

# A Traditional Educational Practice Adapted for the Digital Age

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“Did you know that you are the star of my favorite reality show?” an online auditor asked a University of Baltimore honors student at a reception in the spring semester of 2013. The student was one of twenty-one honors undergraduates who had enrolled for credit in *The King Years*, a weekly seminar taught by Taylor Branch, the scholar who won the Pulitzer Prize for the first volume of his trilogy on the Civil Rights era. The auditor was one of hundreds of remote learners who tuned in every week to the simultaneous webcast of the class. In UB’s alternative MOOC, Branch engaged the UB students in conversations about pivotal moments in the civil rights movement while a graduate student present in the classroom fielded online questions and comments from engaged web viewers. For days after the live broadcast, the conversation continued in cyberspace as auditors reviewed the web footage and chatted with each other and Branch about the issues that had come up in class. At the end of the semester, the online participants had a chance to meet Branch in person and rub elbows with the students at a reception, an event that encapsulated the two goals of the course: a face-to-face seminar for enrolled honors students and a massive yet interactive seminar experience for the general public. Our experiment with an alternative MOOC allowed the University of Baltimore to contribute to three conversations concerning educational innovation: (1) How can we define and deliver online education to large numbers of students in ways that support excellence? (2) How can digital advances add to an academic institution’s civic engagement? (3) How can honors shape the expectations for massive online experiences?

## STRUCTURAL INNOVATION

The fall semester of 2012 was saturated with articles about the demise of higher education and the rise of the MOOC (Aoun; Azevedo; Blackenhorn; Seligson). Standing for Massive Open Online Course, the term MOOC has been used to describe courses that provide free access to content for unlimited participants. The University of Baltimore has been on the forefront of distance and online education for the past twenty-five years, so our Office of Instructional Technologies staff was immersed in the literature and curious about the direction

the trend would take. Taylor Branch, a resident of Baltimore, was not on the UB faculty, but he had expressed an interest in teaching a class on our campus, and we immediately suggested that he work with our honors students and formed a team of UB staff and faculty to help him develop the course.

Adding one honors seminar to the spring schedule would have been easy enough, but the swirling MOOC conversation led Branch and the instructional design team to a bigger vision. Branch's willingness to experiment with new course delivery systems allowed UB to begin to see itself not as a receiver of the MOOC tidal wave but as a producer. The King Years represents a foot in the water for a campus seeking a slow yet innovative entry into the world of massive online offerings. The ultimate shape that the alternative MOOC took resulted from an organic process over the course of several months that involved the Office of Instructional Technologies, the Provost's office, the Helen P. Denit Honors Program, and Branch.

In the months leading up to the launch of the course, Branch conducted an informal survey of college curricula and discovered that many universities did not teach courses on the civil rights era. The University of Baltimore offered "The New South and Civil Rights," and Branch had been a guest lecturer in that course, but many colleges did not cover the movement beyond a cursory week in the second half of the American history survey. Branch recognized the importance of bringing the stories of a half-century ago to a new generation of students. The King Years team did not want simply to follow the established MOOC model by filming a series of his lectures and posting them to a web site. We wanted broad distribution of the civil rights history, but at the same time we valued the traditional practice of the seminar, which recognizes the essential importance of in-class discussion. Even as we planned to reach an audience beyond the walls of UB, the team hoped to achieve the intimacy and in-depth exchange that only a seminar offers. The team's insistence on these two goals produced the final structure of the course: a face-to-face seminar held in a classroom studio and simultaneously available via the web in a secure online community for auditors.

The course had many moving parts. The honors students came from majors all across the campus, ranging from accounting to communications to English. Branch divided the students into three groups, asking each group to read one of his volumes in civil rights era history: *Parting the Waters*, *Pillar of Fire*, and *At Canaan's Edge*. Additionally, all students would read *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement*, a new volume in which Branch identifies eighteen essential moments in the civil rights movement and excerpts passages from his larger trilogy. Each week one group of students was responsible for reading and leading discussion about a volume of the trilogy while the other two groups viewed documentaries and read additional primary sources. In class discussions Branch invited students to engage with both the historical content and his choices as an author in distilling and prioritizing that content into a single, slender view contained in the new volume. By asking students to review different materials each week, Branch set up the in-person sessions to be highly interactive.

