

Lessons from Columbia’s MOOC, Civil War & Reconstruction Part 2
by Laura Moustakerski

MOOCs may not bring in tuition revenue, but they can benefit elite universities in other ways. They allow schools to fulfill a social mission to disseminate knowledge to the wider world. And as recent [report](#) from Columbia’s Office of the Provost notes, they can spur better teaching practices throughout the institution:

“MOOCs provide faculty with opportunities to think deeply about pedagogy and generate much-needed attention to the University’s core teaching mission. They generate unprecedented data about student learning experiences that instructors can use to improve teaching.”

Since 2013, Columbia has released [18 MOOCs](#) on topics ranging from sustainable development, to virology, to big data. CCNMTL is working with faculty to build engaging MOOCs, and is also taking the lead in evaluating the user experience. Evaluation is important, because standards are not yet set in this nascent area of online education and there is still ample room for improvement. Moreover, CCNMTL can carry lessons over to its other online learning initiatives, including [hybrid course](#) design.

Recently, the third and final course in Professor Eric Foner’s well-received MOOC series on the Civil War and Reconstruction launched on the online education platform edX. CCNMTL, which has worked with Foner and his teaching staff to develop the MOOC, continues to evaluate the series. The following are the Center’s findings from an exit survey of participants in Part 2 of the series, conducted at the course’s close in February, along with a summary of participation data provided by edX.

edX participation stats

Although fewer people enrolled in Civil War and Reconstruction Part 2 (CWR2) than in Part 1 of the series, sustained activity and certification rates rose. Of the total number active at the beginning of CWR2, 75% were still active by the end of the course (compared to 61% over the same period in CWR1). More people obtained certificates in the second course, both in total numbers and as a percentage of those enrolled. (See table, below.)

	CWR1	CWR2
ENROLLMENT		
Total enrolled at end of course	7,024	5,878
ACTIVE PARTICIPATION		
Students active first week	2,805	2,584
Students active second week	2,561	2,050
Students active last week	1,723	1,942

Students active last week, as a percentage of enrolled	25%	33%
Sustained activity (active students last week, as a percentage of first week)	61%	75%
CERTIFICATES		
Verified certificates issued	57	83
Honor code certificates issued	1,083	1,349
Total certificates issued	1,140	1,432
Certificate-earners as percentage of total enrolled	16%	22%
Certificate-earners as percentage of students active in last week	66%	74%

Exit survey results

On February 11th 2015, all enrollees in CWR2 were invited, by email, to take an exit survey to share their views on the experience. By February 24th, 666 had responded to the online survey, 90% of whom had completed the course (i.e., qualified for a certificate by taking the quizzes and final exam). The findings of that survey follow.

1. Improvements over Part 1

Participants remain highly satisfied with the course series. Some noted improvements in CWR2 over the previous course, for example:

“I would like to say tests have improved very much”

“I am very impressed by the changes to the course that reflect the feedback students have been providing. THANK YOU!”

“Compared to the first course, I thought that the primary source materials this time around were more relevant to the weekly material. Well done.”

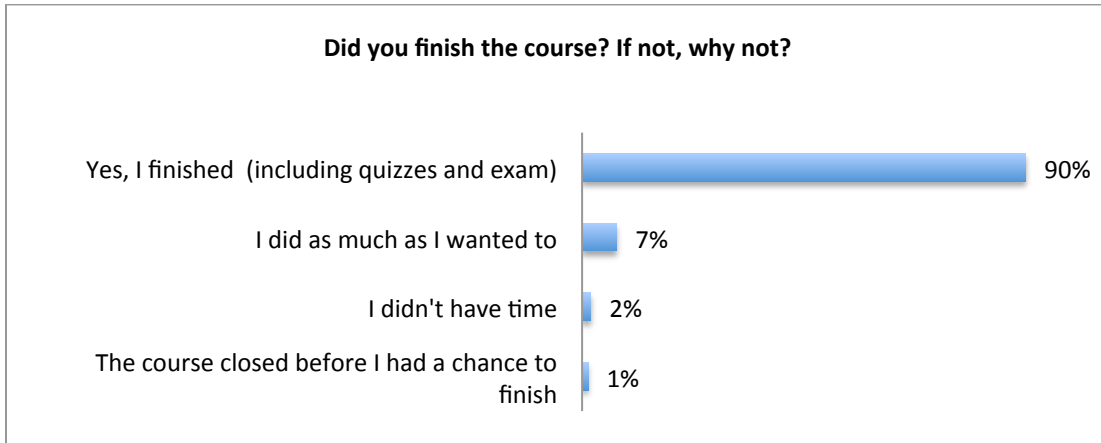
“I appreciate the addition of the freeform discussion opportunities at the start of each section. Again, it allows us to explore topics in greater depth or breadth.”

“The primary source segments are excellent. The segment on William Rathvon was a real treat, so thank you to the person who brought that to the program.”

“I also particularly enjoyed the primary sources, most notably the recording of the man who witnessed Lincoln give the Gettysburg address. That alone made the course worthwhile.”

