Going beyond the good MOOC/bad MOOC debate
(An observation on the special issue)

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Abstract: This article is an observation on the works included in the special issue. The collection contributes to the much-needed, but now growing, academic discourse on MOOCs, providing an international perspective on the topic. As an avid MOOC participant from Egypt, and also an educator who researches MOOCs, I comment on how the articles in this issue contribute depth and/or new perspectives on the emerging academic literature on MOOCs. I highlight how the articles provide nuanced perspectives from the context of the author(s), thereby contributing to a valuable departure from the earlier media-led discourse on MOOCs. Throughout, one gets the sense that the discourse on MOOCs is shifting towards using MOOC research in order to interrogate a variety of issues about MOOCs, eLearning, and education in general. Issues of democracy in pedagogy, issues of access to education when learner success is not supported, and issues of what constitutes quality in eLearning programs, are all highlighted here. Authors also tackle such complex issues as how scale changes the role of the teacher, and how MOOCs can address the diverse needs of learners enrolled.

Key Words: MOOCs, pedagogy, globalization, access

This collection contributes to the much-needed, but now growing, academic discourse on MOOCs, providing an international perspective on the topic. Each article in this issue offers a nuanced perspective from the context of its author(s). Together, these articles show that the discourse on MOOCs is shifting towards using MOOC research in order to interrogate a variety of issues about MOOCs, eLearning, and education in general.

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Issues of democracy in pedagogy, issues of access to education when learner success is not supported, and issues of what constitutes quality in eLearning programs, are all highlighted here. Authors also tackle such complex issues as how scale changes the role of the teacher and how MOOCs can address the diverse needs of learners enrolled. So, the collection therefore provides a valuable departure from the earlier media-led discourse on MOOCs, and each article contributes depth and/or a new perspective on the emerging academic literature on MOOCs.

As an avid MOOC participant from Egypt, as well as an educator who researches MOOCs, I found the early media discourse on MOOCs problematic on three major fronts. The first was the overly hyperbolic view of MOOCs as either a magical solution that would save "our" broken education systems and at the same time broaden access to elite education to the poorest of the world's poor; or the extreme dystopian view of MOOCs as bringing an end to the university as we know it (although some people seemed to view this conclusion in a positive light). Being an educator from one of the world's poorest countries, neither of these extreme views of MOOCs ever really resonated with me. Fortunately, the conversation around MOOCs has moved towards a more critical and balanced view, thanks in large part to the publication of academic research on the topic, such as this special issue. All of the insightful articles in this collection express a rejection of the discourses on both extremes while offering more nuanced perspectives, an approach best summed up as "being critical when criticism is needed and being a cheerleader when possibilities emerge" (Hodgson, 2014).

Second, the media mostly ignored the educational significance of the first MOOC taught in 2008, Connectivism and Connected Knowledge (CCK08). CCK08, facilitated by Canada's George Siemens and Stephen Downes. This was the first experiment in massive open online learning in a course based on connectivist principles, and the term MOOC was coined by Dave Cormier who later joined the course facilitators. Unlike the Coursera and EdX MOOCs (later referred to as xMOOCs), cMOOCs or connectivist MOOCs do not take an elite university's course offerings and create them on a large scale, delivering content to potentially thousands of learners; instead connectivist MOOCs rely on the power of social networking at scale to promote learning. cMOOCs are not without their shortcomings (e.g., Mackness, Mak & Williams, 2010), but their characteristics and potential are different enough from what are now considered more "traditional" MOOCs that one cannot talk about them in the same way--which leads to my next point.

Third, the media and even some academic research treated all MOOCs as monolithic, which is akin to comparing a graduate law course at Harvard with a biochemistry class at Cairo University, which we all know have very little in common. Worse, some MOOC discourses treated credit-bearing online courses in the same breath as MOOCs, when this is highly problematic (as Czerniewicz correctly points out). Even cMOOCs and xMOOCs are not the same within those categories (Bali, 2014) and many courses now fall in between those two extremes, such as the University of Edinburgh's "E-Learning and Digital Cultures" (Ross, Sinclair, Knox, Bayne & Macleod, 2014) and Cathy

Davidson's "The History and Future of (Mostly) Higher Education" (Davidson, 2014), both of which were run on Coursera but encouraged social networking and were not as content-heavy/focused as what is traditionally expected now of xMOOCs. Hogue (2014), for example, proposes an alternative framework for looking at MOOCs that does not divide them into two distinct categories but distinguishes them according to multiple characteristics.

It is by focusing on the non-monolithic nature of MOOCs, and the heterogenous nature of MOOC participants that most of the articles in this collection take the scholarship on MOOCs forward.

Czerniewicz's categorization of MOOCs dispels the myth of MOOCs replacing higher education anytime soon, as she clarifies that most MOOCs fall under a non-formal or semi-formal education category, and she explains why each of the categories she uses actually either target people who have already completed higher education, or people who wish to supplement (but not replace) university learning. Looking at MOOCs from this more realistic perspective tempers the discourse that was looking at MOOCs as a way of extending higher education beyond the walls of the traditional university. As an adult learner myself, I have almost always found myself in MOOCs where the majority of participants are adults like myself, taking the MOOC for professional development and networking. This might be because of the type of MOOC that interests me, but as it has been often reported, the majority of MOOC participants already have college degrees (Kolowich, 2013), and there are enough MOOCs targeting such audiences on offer to warrant a deeper discussion of MOOCs as non-formal or semi-formal education rather than as a replacement for formal education.

