Peter Hadreas
Plenary Address: "The Open Letter to Michael Sandel and Thoughts About Online Teaching"
3:30 p.m, February 14th, 2014

First, I want to thank Dr. Chris Hoeckey for inviting me to speak today, as well as Annie Borden, whose conference organizational expertise accommodated my unusually harried schedule at San José State University. I also want to take the liberty of expressing my respect to Stan Gaede whose foresight led to the establishment of the Institute for the Liberal Arts and the yearly conversations on the liberal arts of which this is the thirteenth.

I read in The Westmont Magazine that Stan Gaede established this annual conference partly out of regret for the decline of the liberal arts in education. Given that regret and the excellence of organization and thoughtfulness that has gone into these conversations, I can't imagine a better forum for the topic: "Technology and Relationship in Liberal Arts Education."

I

Part of my being here is due to my department, the Philosophy Department at José State University, publishing last April an open letter to Harvard professor Michael Sandel.

As some of you may know, this letter, coming from a respected but hardly elite institution, was taken up by people writing in influential newspapers and journals and has been treated as an icon of academics’ disapproval of, so it would seem, the progress towards higher education through MOOCs and in general privatized online teaching. The letter appeared first in The Chronicle of Higher Education. On April 29, 2013. Tamar Lewin in The New York Times noted our stand five days later. The letter was cited and discussed subsequently by numerous national newspapers and journals. To mention the best known: The Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, the weekly national magazine, The Nation, and then several times

again by *The New York Times*, including just a few weeks ago. Because of the whirlwind effects of our letter, the editors of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in their Dec. 9, 2013 issue elected the San José State Philosophy Department to the nation wide top ten higher-education influence list for 2013.

Since the letter became a topic of conversation in national conversations about MOOCs and online teaching, I received telephone calls and letters from celebrated social activists and media spokespeople. Ralph Nader sent me a commendation. Michael Krasny invited me to discuss the value of MOOCs with the founder of Udacity, Sebastian Thrun and Eric Westervelt broadcast my remarks on National Public Radio this past New Year's Eve Day. All said, it has been a strange eight months for me. I have never before experienced before the way the media can pick you up like a rogue wave and then toss you sometimes on high land, sometimes to be left stranded. I still do not know where my department will land, but I do know that we were acting on the best pedagogic principles as we understood them. Truth be told, we feared the reaction of our administration, but it was still a fine moment for us, not because of the notoriety, but because we faced what we saw as the devaluation of what we stood for in teaching philosophy. I credit particularly the junior faculty members who signed the letter -- we senior faculty member had far less to lose. Our colleagues put their reputation and careers on the line in signing this letter.

So what were the circumstances of this open letter to Michael Sandel? It began with pressure by our administration to teach his EdX course entitled, ironically, *Justice*. We knew that Michael Sandel is an international academic celebrity-- just consider his recent reception in South Korea a few years ago. On June 1, 2012, 15,000 students appeared at a Seoul South Korea university

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Outdoor amphitheater to hear Michael Sandel conduct an audience-centric discussion of ethics. The next evening, 1,000 people filled a studio at one of Korea’s three main television networks to hear him speak in a live broadcast. The day after that, he was welcomed into the heart of popular Korean society by throwing the opening pitch for LG Twins at Seoul’s biggest baseball stadium. It is fair to say, that Michael Sandel and his course on Justice, are academic institutions.

But frankly his affiliation with the online consortium EdX remains curious indeed. EdX was founded in May 2012 with grants of $30 million each from Harvard and M. I. T. EdX became especially renowned for its MOOCs, massive open online courses, which so far it offers for free. Less known, but far more a problem for our otherwise hard-working, if middle-tiered, philosophy department, is its promulgation of flipped courses, sometimes called SPOCs, that is small private online courses. Would Dr. Spock appreciate the Star Trek homonym? Clearly there is some semantic drift here. SPOCs are very different from MOOCs. In an EdX SPOC course, that is, a flipped course, an instructor imports an online course as taught by a top-tier university professor, maybe from Harvard, or M. I. T., or possibly from U. C. Berkeley or Stanford. The less famous university signs a contract with EdX. Its faculty then facilitates the teaching of the course. Thus, the professor who communicates the educational content of the course, at least as they are offered by EdX, is the out-sourced and virtual professor from the elite school.

