



Redefining the MOOC: Examining the multilingual and community potential of massive online courses

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Abstract

The rapid explosion of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has recently been tempered by critiques focused on the alienating and isolated student experience. This study examines the Ohio State University's Writing II: Rhetorical Composing MOOC in order to understand how students strategically presented their identities in order to form learning communities. By specifically focusing on the discussion forum interactions of global participants, this article argues that the formation of multilingual learning communities in Rhetorical Composing enabled students to meet their individual composing learning objectives by engaging in reciprocal educational exchanges with students.

Key Words: *MOOC, learning community, world English, identity*

The New York Times heralded 2012 as “the year of the MOOC,” a proclamation stemming from the seemingly overnight explosion of companies, faculty, and students funding, creating, and taking these courses (Pappano, 2012). MOOC, which stands for Massive Open Online Course, is an online course that is open to anyone with access to the Internet. Because of the free nature of these classes, thousands of students from around the globe enroll in the class. The topics of MOOCs range from Calculus to the

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Music of the Beatles (Coursera, 2014); a student can find a class on advanced computer science or mathematics, and even humanities courses such as world music appreciation or science fiction. At first, MOOCs were offered primarily in English by elite American universities like MIT and Stanford, but companies that host the MOOCs like Coursera and Udacity have recently begun to expand their course offerings to include global institutional partners with more classes in 12 different languages.

Much of the hype surrounding MOOCs has been focused on the “Massive” and “Open” nature of the courses, especially as these terms relate to the potential disruption to traditional forms of higher education. In 2012, Udacity founder Sebastian Thrun suggested that MOOCs will eradicate higher education as it is currently known, specifically postulating that in 50 years only 10 institutions of higher education will remain, and Udacity will be one of them (Leckart, 2012). Additionally, MOOCs have been touted as a way to reach underserved populations. Thomas Friedman argued, “Nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty — by providing them an affordable education to get a job or improve in the job they have. Nothing has more potential to unlock a billion more brains to solve the world’s biggest problems” (2013).

The potential of MOOCs to disrupt education, let alone the future of educational institutions, has been subject to much recent critique. A recent paper from the University of Pennsylvania surveying all the 32 courses offered by the university found more than 80% of the students already had post-secondary degree, and a majority of the students were from developed countries (Christensen, Steinmetz, Alcorn, Bennett, Woods, & Emanuel, 2013). This has led many to question whether or not MOOCs will be the solution to the educational access divide (Kolowich, *MOOCs Are Largely Reaching Privileged Learners, Survey Finds*, 2013; Schuman, 2013). Additionally, the American-led effort has led to concerns that MOOCs are a new form of neocolonialism, another example of how Western ideas are privileged and perpetuated as neutral knowledge (Altbach, 2013).

Because MOOCs are a relatively recent phenomenon, most of the academic conversation has taken place in higher education news sources, and there has not been enough time to publish rigorous research in journals. This delay in dissemination of research has unfortunately resulted in a prolonged reactionary response to MOOCs based on conjecture, messianic prophecies from the corporate sponsors of MOOCs (Leckart, 2012), and doomsday predictions from critics (Kolowich, 2013; Rees, 2013). MOOCs are a polarizing topic, but this vacillation between uncritical acceptance or close-minded condemnation is not a productive position to engage the pressing issues that MOOCs raise about educational access and pedagogy.

This article attempts to shift the conversation from such binary understandings of MOOCs to instead focus on what actually happens within such a massive course. I will address what I see as a crucial yet mostly overlooked aspect of MOOCs: the student

learning experience. While this research cannot fully answer if MOOCs are effective methods of teaching and learning -- a question in itself that is too broad because of the number of students and the varied models of MOOCs that exist -- it can begin to address the student experience in the MOOC. Specifically, this research examines the discussion forum interactions of students in the *Rhetorical Composing* MOOC offered by the Ohio State University in order to address issues of student engagement with each other and instructors in large-scale classes, and how this engagement impacts the development of writing practices. This research seeks to address the following research questions: *How do individuals use writing in order to negotiate their own identity and identities in an online composition community? How do students' online identities in online writing courses influence the composition classroom community environment and interactions among other individuals in the classroom?* Ultimately I contend that MOOCs offer an alternative educational experience that could be adapted to face-to-face classrooms in order to improve the learning experience of many students. This is an alternative perspective to the discourse currently surrounding MOOCs which tends to adopt an all-or-nothing approach to the massive form on online education. Instead, I suggest that face-to-face higher education could adopt some of the characteristics and pedagogical strategies of MOOCs such as in order to further support student learning.