It is also important to note that international learners view MOOCs quite differently from how the media expected them to. This collection contains several articles from the perspectives of developing countries: Czerniewicz uses her categorization of MOOCs to highlight opportunities for African-created MOOCs to fill the current lack of offerings from that part of the world, highlighting the overly US/Euro-centric leanings of the first few MOOCs offered. Another scholar from Africa, Nkuyubwatsi highlights the ways in which MOOCs can promote learning via personalization of the learner experience, increasing learner-content engagement to make up for lack of learner-teacher engagement, and how allowing space for learners to engage with a MOOC on their own terms may help those from developing countries adapt learning to their own context. Taking one of the more critical perspectives in this collection, Wahyudi approaches MOOCs from a postcolonial theory lens. She highlights how a particular MOOC she took "seemed to reinforce the idea that *Self* or *Us* is always ideal and them is always marginal, thus not desirable" (emphasis in original). She emphasizes the importance of questioning the US-centric cultural hegemony of most MOOCs (a theme that was questioned and expanded upon in more depth in Sharma & Bali, 2014, with positive developments in MOOCs mentioned in a follow up article by Bali & Sharma, 2014). Wahyudi also highlights how content-centric MOOCS with only one form of closed assessment (MCQ) reinforces that hegemony.

But learner differences exist beyond geographical differences. Vu's article tackles head-on the issue of differences between MOOC learners, their goals and purposes for taking MOOCs and offers a model for differentiating them when discussing success in MOOCs (a point also considered by Clinnin and Fedewa et al). What Vu et al are suggesting is similar to what Cormier talks about when he compares the "social contract" in institution-based courses vs. MOOCs (Bali & Honeychurch, forthcoming): depending on payment and commitment, level of interaction with instructors/facilitators should be different, as well as expectations from learners. This brings up the issue of instructor role and identity in a MOOC, something brought up by Ross et al (2014), and tackled in this issue by Clinnin, Fedewa et al, and Sthathopoulu. These three articles also have the advantage of focusing on a particular MOOC and discussing it in context.

Sthathopoulu makes the very important point that eLearning discourse usually speaks of eLearning in a generalizing manner rather than with reference to particular contextual considerations, one of the most important of which is the discipline being taught/learned. Her particular context was language learning, and she emphasizes the importance of taking into account the particular pedagogical good practices from years of research and teaching of language learning when designing a MOOC on the subject.

Both Clinnin's and Fedewa et al's articles focus on particular courses, writing courses, and differentiate their courses from other MOOCs that preceded them and that were mostly science-based and centered on videos and quizzes: instead, both courses focus on community-building, and Clinnin's course strongly focuses on peer review of writing and so provides a different model that deserves to be studied in its own right. Clinnin also highlights the different demographics of learners: one cannot generalize from one MOOC population to another MOOC's, and within a MOOC one cannot generalize one learner's experience to another's. Clinnin starts asking important and new questions that previously had not been asked in depth about MOOCs: "what happens when transnational and translingual identities are brought together to form a community in a digital environment?"

Clinnin, in describing the MOOC community discussions highlights something very important: MOOCs are not necessarily a "poor" approximation of face-to-face, or even a massified approximation of online learning; instead, a MOOC can offer opportunities for enriching learning that college campuses may not be able to offer. For example, this study showed learners' willingness to admit fears and vulnerability to strangers from all over the world who can help them learn in a multitude of ways. Although connectivism is all about harnessing the power of social media to connect people around the world, what is new about Clinnin's analysis is that it highlights how even people who cannot handle the abundance of connectivism, people who are only using the discussion forum within a MOOC, can build connection. This, despite the fact Clinnin notes that the particular MOOC being studied *did indeed* also have social media spaces beside the discussion forum, but were not included in this article's analysis.

Clinnin's main critique of some of the xMOOCs is worth quoting in some detail here:

> … if MOOCs remain 'nonsocial media environment[s]' then ultimately MOOCs are a *massive form of educational malpractice by perpetuating teacher-focused, knowledge disseminating according to the banking model* as evidenced by quizzes and instructor-produced video lectures. *Reframing MOOCs as student-centered, knowledge-creating and sharing communities* in which the connection among students and instructors are vital to the development of learning reveals the true potential of MOOCs. This community aspect is not limited to MOOCs, but it's an element that is *easier to cultivate within a Massive environment where students engage with potentially thousands of other students and are more likely find others with shared experiences and perspectives.* (emphases mine)

Clinnin concludes that educators (online and face-to-face) can learn from the online community experience of their MOOC and consider ways of facilitating peer learning on different scales. Other useful lessons from their MOOC experience was ways of including language-learners' experiences "so that their language experiences and skills are integral, not marginal, to the classroom."

Fedewa et al. also focus on the process of learning and community-building. They highlight how instructor roles and identities change at scale:

> … the complexities that arise when teaching at scale that pertain to not only time and labor logistics, but also to the instructor identity that is formed through the collaborative efforts that make designing and facilitating a MOOC possible.

They highlight the emerging need for curation, and the difficulties in keeping track of learners and learning across various platforms with multiple instructors. They also discuss the unpredictability of MOOCs, particularly in terms of predicting your student population in order to respond to their needs, particularly in their case where they ended up with a totally different demographic of participants than anticipated.

Conclusion

All good MOOCs are *not* the same, and bad MOOCs are bad for different reasons. This collection excels in highlighting alternative and contextualized perspectives on MOOCs, offering new ways of looking at MOOCs (and the different types of and approaches to it) from the viewpoint of global learners and educators. It also highlights some of the criticisms of MOOCs (e.g. Wayhudi's postcolonial perspective), with some of their potential (e.g. Clinnin's ways of empowering English-language-learners as integral to the learning experience of all). This collection of articles, taken together, spans important areas of research that explore in depth some particular MOOCs, and ways of looking at different types of MOOCs and how different learners approach MOOCs and can benefit from them. The findings and insights that they offer will hopefully benefit future MOOC-makers as well as future scholarship and thereby all educators.

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