So why did we write the letter? There were reasons connected with the San José State administration, but they were lesser concerns for us. Our more compelling concerns had to do with the nature of teaching Sandel’s EdX Justice course, in or out of San José State.

• First, the San José State administration reasons. Our administration had taken a singularly strong stand on online teaching. In press conferences with Governor Jerry Brown and Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, our President had predicted that online courses, especially MOOCs, would solve the major problems of higher education in California. He referred to three broad, but certainly very real, trouble areas: 1) High school students in California who come to the Cal State system inadequately prepared and in need of extensive remedial teaching; 2) A bottleneck of students wanting admission to California State Universities since the current State System does not have the faculty or classrooms to accommodate them; and, 3)

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.
Students in the California State University system taking a discouragingly long seven to eight years to graduate, on average. In the President’s 2012 white paper, he clearly indicates that the three problems will be solved by the introduction of MOOCs and SPOCs. His plan is to teach through MOOCs and SPOCs to 25 to 40 percent of lower division classes. Incredibly, he means to apply his plan not merely to San José State, but to the whole of the California State system, that is, all community colleges, all Cal State Universities and all Universities of California. And that’s the first step. The next step, as our President writes: "... will be redesigning upper-division programs . . . each institution, or group of institutions, can build degree programs using a number of possible sources, such as materials already available in open source courseware, learning modules developed by corporations, national labs, public broadcasting services, libraries." (No mention of increasing the size of the faculties, the staff or the brick and mortar classrooms. Granted this solution, however realistic, would not appear heroic to taxpayers. There’s no magic bullet in having the supply of faculty and classrooms keep up with the demand.) So, with the President’s highly ambitious plan waiting in the wings, Michael Sandel’s course was seen as one of the many methods that would supplant face-to-face teaching.

- Leaving aside San José State politics, we had two main concerns about Sandel’s course. First, in his course Sandel interacts only with his Harvard students, whom he repeatedly cites as the brightest students, the crème de la crème. What then would be the effect on our students? They would be required to watch Michael Sandel talking to his Harvard students. They could not ask him questions. They would not have access to him as his students do in Harvard’s glorious Sanders Theater. To make matters worse, his students did not fit the demography of our students. San José State is wonderfully diverse. We are very proud of that. Sandel’s students did include some people of color but they were surely in the minority. If we taught Michael Sandel’s EdX Justice we would be casting our students into an upstairs-downstairs scenario. We would be inferiorizing them. Considering the topic of the course, ’Justice,’ it would seem a cruel joke.

- Our second reason, also not connected with San José State politics, was the anti-democratic spirit generated by a one-size-fits-all pre-

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10 Ibid.
recorded video course. Many of our faculty had special expertise in diverse topics concerning justice. Professors from other universities possess different expertise. Students’ awareness that there is a difference in readings and discussions as they pass from one course on justice to another course gives them a chance to experience diverse perspectives. It prevents the codification of one approach to a complex subject that especially warrants open discussion. With Sandel’s course, open discussion occurs between Sandel and his Harvard students. Our students would be merely allowed to watch it.

I can't finish with this trying history without mentioning Sandel’s response, or, rather, his remarkable lack of response followed by inconsistent remarks to his Harvard students. He never addressed our letter, which is remarkable in itself since, as I said, as far as reportage on online teaching has gone in 2013, our letter has become a media emblem. But Sandel did address the issue of teaching his course ‘Justice’ online at Harvard. On October 31, 2013 The Harvard Crimson published Professor Sandel’s remarks on the teaching of EdX Justice:

"I have never required or even encouraged on-campus students in ‘Justice’ to watch my online lectures before class, . . .”