Welcome to the MOOC

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the Ohio State University's *Writing II: Rhetorical Composing* MOOC (hereafter referred to as *Rhetorical Composing*), which ran on Coursera from late April to mid-June 2013. As mentioned before, MOOCs were initially offered primarily in mathematics and computer science because the content was easier to deliver and assess in a large-scale class through the use of pre-recorded lectures and multiple-choice tests. However, in 2012 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided grants to higher education institutions in order to offer developmental classes (Fain, 2012), and four institutions² were awarded grants to teach developmental, first-year, and second-year writing courses. *Rhetorical Composing* was the product of one of these grants. The course itself is loosely based upon a second-level college writing course offered at Ohio State. Throughout the 10-week MOOC, students focused on rhetorically reading, researching, and composing alphabetic, visual, and multimodal texts. In addition to its curriculum, *Rhetorical Composing* is of particular research interest because of its student demographics and emphasis on collaborative peer interactions.

² The Gates Foundation grants were awarded to Duke University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Mt. San Jacinto College, and the Ohio State University.

Over the duration of *Rhetorical Composing*, a total of 32,765 students enrolled in the MOOC. However, the demographics of this MOOC differ significantly from the general findings of the University of Pennsylvania paper, which found that “the student population tends to be young, well-educated, and employed, with a majority from developed countries” (Christensen, Steinmetz, Alcorn, Bennett, Woods, & Emanuel, 2013). A pre-course survey administered in *Rhetorical Composing* revealed that 79% of the students had a college degree, which is in alignment with the UPenn research. One point of differentiation from the UPenn study was the country of origin: in *Rhetorical Composing*, more than 75% of the participants were not from the United States. Thirty-two percent of students noted their location as North America, and an additional 32% selected Asia, followed by 22% in Europe, 8% in South America, 5% in Africa, and 1% in Australia. A student-produced Google Maps allowed students to locate themselves across the globe, and pins can be found in places ranging from Serbia to islands in the Indian Ocean. These demographics of *Rhetorical Composing* deviate from the UPenn findings, which found that most students hailed from the U.S. or Europe and listed BRICS countries³ as only 14% of the total student population (ibid). Furthermore, the *Rhetorical Composing* MOOC pre-survey revealed that only 37% of students listed English as a first language spoken.

The presence of a significant number of English Language Learners⁴ in the MOOC necessitated a multilingual approach to teaching writing. The role of multiple dialects and languages in the writing classroom has been widely studied in composition studies. The monolithic, monolingual approach to teaching writing has been extensively examined and critiqued by scholars (Matsuda, 2006; Williams, 2008; Canagarajah A. S., 2006), and national organizations like the Conference on College Composition and Communication have asserted the students’ right to their own language (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974). This CCCC resolution argues against the use of a mythical “standard English” as a way to assert dominance by a particular social group and the importance of preserving linguistic diversity in the classroom (ibid). However, most of these scholars have focused on multilingual approaches in relatively small, physical composition classrooms in which English as First Language speakers are the majority of students. In contexts such as the *Rhetorical Composing* MOOC in which ELL students are an overwhelming majority and access to the course reaches across the world, notions of the classroom, composition and communication skills, and student identity and diversity are in flux. For MOOCs like *Rhetorical Composing*, the

³ The BRICS countries category from the UPenn study includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

⁴ English Language Learners was the term adopted by the *Rhetorical Composing* team in recognition of the fact that many students spoke English not just as a second language but also a third, fourth, or fifth language. Additionally, ELL recognizes that all English speakers are language learners regardless of whether it was a first or fifth language.

concern about language diversity, therefore, is not about how to encourage language diversity in the class but rather how to best foster productive exchanges among students and faculty in the face of such diversity.

