

## Online Education Has a Loneliness Problem. Can Harvard Fix It?

By Amy S. Choi

As business schools tiptoe into the world of massive open online courses, or MOOCs, Harvard has a plan to sidestep the isolation of online learning—a problem that keeps most students from sticking with the classes.

Business education at Harvard will go online with “Innovating in Health Care,” a course beginning March 31 on HarvardX, the university’s online learning platform. More than 10,000 students have already registered, according to the school.

It will be the first HarvardX class taught by a dedicated business school instructor: Regina Herzlinger, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. (Herzlinger is no stranger to firsts at the institution: She was also the first woman to be tenured and chaired at the business school.)

Herzlinger has taught innovation and health care at Harvard in person for 43 years. The main goal of her online class is to spur collaboration, interaction, and networking, but that’s difficult when crowded classrooms are replaced with the solitary glow of a home computer monitor.

To overcome the separation factor, she’ll employ a clever collaboration of her own: Herzlinger worked with Svetlana Dostenko to integrate Project Lever, a “sort of EHarmony for building businesses” into the edX platform. Project Lever was designed as a way to match students with the best resources for their research projects. In Herzlinger’s course, students will use Project Lever to connect with classmates whose skills complement theirs.

Herzlinger says MOOCs are suited to classes with objective, measurable outcomes. They don’t work as well for teaching conceptual or action-based ideas.

“Didactic courses are very adaptable to the Web,” she says. “I teach accounting as well, and there’s always a right answer. Those courses are easy. Innovation is much more challenging because it has to be interactive and team-based.”

Herzlinger’s online students will have to write a business plan in a team of four to seven people. They’ll find their teammates through Project Lever. So, say you’re a researcher with a business idea for distributing consumer health information. You can use the program to publicize your business plan, describe your skill set, and advertise for collaborators with big data expertise or a background in the pharmaceutical industry. Project Lever also factors in time zones and availability to match potential team members appropriately.

Herzlinger hopes that team-based learning will also address the huge attrition rate of online students. According to a study HarvardX and MITX conducted on their 2012-13 online offerings, 95 percent of students dropped out before earning a completion

certificate. “When students are on teams, they become much more committed to both each other and the class,” she says.

The program could prove instructive for the wider B-school if Herzlinger is successful at getting students to work together—and do it for the duration of the course. Harvard Business School is expected to launch HBX, its own online effort, this spring.

Why study subjective concepts like innovation in a format that makes it harder? Herzlinger concedes that online courses can impede collaboration, but notes that you can’t beat them for price and convenience.

“We’ve done everything we can to encourage collaboration and foster interaction online,” says Herzlinger. “The drawback is that you can’t have the kind of personal interaction that \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year will buy you. But you also don’t need to leave your job and come to campus and make a huge financial sacrifice.”