The non-credit viewers, participating for free, engaged as well. The size of this audit group was originally intended to be fifty but quickly ballooned to two hundred as news of the opportunity spread. Auditors accessed materials via an online community site that ran in parallel to the campus learning management system rather than risk any access delays associated with university systems. The external group had the ability to view the class remotely each week (live or archived), join a live text discussion with a teaching assistant (who sat in the classroom with Branch), and delve into the same course materials as the on-campus students. In addition, because the audit community was password protected, the online participants had access to all the video offerings, available to be streamed for a week. At the end of the semester we asked auditors to provide feedback on the design and materials for future iterations of the course and invited them to attend the final class session and to meet the students and Taylor Branch.

First-night audio levels were the only technical issues in a live, sixteen-week production. Three remotely controlled cameras captured the class, two on Branch and one on the students. Ceiling mounted microphones in the classroom and a single lapel mike were used for audio. Existing lecture-capture technology was used for a live feed and for viewing recorded sessions on-demand. Auditors were not the only ones viewing online. On a few occasions, and with Branch's permission, students also joined the viewing community. One student technician and one staff member served as the production crew. Separate from some labor costs, the course was relatively inexpensive.

While certainly not massive, *The King Years* was a pilot project in offering a course both locally and internationally, for-credit and noncredit, live and asynchronously. The course also used streaming video webcasting and learning management systems to enhance its reach and impact. The course was not designed to become a MOOC as we have defined it but was piloted as an alternative, a place for independent scholars and exemplary professors to expand their audience, engage a larger community, experiment with new technologies, showcase the seminar model instead of the lecture, and examine possible distribution options for a course without losing meaningful, time-honored classroom discussion and student-teacher interaction. More specifically, while open to a large online audit community, the course was a credit-based class with twenty-one students on campus. What UB was pursuing was a way to mobilize the scope of a MOOC without abandoning intellectual property and the benefit of credit-bearing course completion.

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Because the course gained a life beyond the UB classroom, *The King Years* presented a rich opportunity for the University of Baltimore to contribute to a broader civic conversation. The seminar originated in the history department, but, from the first day, its interdisciplinary student body and Branch's story-telling approach set it apart from other courses in the history curriculum. Perhaps

surprisingly, the students who had the most difficulty adjusting were the history majors. History students who had been trained to take a constructivist approach to the past expressed frustration with the narrative delivery. However, the subject matter of the class distinguished it from other historical topics, and Branch's treatment of it reflected the higher purpose of the course: not simply to inform students about a particular period of history but to invite them and the wider remote audience into a discussion about what it means to be an American.

The struggle of the civil rights workers is different from traditional history-classroom topics such as troops, tariffs, and trials. In witnessing their witness, students encountered a different kind of history, one delivered with an enlarged purpose of civic engagement. Branch's years of interviews, research, and consideration led him to write his trilogy using a narrative approach, the form he found most appropriate for this body of material. Branch used the stories of these everyday activists to proselytize to a new generation as it faces its own challenges to live up to America's ideals. He required that all students in the face-to-face class put themselves in an uncomfortable situation during the semester through a "civil rights stretch" exercise and report to their classmates about their emotions during that experience. Christians visited mosques and synagogues; middle-class students visited a homeless encampment. An African-American woman had her hair cut in a salon that served a white clientele. An inner-city student visited an Amish community. Branch extended the challenge to the auditors, and a few of them took part. He did not ask anyone to engage in civil disobedience, but reflections on their activities prompted some of the most powerful moments of class discussion, linking the social issues of today to struggles of fifty years ago.

### HONORS AS A PLACE FOR INNOVATION

The "civil rights stretch" activity linked to one of the four mission points of the University of Baltimore: "establish a foundation for lifelong learning, personal development and social responsibility." The combination of stand-out faculty, focus on civic engagement, and instructional innovation made this seminar a natural fit for UB's honors program. The UB administration recognized that The King Years would find a comfortable berth in the Helen P. Denit Honors Program in large part because the honors administration has aggressively positioned honors as an incubator for experimentation and innovation, offering our faculty, students, and resources to university initiatives. In doing so, we have sought to align our program with the aims of honors educators around the country.

One of the National Collegiate Honors Council's Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program states:

The program serves as a laboratory within which faculty feel welcome to experiment with new subjects, approaches, and pedagogies. When proven successful, such efforts in curriculum and pedagogical development can serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus.