“To have students watch online lectures in advance would risk dampening the spontaneous, unpredictable, and open-ended quality of the discussions we have in Sanders Theater,” Sandel wrote.11

So, why does Professor Sandel sell his online EdX Justice course to universities nationwide knowing there will be no spontaneous discussions? I don’t have an answer. He has not offered one. Lest my quoting his statement in The Harvard Crimson questions his integrity, I must qualify my remarks. Professor Sandel has had a long and brilliant career, but not in this occasion. Something is obviously missing. Perhaps a lapse or a disconnect of some sort. I hope some day Professor Sandel will supply us with an explanation. Respectfully, we can await that day.

II

In the time that remains I want to express some general misgivings I have about teaching by MOOCs or SPOCs. Let’s leave aside technological progress in education for a moment, as wrong-headed as that sounds. Why? Instead consider accounts of what makes good teaching even before technological progress was an issue. Consider positions taken in diverse traditions. Because of my own training I’ll limit myself to the Western tradition, and

consider criteria for good teaching as they were first, to my knowledge, investigated. After all, these talks here at Westmont are called a **conversation**. Philosophy began as a conversation. Let’s go back briefly to a conversation between Socrates and Callicles, as written by Plato in the dialogue, *Gorgias*. The question arises: How can we proceed to investigate the conditions of a good life? What qualities do we expect from a person who seriously wishes to engage in such a pursuit? Socrates proposes that a person who is serious about investigating good character and understanding needs to have **knowledge** and **good will** and to exercise them through **open discourse**. How easy it is to forget these principles when caught in the juggernaut of deciding what will most likely yield a high paying job. Good teaching will strip away the misconceptions a person might have and allow her or him to judge fairly how they should proceed with their lives. To do this, it needs conversations. And those conversations need to uphold the requirements of knowledge, good will and openness. In the remarks that remain, please allow me to accept these criteria as givens that express basic conditions of good inquiry in education.

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12 Plato, *Gorgias*, 487A.
13 Plato, *Gorgias*, 487A, the Greek phrase is ἐπιστήμην τε καὶ ἐννοιαν καὶ παρρησίαν. *Parrhesia* (παρρησία) has been discussed at length among classical scholars recently who often translate it as 'frank speech' or 'bold speech.' Even in this passing reflection on the virtue, *parrhesia*, two points of clarification need to be added. First I am translating the term as 'open speech' even though recent scholars, such as Monoson, Foucault, and Nehamas have translated the term as 'frank speech' or 'bold speech.' I have translated the term as 'open speech' since without a more detailed account of the context in which it was used it can take on the sense of outspokenness. In their writings Monoson, Foucault, and Nehamas presume an awareness of, or examine, the context in which *parrhesia* was used. I would digress from the topic if I took up space to do so here. See Monoson, S. Sara, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Foucault, Michel, *Fearless speech*, Ed. Pearson, Joseph, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001); Nehamas, Alexander, *The Art of Living*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
Second *parrhesia* needs to be distinguished from 'free speech' as understood as a fundamental right in the U. S. political tradition. Unlike free speech, *parrhesia* as Aleve Saxonhouse says, is "the universalizing of the practice that entails the exposure of one's true thoughts." Saxonhouse, Arlene, *Free Speech And Democracy In Ancient Athens*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 88. As Saxonhouse explains, *parrhesia* enabled 4th century B. C. E. orators to serve the public good, because the distinction between rhetoric and truth-speaking was more firmly drawn. This of course does not make less of our own political tradition's notion of free speech, but points to the different goals of the two political virtues.
I don’t mean in any way to make less of courses that lead students to obtain high-paying jobs. I do think, however, there has been hype and hyperbole connected with MOOCs and SPOCs as especially providing training for high-paying jobs. Coursera currently offers MOOCs in Algorithms, Introduction to Programming, Internet History Technology and Security, Designing and Executing Information Security Strategies, Compilers, and General Game Playing. These are topics that would seem to lead to well-paying jobs. But there are two mitigating circumstances. First, there is now much data regarding the behavior of registrants in MOOCs. This past December, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania published their analysis of the behavior of over one million registrants in sixteen Coursera courses. They found course completion rates to be very low. They averaged around 4%, ranging from 2% to 14% depending on the course and measurement of completion. User ‘engagement’ generally decreased dramatically after the first 1-2 weeks of a course. Second, various myths abound regarding which academics subjects lead to high-paying jobs. People who have degrees in the humanities are not so workplace abandoned as popularly believed. Allow make a pitch for my discipline. It is a fact that philosophy majors rank top in cumulative GRE scores, LSAT scores and second in MBAT scores, as compared to all other academic disciplines.