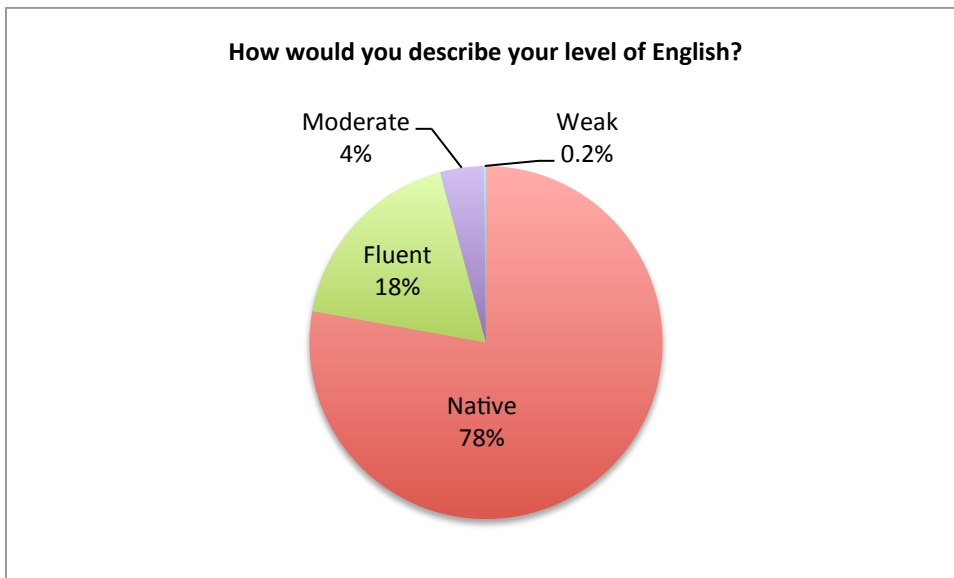
2. Enough time to finish the course

Most of the survey respondents (90%) finished the course. For those who didn't, it was generally a matter of choice: they didn't want to take the quizzes and final exam. Only 1% said the course closed before they had a chance to finish. One person wrote: "Finished lectures/exams but system on last day did not allow me to save exams."



3. Many non-native English speakers

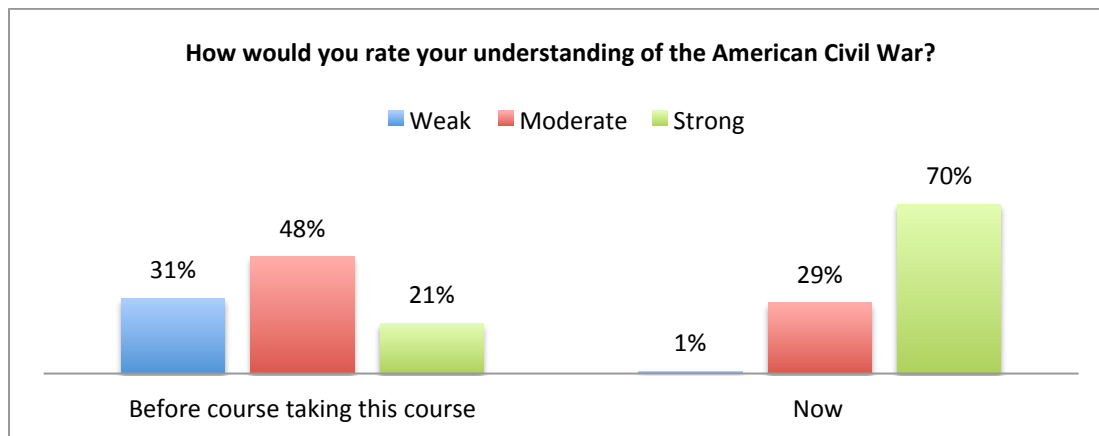
We've previously asked which part of the world participants reside in and found that 27% are based outside of North America. In the exit survey, we asked about participants' level of English:



While 95% have strong English, it is notable that 22% are not native speakers; many say the transcripts help them follow the lectures, and some lament that the interviewer speaks too quickly and is hard to understand.

4. Strong gains in understanding the Civil War period

As with the previous mid-course surveys, many people wrote in the open comments box that they learned a lot in the course. This time, we also tried to capture a quantitative picture of learning outcomes. The results are encouraging: the proportion of participants who consider themselves to have a “strong” understanding of the Civil War was 70% at the end of the course, compared to 21% before taking the course. Just as significantly, those who feel they have a “weak” understanding of the period fell from 31% to 1%.



Here’s how one participant describes the impact on his or her life:

“I am better able to help my own children understand the historical significance of the civil war. As a family we like to go to historic sites for vacation. Now, our own conversations can be more engaging. Also, I am enjoying historical fiction and nonfiction much better. I am following the New York Times articles as well. Love it.”