With our participation in the Taylor Branch course, we saw an opportunity to add a significant new way to advance and articulate the relationship between honors and institutional innovation, a relationship that has historically been described in terms that are somewhat conservative. For example, after summarizing the rise of honors education and its emphasis on differentiated, individualized instruction in an increasingly homogenized environment, Scott Carnicom in a recent essay usefully asks: “[A]re these approaches innovative, or is the honors community advocating and preserving tried and true pedagogical models” (50)? Carnicom further elaborated, “[I]n this current environment one important value of honors is to keep alive the tradition, which now seems like innovation, of small classes and one-on-one instruction.” Framing a response to Carnicom’s essay using Richard Arum and Josipa Roska’s recent blockbuster *Academically Adrift*, Linda Frost argues more specifically that the higher expectations found in honors courses, most often translated in terms of heavier reading and writing requirements, are the most important contributions that honors can make to the larger university environment. Most honors educators would agree with these two respected scholars that the virtues of smaller classes and greater rigor remain important hallmarks of honors education, hallmarks that the rest of higher education would do well to emulate.

Nevertheless, Carnicom’s question remains: do either smaller classes or higher faculty expectations constitute innovation, especially as the twenty-first-century landscape of higher education frames it? When honors educators have discussed the digital revolution, arguably the most disruptive development in higher education in the last half-century, they have often gone in one of two directions. They have either talked about its products (such as MOOCs) as the ultimate realization of the commodified, cookie-cutter, mass-based education that they have witnessed and decried for decades in large lecture sections, or, more positively, they have discussed the ways its tools can be used to extend some honors pedagogies into a virtual format. A recent issue of JNCHC dedicated to “Honors in the Digital Age,” for example, included both of these perspectives (Mariz). Rarely, however, have honors educators discussed how honors programs and colleges can embrace digital initiatives that go beyond preserving small-class, individualized experiences, especially if these initiatives seem to threaten traditional honors experiences.

A major reason for the truncated exploration of honors in the digital age might be that much of the rationale for honors as a laboratory for innovation has been focused on faculty and the unleashed power of creative teachers in small classes with talented students, but, given this rationale and how it is articulated in the NCHC Basic Characteristics, a nagging question remains: how transferable or scalable are the insights gleaned from an experience if neither the class size nor the student talent level is replicated in non-honors sections? While we agree that honors can serve as an incubator of pedagogical innovation, we believe that the value an honors classroom offers, what makes it an excellent environment for exploring issues related to teaching and learning, is that the classroom has academically confident students willing to embrace the unpredictability of an

experimental course. The attitude of our honors students was in large part why we argued for honors as a place to try out such a challenging and radical course: our students had the confidence not only to handle the ambiguities going into the course, but also to provide constructive feedback on their experiences.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Among the many lessons our team learned from the experiment of The King Years are several that we will carry into the next iteration of this project:

1. **The seminar format can work in such a course.** Two and a half millennia after Socrates, students are still eager to engage in dialogue with their instructors and with each other even if they are located thousands of miles apart. Our auditors talked with Branch and one another over vast distances, both in real time and on message boards.
2. **Auditors want direct engagement.** The course design intentionally kept the auditors from direct interaction for fear that they would overwhelm the student experience. After auditors requested more interaction, we added additional auditor-only sessions throughout the semester to allow for more direct interaction.
3. **Some auditors have a low level of commitment.** Perhaps because the course was free to auditors, the total number at the end of the course was considerably smaller than it was at the beginning. Another cause might be that the course ran sixteen weeks rather than the typical five weeks of a mini-course.
4. **Courses like The King Years should augment current offerings of the academy, not displace them.** Created as an alternative MOOC, the model complements, not threatens, the traditional higher education experience. Most MOOCs replicate a lecture experience on a much larger scale. Our MOOC aimed to replicate the seminar experience. It also leveraged the expertise and connections of a unique scholar to share valuable information about a specialized topic.
5. **Experiences like The King Years can benefit institutions that don't have the bandwidth to cover all topics.** Students can get credit at the hosting institution or a local participating institution, allowing networks of universities to have overlapping course offerings without students going to a single physical space.
6. **It is easy to underestimate how much time and effort a production like this will take.** Since we did not allocate new staffing resources for this project, it presented a challenge to existing support staff.

As the debate over online education continues to evolve, we believe that our persistent efforts to capture and replicate the best features of a face-to-face seminar in a virtual environment can play an important role in reminding ourselves

and our outside stakeholders of the virtues of traditional educational traditions that are practiced in honors education.

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