Leaving aside the fate of MOOCs, for there are many varieties of online teaching beside massive online courses, and speaking of what particularly seems at issue, outsourced privatized fully online courses, I am very worried that such online classes will turn their enrollees into pedagogical orphans. The students will have no bona fide pedagogical protections. They are left to learn about what constitutes knowledge catch-as -catch-can. Out-sourced privatization makes instructor good will answer to the constraints of profit. And when behavior on pre-programmed quizzes, midterms, exams and papers constitutes a class grades, students have little motivation to speak their own mind and to develop their own views and self-understanding.

Hopefully, it will be understood that I believe that online courses might play a constructive role in twenty-first century education, provided that the criteria of knowledge, benevolence and open speech are upheld, let me finish

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16 See for example "Value of a Philosophy Degree: Graduate School Preparation," website maintained by Purdue University, downloaded Feb. 7, 2014 from http://webs.purduecal.edu/philosophy/graduate-school-preparation/ For a further detailed view of academic majors in relation to GRE scores see http://www.physicscentral.com/buzz/blog/index.cfm?postid=6469561661568777605
with some trouble-spots wherein MOOCs and SPOCs as currently conceived, do underplay and even oppose knowledge, goodwill and free speech.

1. *The false lure of an elitist education.* As mentioned, EdX, of which I am most familiar, trades upon the imprimatur of Harvard, M. I. T., Stanford or some other University with a special claim to prestige, a practice marketing specialists know as branding. In Harvard’s EdX Course, *Introduction to Computer Science,* who actually teaches the course *Introduction to Computer Science?* Not Harvard’s permanent faculty. The current Harvard EdX Course, *Introduction to Computer Science,* is taught by a Senior Lecturer, David J. Malan and two B. A. students, Ron Bowden and Zamlya Chan. I submit that the current data bears out that a professor from a university with a less hallowed name, whose credentials have been checked through the many online resources that enable a student to evaluate a professor in advance, would be as good or better choice for instruction in this subject.  

2. *The lack of evaluation of the online teacher’s -- or mentor’s -- concern for their students.* The State University of California teaches some 473,000 students. For over the past thirty years, and increasingly so in the last ten years, the faculty at the twenty-three CSUs are reviewed by their students semester by semester. Students are finely sensitive as to whether their instructors have their best interests at heart. They are given many

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17 Very recently, Feb. 2, 2014, we have a statement from Stanford President, John Hennessey in which he specifies data that indicates the failure of Stanford sponsored MOOCs, and at this point more relevantly, data he offers regarding an exemplary SPOC. About MOOCs Hennessey states: "The range of student capability within the course simply becomes so large that you’ve got 10 students that are way ahead of the class – or 1,000 students that are way ahead – you’ve got 5,000 that are lost and you have some in the middle – and it just doesn’t work ... [When] you give an exam, that exam is going to be a cakewalk for some students and it’s going to be a disaster for others – and you could see that in some of the early experiments we’ve done with the really massive activities."

