Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are a growing Internet innovation widely discussed in education literature (Bowen, 2013; Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013). Few publications on MOOCs are found in healthcare literature and no publications are found in the nursing literature. This overview of MOOCs is based on extant literature, the current MOOC landscape on the web, and personal experience enrolling in MOOCs.

Massive open online courses are free online courses with open and unlimited registration for anyone across the globe with access to the Internet. The courses are primarily offered by renowned universities and taught by faculty who are experts in their field. Most MOOCs are conducted in English. Massive open online courses are not university credit-bearing online courses; but for a fee some will offer a “certificate of validation” for successful completion. Massive open online courses do not require prerequisites but may state what background is helpful for the course. Courses are usually less than 8 weeks duration.

Massive open online courses are delivered with state-of-the-art web applications through for-profit or nonprofit platforms. The courses are listed by the provider and recognized by the provider name (examples: Coursera, edX, KhanAcademy, Open2Study, Udacity). Aggregator sites provide comprehensive lists of MOOCs from multiple commercial providers (www.mooc-list.com, www.class-central.com).

Course content is delivered through short video lectures, slide presentations, and readings. Because thousands of students typically register for a course, evaluation consists of multiple-choice quizzes, often embedded in the lectures, graded online for immediate feedback, with an option to be retaken for mastery. Weekly assignments or projects are evaluated by peer participants in the course, a certain benefit for peer interaction; however, sometimes peer feedback is minimal and of limited value. Courses include discussion forums to promote participant interaction, which is logistically overwhelming with hundreds in the course, and fortunately is optional.

A rigorous systematic review of MOOC courses in “health and medicine” identified 98 courses, from 12 platforms, with 94% in English and 70% from North American universities (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2014). Most platforms have a category for health, including courses directed at consumers. Nursing-related courses begin with a course designed for individuals considering a career in nursing (www.open2study.com/courses/introduction-to-nursing-in-healthcare-020614) and a course for nursing licensing exam review (www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/NCLEX-RN). But most important, available courses suited for practicing nurses include topics such as teaching/learning, project management, physiology, leadership, finance, negotiating, public speaking, research techniques and data management, genetics, epidemiology, infections, Ebola, vaccines, child nutrition, contraception, pain, ethics, and languages.

Nurses can use MOOC courses as part of a personal professional development plan.

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