You’re gonna have a conversation with Bob. Forget I'm even here. You don't have to worry about this.

Okay. It's not like a photography studio where I have to go like this?

No, no, no.

[laughter]

Stay relaxed and forget I'm here.

And I think the only thing that maybe is a little different from a conversation is if you can kind of restate or include the question in your answer.

Okay.

Is that right? Did we do that right?

Mhhm.

[whispers] He knows a lot more about this than I do.

So if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself just real briefly and maybe say what you teach here -

On cue.

Yup. Is that a problem?

Oh sorry!

No!

Oh that!

[laughter]

Perfect.

Okay if you could introduce yourself briefly and the courses you teach here and then the MOOC that you taught

Okay. I'm Dan Bonnevac, I'm a professor of philosophy. I taught a MOOC called “Ideas of the Twentieth Century” in fall 2013 and fall 2014. At the university, I teach that course as a signature course, part of our freshman program, every fall semester. And I've been doing that for about the past seven years. I also teach introductory courses in philosophy. I teach graduate seminars in logic. I do courses on the history of Christian philosophy, on a variety of topics east and west. Steve Phillips and I team teach things. He's a specialist in Indian philosophy. So a year ago we did Argumentation East and West about rhetorical theory in both traditions and right now we're doing one, Natural Theology East and West which is arguments for and against the existence of God in India and in Western Philosophy.
Wow that's really interesting. So one question we've been really interested in is why you decided to teach a MOOC? How you got into it, and what made you want to teach one?

I was really excited about the idea of MOOCs from the very beginning. I had followed some of these things that were written up in various journals and magazines. I was really impressed by the success of the first few that were done on Artificial Intelligence and circuits and electronics and so on.

And I thought it was a fantastic way to reach a much broader audience. In the classroom, even in the large classes I teach I have say 200 students, 300 students. The largest one I've ever taught is about 500. And I love doing that kind of setting, but the thought of being able to reach a large number -- and in the first iteration of the course we had 40 thousand students. That I just found an irresistible [laugh] temptation to find out whether I could package what I do in the classroom in that way.

When you're doing something in a small seminar and there's a lot of interaction, there's something going on that I think can be hard to capture in a sort of online format. Although we've had people here -- Mike Starbird in math who has really done a good job of I think trying to get that sort of feeling. My thought was, look I'm already teaching this course to 100 students, 300 students and various iterations of it, I'm not sure it's so different to do things on camera.

I found that it is really different to do things on camera [laugh]. Much more different than I thought initially that it would be. But it was really in part the appeal to a much broader audience. And I hadn't realized initially how broad that audience was going to be. But three-fourths of our students were from outside the United States and so there were large numbers of people who really could not have easy access to a university and certainly not a university in the United States. And it was exciting to teach people. We had more than a thousand students in India, we had hundreds in Germany and Brazil and Italy and a variety of other countries all over the world. So the idea of having a kind of global audience was fantastic. And when it came to doing it again, part of the appeal was the discussions that take place amongst students from all over the world -- was also fantastic. So just being able to be a fly on the wall of the discussion boards, occasionally contributing but often just sort of admiring the seriousness with which people were taking this and the clash of different perspectives. It was just a very exciting experience.

That's so interesting and when you talk about that, did you find that to be different than with your traditional courses? Is there that same level maybe of seriousness or clashes in discussion boards?

Well, one of the things I really love about the University of Texas is that the students here actually are really involved, take their education seriously and also represent a variety of perspectives. We have a diverse student body, we have a lot of international students and so I think a lot of this was just like what happens at UT but writ large. [laugh] And with a variety of things that we don't usually encounter here. People who can say, look I live in a small village in India and here's what this looks like from my point of view. Or people from Africa or people from -- in one case actually, an unreconstructed Stalinist from New Jersey who insisted that all this talk of Stalin's camps and so on was greatly exaggerated. He said "of course in a country as large as Russia lots of people die." [laugh] And I don't usually have students who are that committed to a given point of view. But it was really interesting to see the interplay between these various kinds of things. So it wasn't radically different from what I find at UT, it was just even more so and that was a fascinating perspective to get.

Yeah, that's interesting. Especially such an unpopular maybe opinion.

Well, that's right. There were some really unpopular opinions put forward. A student in class, you know, can be identified by the other students and I think in some places that leads to a kind of uniformity of
thought. Now here, it doesn't. But on the other hand, you don't get people with really, really wild views and online there's a kind of anonymity, but there were some people who were just really terrifically brilliant as well and so the level of conversation. And some of the older students, the perspective that just age and experience brings was a great thing. There were people talking about movies for example, who had actually been involved in the film industry or were still involved in the film industry. And they can say, well, here's why I think that took place in the 1970s, there was this new technology and here's how we were using it. And so that was a kind of insiders point of view that kept coming up in a number of different respects that you wouldn't get in a classroom of 18 to 22 year olds.

[end of audio]