As for SPOCs, Hennessey cites the results of Harvard Law Professor, Terry Fisher, who offered his course in copyright law, not to a massive amount of students, but to 500 students broken into individual sections of 25 students each, "chosen after extensive applications," each section with its own teaching assistant, some with live discussions and some with asynchronous discussions. Of the 500 people who signed up for the course, 307 completed it, although 60 did not take the final exam and 52 who did failed. The drop-out and fail rates in this SPOC, although better than MOOCs on average, unquestionably are worse than students’ success rates in face-to-face teaching, Walters, Richard, "Moocs in transition: Not so open, open or even online." *The Financial Times Web Blog,* Feb. 2, 2014, downloaded Feb. 9, 2014, https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#inbox/144128b86165d3b4?projeector=1
opportunities to rate their professor and faculty through carefully tabulated questionnaires. Such reviews, I assure you, are taken very seriously. As a department chair in the CSU system I can attest that these reviews determine whether a new faculty member will be rehired and whether an older faculty member will receive the benefits of teaching courses he or she wants.

The situation is quite different with privatized MOOCs and SPOCs. Mentors of MOOCs need not be reviewed. Furthermore market forces come into play. Online companies, in an effort to attract more students entertain hiring movie or television celebrities in place of academics. I quote the CEO of EdX, Anant Agarwal in a statement he made a few months ago:

"From what I hear, really good actors can actually teach really well," said Anant Agarwal, CEO of EdX, who was until recently a computer-science professor at MIT. “So just imagine, maybe we get Matt Damon to teach Thévenin’s theorem,” he added, referring to a concept that Agarwal covers in a MOOC he teaches on circuits and electronics. “I think students would enjoy that more than taking it from Agarwal.”

Coursera, EdX and Udacity again so as to attract students want to minimize the screen presence of instructors without good looks. "Udacity, another MOOC provider . . . apparently already uses “camera-friendly” staffers to appear in videos with professors," as reported by Sumagaysay Levi from her interviews with Coursera, EdX, and Udacity personnel. When students are signing up for online courses they easily are attracted by the good looks or the movie star fame. They sign up without any knowledge of the instructor's good will towards their students.

3. The inability of MOOCs and SPOCs to deal with unconventional and eccentric ideas. Open speech, as given by its openness, permits and does not rule out unconventional, out-of-the-box responses from students. MOOCs and SPOCs depend on programs, algorithms, routines, and rubrics. There is a profound difference between the two regarding ruled versus non-ruled behavior. MOOCs and SPOCs, in evaluating student responses, whether in chat groups, multiple choice quizzes and exams or essay exams, inasmuch as they are corrected by ruled-organized programs must by their nature not be able to handle unconventional, out-of-the-box responses. Granted such unconventional responses may be misguided or simply mistaken, but it is from the class of remarks, ideas, insights and theories that are unconventional and out-of-the-box that innovative, creative and ground-breaking ideas may emerge. Here MOOCs and SPOCs would seem to be not

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19 Ibid.
only inappropriate, but in principle counter-developmental. Open speech is a feature of good teaching, which makes MOOCs and SPOCs unworthy substitutes for live courses in higher education.

In summation: What did our experience with the media coverage of our Open Letter to Michael Sandel teach us? In briefest terms, it surely strengthened our faith in free speech. Even in the perfect storm of media coverage, we stood by the best pedagogical principles we knew of. We believe our students know they were respected and, we believe, that students nation-wide will be protected from a derelict, if not abusive, online course experience. We’re very grateful for that.

As for my passing reflections on MOOCs and SPOCs in general, let me sum by saying that the data indicate that SPOCs and not MOOCs will likely figure into educational practices of the twenty-first century. But when SPOCs increasingly comprise some significant percentage of instruction, they need the overriding governance of teachers who have good will for their students and are willing to be open to unpredictable and unconventional discourse. Then we can avoid the rigidification and standardization of education that SPOCs bring with them, and continue to make our best efforts to promote our students’ open-mindedness, self-understanding and love of learning.