There were many laudatory comments about the course content, presentation, staff, and especially Professor Foner, from participants around the world, of all ages and backgrounds. Here’s a great one:

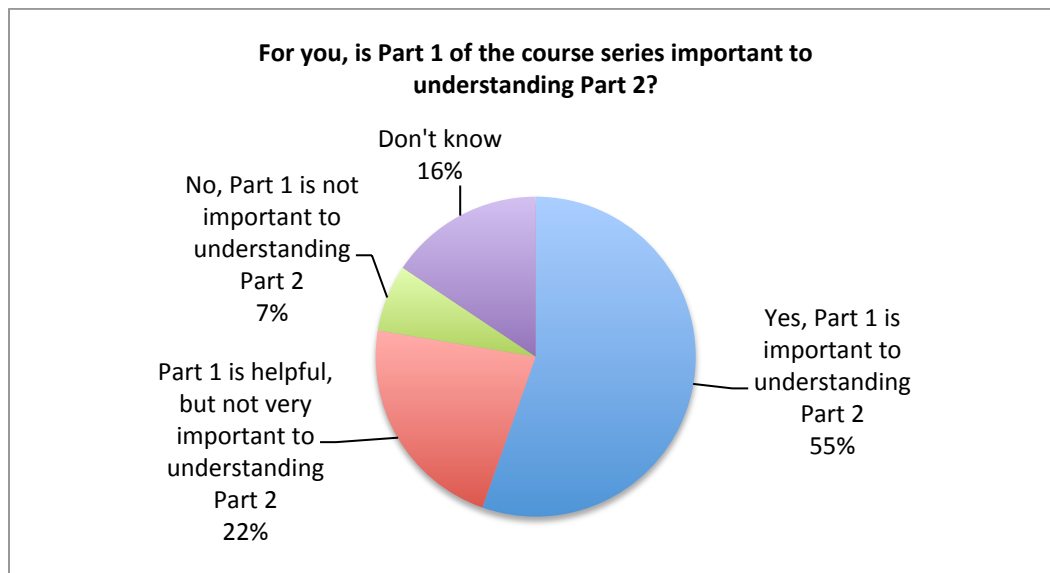
“I’m a high school student from Australia and this is definitely the best history class I’ve ever taken in my life. Professor Foner’s teaching style is one of the key aspects that made this course so interesting. In my high school English class, we are reading ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ by Harper Lee and this course significantly increased my understanding of the historical context of the novel. Thanks to this course, my English teacher now refers to me as the ‘encyclopedia of American

Civil War history'. I love this amazing course very much and thank you all for bringing it to the world!"

Many people requested that Columbia develop more history MOOCs.

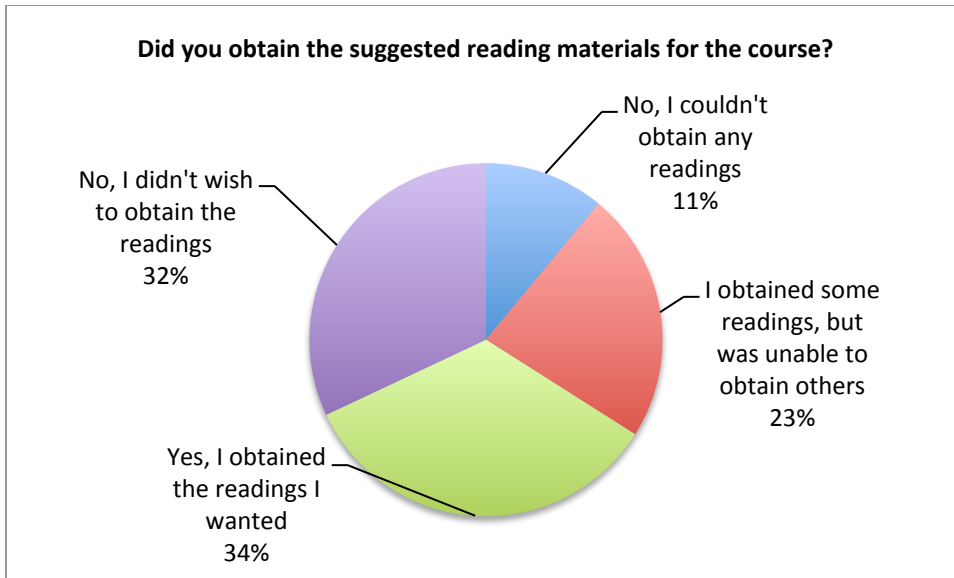
5. Courses in series are best taken together

Although each of the courses in the three-part series is meant to stand alone, most people feel that they go hand-in-hand: 55% say Part 1 is "important" to understanding Part 2 of the series, and 22% say it is "helpful" to understanding Part 2. Only 7% of survey respondents feel that CWR1 is not valuable to understanding CWR2. Several people who had missed CWR1 said they want to go back and watch lectures from the earlier course. Many want to know whether the entire series will be offered again.



6. One-third can't access all the reading materials they want

In previous mid-course surveys, many participants noted frustrations in obtaining the recommended readings. In the exit survey, we captured data showing that two-thirds of participants either obtained all the readings they wanted (34%) or did not wish to obtain the readings (32%). However, that still leaves one-third of participants unable to obtain some or all of the readings they want.



In the open comments box, some repeated entreaties to make readings available online. One respondent noted that Stephanie McCurry's Coursera course "makes most readings online for free." Others suggest that participants be given a list of the documents being assigned in the Gienapp book, since many individual primary sources can be found free online. Another common request: a list of all books and primary documents that Foner cites in each lecture, many of which are not on the course reading list.

