So, I’ve been following a MOOC

MOOCs: the future of education!

Or should I say that MOOCs have been following me?

Yes, MOOCs are a hype. Yes, everybody is discussing if they are going to change the way we learn. Yes, I decided to follow one to see how it is and no, I didn’t know what the acronym MOOC meant.

So the first step has been to look it up on Google...

1. My Opinion Only Counts
2. Miles, Dollars and Organized Crime
3. Possible Open Online Courses

MOOCs are online courses on virtually EVERY subject, with millions of subscribers. I decided to follow the Songwriting MOOC of the Berklee College.

It’s Berklee not Berkeley, BERKLEE!!!

Right it’s Berklee, a very famous college of Music in Boston, where many successful musicians have studied, such as...well...OK, the only reason why I know Berklee is that my boyfriend went there to study guitar when he was seventeen, instead of attending a very important exam in France. The truth is that I don’t know anything about music.

I just know that I’m a little jealous of musicians. When they play it looks like they could go on and on and never stop. They seem to be floating in some kind of supernatural magic dimension from which musical humans are forever banned.

I would love to be a musician. Maybe this MOOC will make my dream come true!

So, I’m very enthusiastic about this MOOC and I think I’m going to learn very fast a lot of new things. I signed up on COURSERA, the online platform for MOOCs, and I’m checking it everyday to see if the MOOC has begun.
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MOOCs will allow us to learn as fast as Zeus in the 8th century!

Finally, the Songwriting course begins. The first lesson is composed by a few short videos — which are not presenting the course as one would expect. There is the Professor, a guy in his sixties called Bill Britann.

The first video is a very dramatic monologue about a couple splitting up.

He’s very emphatic, just like an actor on stage, and he always wears a rock ‘n’ roll leather jacket.

He repeats things like 6 or 7 times.

I can’t help but thinking that he’s too American. I mean, he’s American like a bald eagle eating a hamburger at the White House.

But I’m impressed by the technical quality of this video. Everything is perfect!

Soooo, you wanna compose a song, dude?

The course goes on and the theory behind it is beginning to unfold. The course is actually about how to write lyrics. Bill Britann has some very clear rules:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Lines</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Rhymes</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Even</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uneven</td>
<td>Unequal</td>
<td>Not rhyming</td>
<td>Unstable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I’m of two minds about this. On the one hand it looks to me an over simplistic approach. Did all great lyric writers really work in this way? I’m trying to picture Bob Dylan counting his verses to check if they are uneven to suggest a sense of instability and I just can’t visualize it.

The whole thing seems too reductionist and too much based on measurable things, while... writing is not about measuring stuff!

Mind if I add another syllable mai am?

On the other hand I begin to listen differently to lyrics, trying to analyze them.

Actually, I begin to LISTEN, full stop.
For instance, on the bus,

The problem is all inside your head, she said to me.
The answer is easy if you take it logically.
I’d like to help you to your struggle to be free.
There must be fifty ways to leave your lover.
Fifty ways to leave your lover.

You just slip out the back, Jack.
Make a new plan, Stan.
You don’t need to be cry. Roy.
Just get yourself free.
Hop on the bus, Gus.
You don’t need to discuss much.
Just drop off the key, Lee.
And get yourself free.

(Paul Simon, 50 ways to leave your lover)

A MOOC is like a real course not only you have to attend classes once a week but you also have discussions and homework.

I discover my destinates after one week or so there is a huge online activity going on there! A forum with a many threads. People are coming mainly from the US and they are music lovers; many of them have bands and perform.
I read several discussions on the forums, but I don’t feel like participating. Why? Maybe I’m the lurker kind, maybe Planet Music is still very distant from me.

As for homeworks, I have been doing some very easy quizzes every week, but the dreadful moment arrives in which I have to submit my work to PASS EVERYTHING.

Now, not only making homework is in itself not very pleasant because it makes me feel like I was back at the elementary school, but I have a special problem with peer reviewing.

