refer to a specific set of things or ideas" (17). Hence we are now have a "posthistorical University, the university without an idea" (118). And while it is worth criticizing this in itself--for what, in the end, is a university without ideas?--Readings also argues that this is part and parcel of the institution's corporatization and its succumbing to the logic of the market. It is further worth pointing out that (for all its aspirations and claims) the university makes for a notably poor and inefficient corporation. Google or Facebook, let alone Ford or General Motors, have a much better sense of what they are about. The university as means without ends, means without meanings, is in no fit shape to compete with them.



Enter the MOOC, or the "Massive Online Open Course," which strangely mimics the ethereal nature of the "From Here" brand. The MOOC, a set of distributed classes independent of institutions, takes literally the suggestion that learning can take place anywhere. It says: who needs universities, anyway? In response, UBC's provost, in his gushing introduction to a presentation by Daphne Koller, co-founder of MOOC provider Coursera, declared that "this fundamentally challenges the university's

business model." Which is revealing not simply because it is above all business that occupies the provost's mind. But because it is a recognition that in converting itself into a business, the university has done it wrong. No wonder that, despite the gush, the provost could be described as "spooked" by the coming of the MOOCs. And then perhaps on the principle (if indeed principles are at issue) of better the enemy you know than the enemy you don't, the university quickly and enthusiastically, and with little in the way of consultation, signed up for a partnership with Coursera, this venture-capital upstart, and started throwing resources at what it calls "flexible learning" while withdrawing them from, for instance, the Faculty of Arts. Since then, however, like the most fickle of lovers, we learn (but not why) that we are ditching Coursera for EdX. But whoever the partner may be, MOOCs or something like them, we are breathlessly told, are the future. And the university, which for all its talk of innovation and "from here" is desperate to copy whatever Stanford or Harvard, McGraw-Hill or Pearson, are perceived as doing, and so to welcome what emphatically comes "from there," has therefore jumped on this bandwagon with a vengeance.

The problem is this: MOOCs and the like can only be framed as the future by means of a shocking ignorance or amnesia about the past. For almost everything that this so-called revolution in learning claims to offer was promised, and indeed anxiously anticipated, by an earlier generation of theorists and critics of higher education, such as Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire. We should, after all, hardly fear a challenge to the education system. The university has historically been challenged, and rightly so, on a whole series of counts. Massive Open education has been a radical dream for at least half a century. What *is* new with the MOOC is only its cooptation by capital, and the supine and superficial reaction it has provoked in university leaders who have forgotten the true purpose of education. Educational technologists Brian Lamb and Jim Groom argue that we have to "reclaim innovation," for there is nothing innovative about "bringing things to market." There is nothing innovative about selling things. Innovation has to be reclaimed from this banal reduction to the norms of the market. Similarly, we have to reclaim the MOOC. Rather than the lack of ambition inherent in the notion of responding to McGraw-Hill, our aim should be to continue the best traditions of the university, even and especially when they involve long-standing critiques of the university. And we can, and should, do it (really) "from here."