Many people also repeated requests that reading lists and syllabi be distributed well before the course begins, to allow time to acquire the materials.

"Limitation of the EdX platform is that we cannot access a course prior to the start date. Therefore I only learn about the required readings & suggested texts on my first access after the start date. Would it be possible to mail out a pre-course reading list, together with any other helpful information (e.g. course agenda over the 8-10 week term), to enrolled students about 4-6 weeks before the course starts? Just to get in the groove early..."

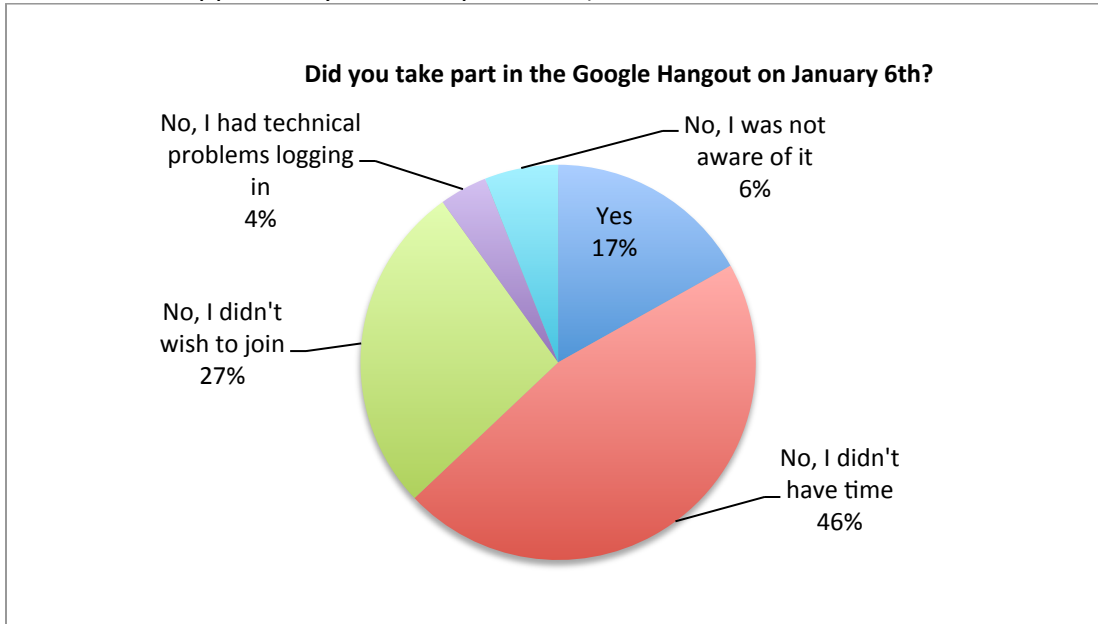
One suggests that we let people know that reading lists are available on Foner's own website:

"I've previously requested some advance notice (before the course begins) of the readings so those of us who don't live in metropolitan areas with good libraries and bookstores can obtain the readings by the time the course starts. I had to scramble to get them for Parts 1 and 2. In the last Google Hangout Professor Foner mentioned that the syllabi and readings for all of his Columbia courses are on his own web page. I hadn't known that previously. So I went there and noted the books likely to be used in Part 3 and have started getting them in advance of

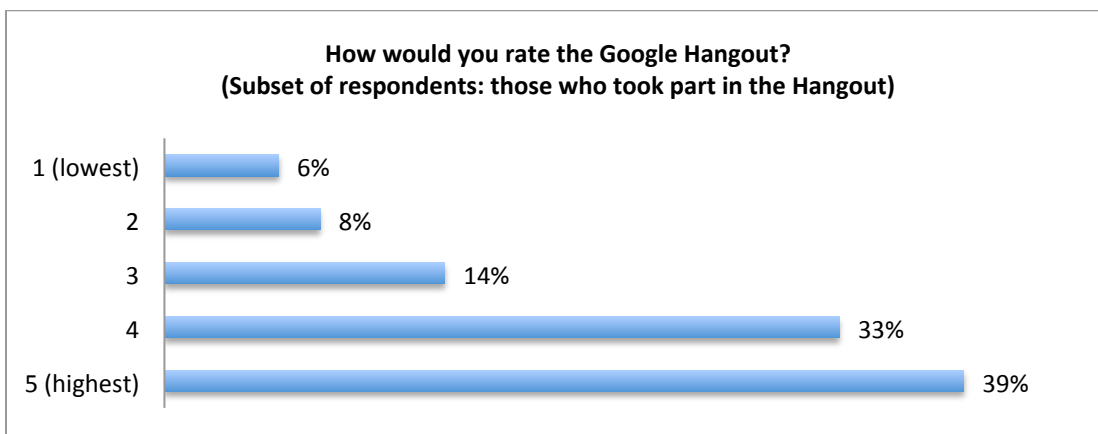
the course beginning. It would be helpful if you could at least let others know they can get the list in advance from that website.”

7. Room for growth in Google Hangout participation, both live and recorded

Only 17% of survey respondents took part in the Google Hangout on January 6th; an additional 4% wanted to join but had technical problems logging in. Some noted that they watched a recorded version of the Hangout. (“All I lost by not participating in real time was the opportunity to ask a question.”)