You don’t know what you can expect from your classmates, you cannot evaluate their level of knowledge as you can do with a teacher; long story short: you cannot trust them.
Yet you must submit your work for them to judge.

And by the way hey, it’s time to find an idea for our own lyrics.

We had to either choose from some proposed little or make up one of our own.
I’ve chosen the little One Story song because I liked the fact that the word “story” can have two meanings. Also, I have a bit of memories about a house, a grandfather’s home where I used to visit on holiday when I was a kid, and some kind of unresolved issues about it. So, I thought that I could write the lyrics about it could be a way to save them or at least ascend them.
So, I went through four or five different versions for the lyrics, here’s the last one.

I was scared the first time I had to read peer comments about this intimate stuff.

But I was relieved when I read reviews like these:

REV #1: This is great. Could be a duet. Good imagery and good scene setting. I am surrounded by snow currently, but the opening I felt me there. Nice work.

REV #2: Love the detail and the set up in the verse. Be first line in the chorus is great. Love the idea and how it sets us up for the rest of the song. My only problem is with lines 2 and 4 of the chorus. I would have liked a rhyme of some sort not necessarily a perfect one or even a family one but some kind. It almost threw me off only cause it was operationally supposed to be stable. Of course, I don’t know what I overall I learned. Good work!

REV #3: Very good. Nice unstable and stable structures here, and I like your use of a play on the last line of the verse. I really like how descriptive the verse is — you’re setting the scene quite clearly here. The idea in the verse strikes me as stable, so I’d be inclined to not use it in an unstable structure.

At the beginning this made me feel like I had to return the favour to my fellow students trying to tell them something really meaningful and helpful about their work, as for all I could not just say it's good or it's bad.

My reviews of others' work are not saved on the Coursera platform, so I cannot copy them here. Anyway, I was in the same style of my reviewers #2 and #3.

REV #4: At the beginning this made me feel like I had to return the favour to my fellow students trying to tell them something really meaningful and helpful about their work, as for all I could not just say it's good or it's bad.

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REV #5: At the same time, I'm more and more interested in what is going on in the forums, and I see that quite a few are who have problems with peer reviewing. As soon as the course began, the forum's threads are filling up with bitterness:

**Hello from sunny Arkansas!** (10 posts)

**Hi from Chattanooga, can we be friends?** (16 posts)

**Yay! Looking for collaboration** (12 posts)

**Threads when peer reviewing has begun:**

- I am not satisfied with the reviews (53 posts)
- I know who you are, Reviewer #2 (471 posts)
- Post here if you hate your reviewers (683 posts)
Around the half - two thirds of the course, many things have changed:

1. I realize that a MOOC actually takes a lot of time and I'm struggling to find the time to attend classes.
2. Even if now I stand off from years reviewing me, I'm always uncomfortable when I have to read their comments.
3. I'm not so enthusiastic about peer reviewing myself. I forget to do it at least four times.
4. Exercises and classes are not simply any longer. I have to repeat them several times before getting it right.
5. I changed my mind about Flat Ullion.

Once again, I'm not the only one in the course. Berklee College has been carrying out a survey about what students liked and disliked about the course.

My admiration for Flat Ullion reaches a climax when I see him in action in a real class at Berklee College. He's coaching a musician who is playing and singing her own song. Without changing her lyrics, with just some advice about how to stress syllables and other details he's making her song different. Much better.

The last courses about rhyme types and probably are dense and they get more and more difficult to follow.

At the end of the course, I crown Ullion as poet laureate.

But I'm not able to do the last assignment. The problem is that in the last two courses something new has come in my way. ACTUAL MUSIC.

I mean, I should compose a melody to match with my lyrics. Flat Ullion gives some directions for that too, but after browsing a while about writing a brilliant song I find an excuse and skip the assignment.

I'm still thinking about doing the course twice to make it to the end.

Will I do it? I'm not sure, I think I'll need a practical (and unlikely) reason to do that, like being asked as a lyric writer by someone from distant Planet Plut.</p>