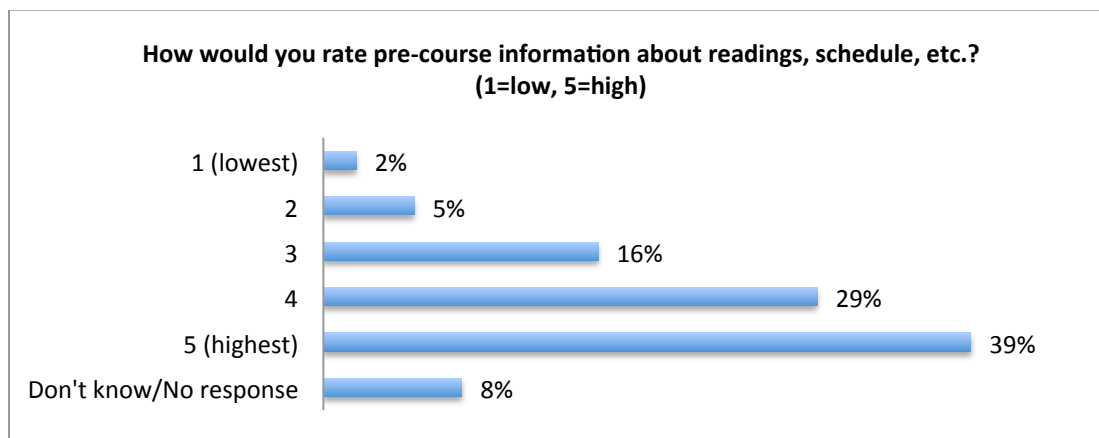
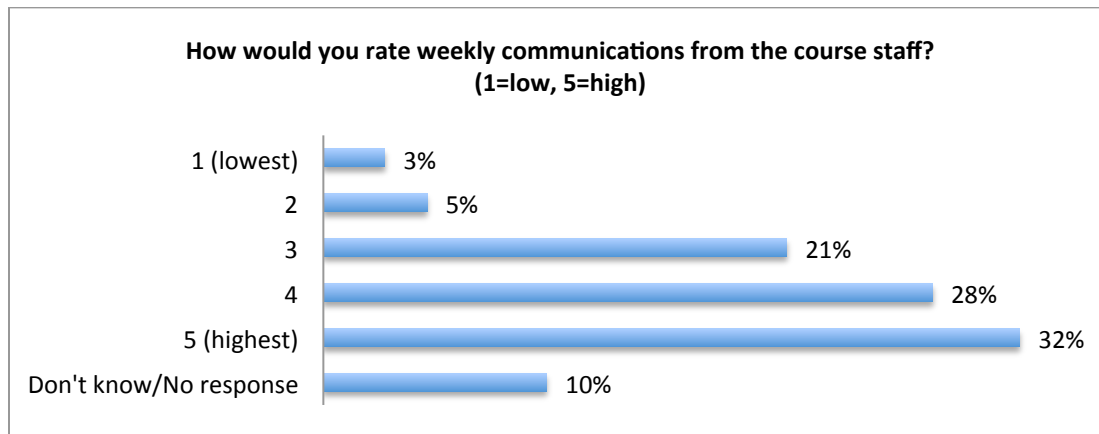


Of those who took part, 72% rated it highly (4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5). One participant wrote of the CWR Hangouts: “I have enjoyed both of them because it provides a forum for more freewheeling questions on related issues. I enjoy hearing Prof. Foner speak off-the-cuff.”



8. Communications good overall; some areas could be improved

Overall, people are satisfied with the level of communication from course staff. Only 8% give a low rating (1 or 2) to the weekly email, and only 7% rate pre-course information poorly.



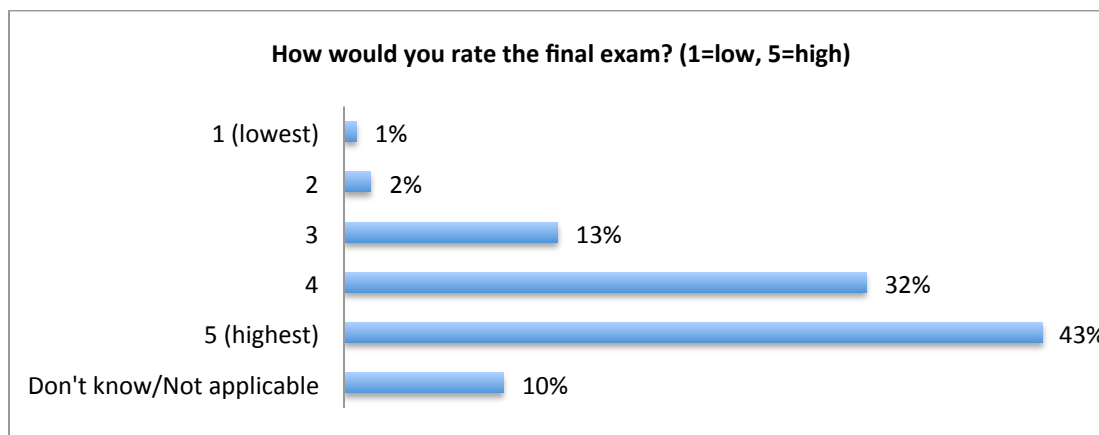
Survey respondents suggested some pieces of information that could be better communicated (a few of which are already noted above):

- Earlier release of reading lists and syllabi
- Lists of, or links to, readings and primary documents that are referenced in each lecture (some may be available free online)
- Advance notice, or links to podcasts, of Foner's other lectures and interviews (e.g., with Terry Gross on Fresh Air)
- Links to articles on current events that are relevant to the course (similar to those Foner references in class, but even more up-to-date)
- Mention of Foner's own website
- Overview of main questions raised in the weekly discussion threads (compiled by course TA)

- How and when edX certificates will be sent
- How to access archived CWR lectures, primary sources, Google Hangouts, quizzes and exams
- Whether the course series will be offered again on edX, and when
- Why transcripts can't be downloaded (some assume it's an intellectual property issue)
- Results of mid-course and exit surveys; edX participation figures; Foner's personal assessment of how the series is going
- Columbia's plans for future MOOCs

9. Final exam rated highly

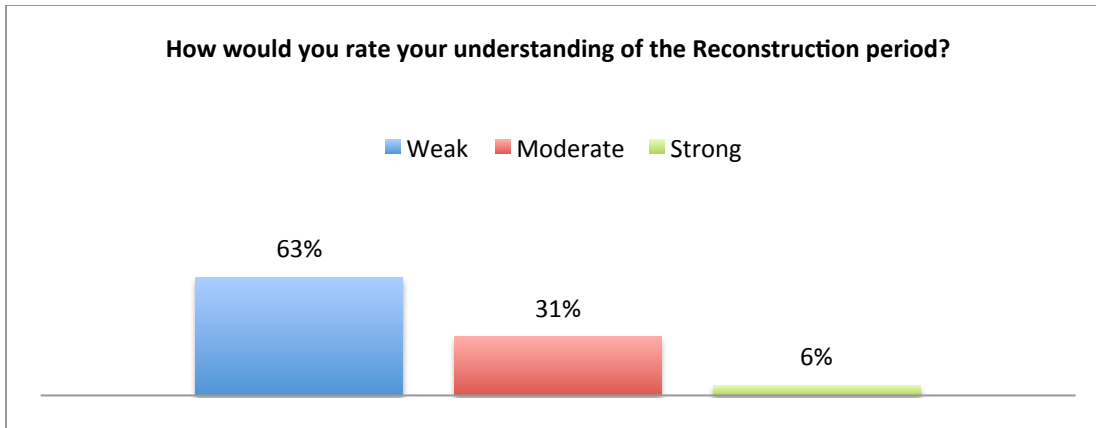
In the CWR2 mid-course survey, 82% of respondents rated the quizzes highly (4 or 5). In the CWR2 exit survey, 77% rated the final exam highly. The sample group is not exactly the same, so the comparison is not exact, but it's safe to say that participants are generally satisfied with the assessment tools of the course. Some write-in comments repeat requests for more difficult questions and essay assignments, but others say that the current requirements are appropriate for a free MOOC and the level of commitment that most participants can make.



There were a few grumbles. Someone noted that an error in a quiz question was never fixed. Some feel the final exam simply rehashed questions from the quizzes. Several people want richer explanations to the answers of quiz and exam questions.

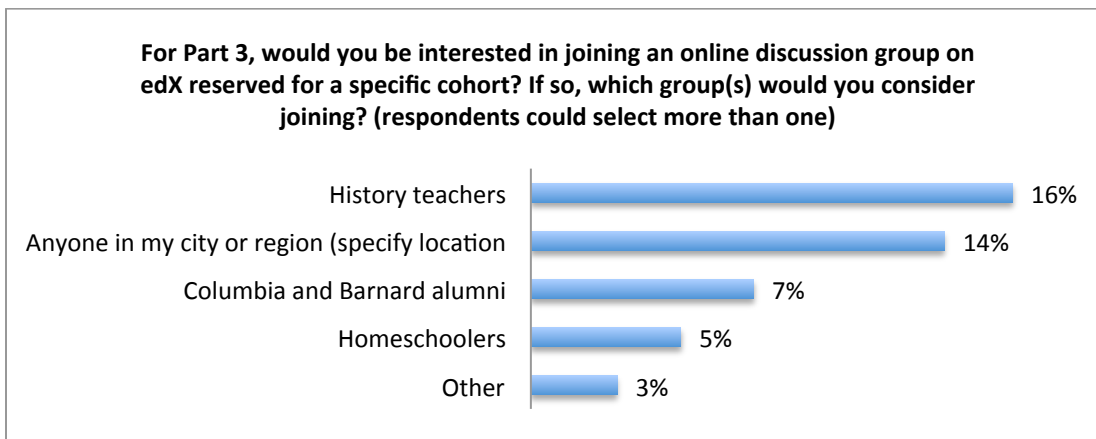
10. Looking ahead to CWR3

94% of survey respondents plan to take part in Civil War and Reconstruction Part 3 (another 4% are undecided). Respondents self-rate their understanding of the Reconstruction period much lower than that of the Civil War era. It will be interesting to see how this shifts!



11. Interest joining online discussion groups

Over one-third (36%) said they'd be interested in joining one or more online discussion groups on edX reserved of specific cohorts. 7% are interested in an alumni grouping (8% of all survey takers are Columbia or Barnard alumni). Some like the idea of having groups based regionally (Boston and France are the top two requests); but one respondent notes that regional groupings would make sense only if the groups intend to meet in person.



Other proposed groupings: Civil War junkies; history students (any school); professional historians; students at any edX participating university; descendants of former slaves.

Some wrote that smaller groups could help reduce the clutter of the discussion threads and encourage more people to participate. In other words, even randomized group assignments would be welcome. One person asked whether it's possible to let participants form their own discussion groups (e.g., friends who are taking the course together). Another asks whether the technology would allow participants to IM each other.

Certainly, many are enthusiastic about having more tailored discussion groups. However, a number of respondents said they *do not like* the idea of siphoning off history teachers, Columbia grads, etc., leaving less knowledgeable participants in the general thread. Here is one comment:

“I wouldn't want to join a specific cohort for discussion because I find the input from the wide variety of people to be much more interesting - particularly our foreign classmates who often bring a very unique perspective. I'd also be sorry to have history teachers abstracted from the general discussions since they often have information others don't. That goes for those who are even more fervent Civil War buffs than myself who have great experiences that they share.”

It seems likely that the general discussion thread will deteriorate, if separate affinity groups are established. Some suggest that cohort discussions be made visible to all course participants, for everyone's edification.

11. More ideas re: discussion threads

As in previous mid-course surveys, many of the write-in responses focus on the discussion forum and how it can be improved. Among the comments and suggestions in the exit survey:

Ask more provocative questions.

“One thing I don't like about the discussions is that the lead-in question is often just an invitation to regurgitate what Prof. Foner covered in the lecture. I'd prefer a more thought-provoking question which would elicit more interesting responses.”

“Discussion answers were primarily just a rehash of Dr Foner's remarks. Like on a test. I stopped participating in the Discussion Forums since they added almost no new information. In Stephanie McCurry's Slave South course on Coursera (which I took), the participants were from around the world and discussed slavery in their countries/traditions etc. Fascinating.”

Increase staff involvement.

“I did have a handful of good interactions in the discussion, but even those were short of what would happen in a classroom. That's a flaw of MOOCs more than it's a flaw of any particular course – but I would love to see more of the staff-led ‘Selection of discussion threads’ like the one Manuel posted for section 5. That was very useful.”

“I really liked the selection of discussion threads put together by Manuel A. Bautista González through January 14, 2015.”

“Staff contributions to the discussion forum were very good. Staff comments improved the quality of the discussion, sometimes turning the effort of reading the strings from arduous to interesting.”

Enable email alerts.

“In one way the coursera platform is useful because once you start a thread, if someone responds, you get an email back, which encourages interaction. On edX you need to check back in manually which is tedious.”

Create a forum for each video segment.

“I really think subforum for each video segment is helpful ... provides a filter or topic for that segment. One mooc I took did that.”

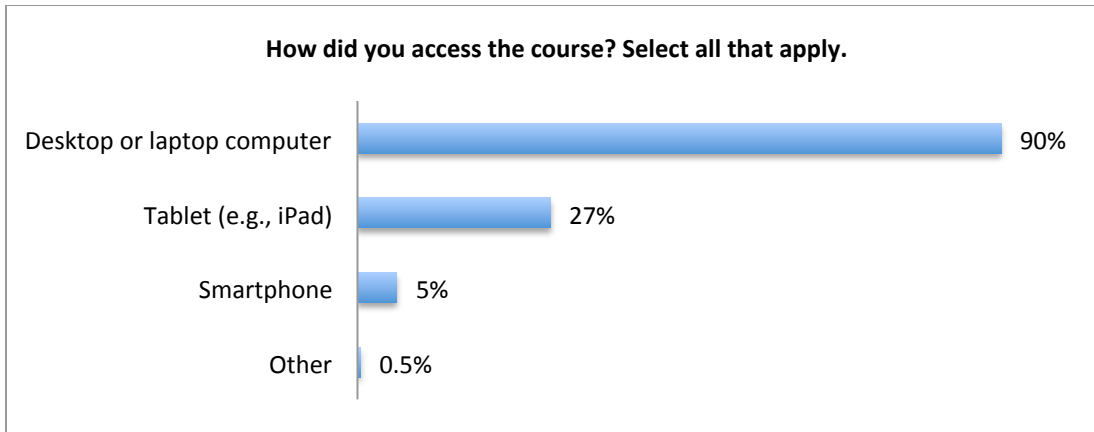
The less interaction the better.

“I joined the course to listen to the Professor, not to argue with strangers. Too much these days is about social media interaction instead of actually learning things (yes, I was a grown-up by the time the internet was invented!). I would much rather have extra readings than an opportunity to post my thoughts. Who cares what I think? And I don't care what they think. I'm interested in informed opinion, which is the lecturer and the writers of the various recommended texts.”

12. Tech experience

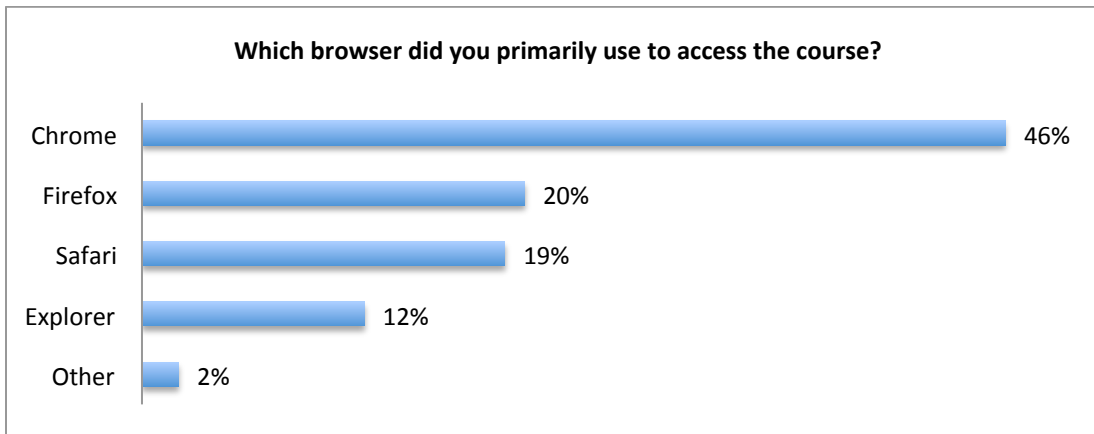
In previous surveys, participants noted some technical difficulties (e.g., drag-and-drop activities not working on iPad, inability to zoom in on primary sources). In the CWR2 exit survey, we wanted to get a clearer picture of how participants are accessing the course on edX. Most (90%) use a desktop or laptop, but tablets are also common (27%). Smartphones are relatively little used (5%). (Some respondents use multiple platforms.) It will be interesting to see whether these figures shift over time. Also, is edX aware of the drag-and-drop problem on tablets? Should participants be warned of the problem? According to one respondent, this is not an issue in other edX courses:

“Also using IPad, the drag and drop does not work. Needed to access through desk top to complete any activity that used this. I have done other classes in eDx where this worked correctly.”



Other: tablet with chromecast, TV, Xbox One (“works really well!”)

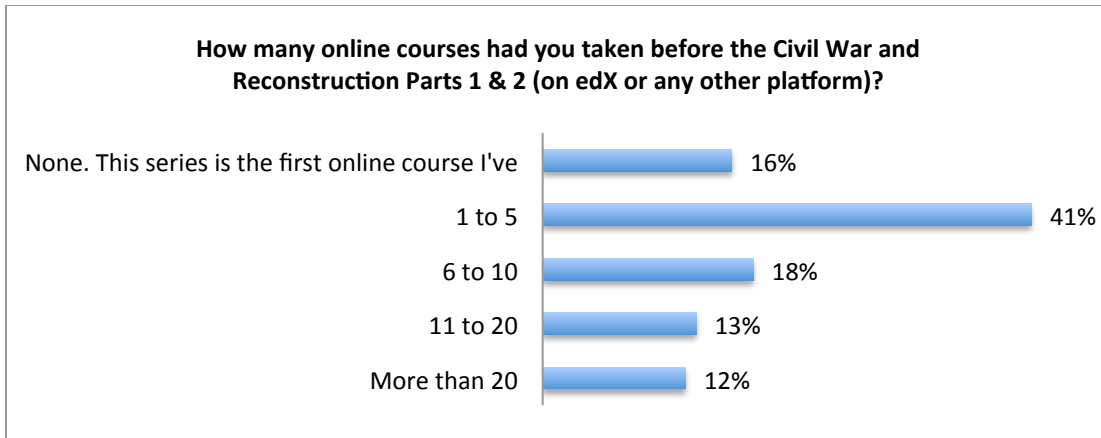
The choice of browser may have some connection to the technical difficulties people have reported. Here is the breakdown of usage:



Other: AudioMark (1), Bing (1), Opera (7)

14. Most are not new to online learning

Many participants have noted in previous surveys that this is “the best” online course they’ve taken. Just how many have they taken? In the CWR2 exit survey, we sought to find out. In fact, participants have a lot of experience in online learning: 84% have taken other courses before CWR, and 25% have taken more than 10 other online courses.



Here are some encouraging comments from veterans of online learning:

“I had tried but never finished an online course before this one. I continue to think it's very engaging and well structured.”

“I have audited well over 50 moocs and this is the only one where the assistant has truly contributed real value in his questions/comments on the video, rather than just being a passive foil for the prof.”

“This course is really great. As I already experienced in different MOOCs, the professor is the key element for the success. Keep it as it is. Just simple videos from classrooms. There is no need for special effects, picture in picture, etc. The simpler the better. If the professor is interesting, the course is interesting.”

CCNMTL will continue to evaluate the CWR series, to discern which factors have made it among edX's most successful, what can be improved in future MOOCs and online learning initiatives, and how pedagogy at Columbia can benefit.