This concept of English language diversity has been richly examined in composition and literacy studies (Smitherman, 1977; Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003). Scholars have recognized that English is not a monolithic, static language but “a heterogeneous language with multiple norms and diverse systems” (Canagarajah A. S., *Negotiating the Local in English as a Lingua Franca*, 2006). As Canagarajah notes, the presence of English across the globe and the various forms of English are part of an imperialist history, so there are very real cultural and economic implications to the spread and usage of English (ibid). Canagarajah argues for a local approach to English as lingua franca in which “communities and individuals should exert their agency to negotiate with English and preserve their interests” such as cultural history and identity (ibid). For Canagarajah, this means examining and valuing how individuals and communities within specific contexts use English or local languages for different purposes or engage in code-meshing by blending multiple languages (ibid). Rather than prevent effective communication, these varieties of English form “a heterogeneous global English speech community, with a heterogeneous English, and different modes of competence” (ibid). Ultimately, such an approach to the diverse varieties of English allows for researchers to understand the identities, contexts, and purposes of local speakers on their own terms rather than set against an imaginary standard of Standard English.

It is from this scholarly understanding of language diversity in the classroom that the *Rhetorical Composing* instructional team⁵ decided to approach, welcome, and embrace the multilingual nature of the course. The weekend before the course opened, the instructional team opened a page that encouraged students to welcome all global English speakers in the course and to create a vibrant and supportive learning community that respected the diversity in language and learning objectives (Thinking About World Englishes , 2013). The instructional team offered suggestions for how to foster a collaborative learning community that represented the linguistic and cultural diversity of the course participants by encouraging students to recognize and respect the varieties of English, exchange information about different Englishes, share strategies for learning English, and help peers in the course by focusing on higher-order concerns such as content and ideas rather than surface-level issues like grammar and vocabulary. This collaborative learning community was also continued throughout the course with the use of the Writer’s Exchange (WEx), a peer review engine which allowed students to submit their writing to several peer readers who would then respond

5 The instructional team included Ohio State professors Susan Delagrange, Scott Lloyd Dewitt, Kay Halasek, Ben McCorkle, and Cynthia Selfe, Ohio State graduate students Jen Michaels and Kaitlin Clinnin, and an independent programmer Corey Staten.

to the writing with suggestions. *Rhetorical Composing* ultimately required students to engage in a learning community in which peer contributions were not only valued but also necessary to the class.

The issue of community in the MOOC was a continued focus for the instructional team as many of the charges levied against MOOCs cited the massive, depersonalized, and alienating experience of such courses (Levinson, 2013). The group's understanding of learning communities was informed by an interdisciplinary approach that included perspectives from higher education, composition, and literacy studies. In higher education, the learning community is presented as an ideal learning structure with overwhelmingly positive impact on the university community. Love offers learning communities as a way to change the interactions among students, faculty, and administrators in order to "form a more holistic learning experience, both across and within disciplines" (Love, 2012). In the 2010 Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) report *Five High-Impact Practices*, learning communities were identified as a way to foster the development of higher order thinking skills as well as to increase student and faculty engagement, interaction, retention, and satisfaction (Brownell & Swaner, 2010). Learning communities have been implemented at two-year and four-year institutions, and there have been a number of studies that support the findings from the 2010 LEAP report (see Dodge and Kendall 2004, Minkler 2002, Purdie and Rosser 2011). However, the work on learning communities in higher education tends to focus more on official structures and programs sponsored by departments or disciplines, and there is limited attention paid to how learning communities can develop outside of such structures.

Community has also been thoroughly examined in composition and literacy studies as both a curricular and an extracurricular formation. New Literacy Studies scholars such as David Barton (1994), Mary Hamilton (Barton & Hamilton, 2012), and Brian Street (1984) have argued for understanding literacy within a particular social context, so literacy practices and values are determined by a local needs in a particular culture and time. This attention to the local situatedness of literacy practices has been examined in case studies such as Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words* (1983), Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), and Anne Ruggles Gere's *Writing Groups* (1987). Each of these studies examine the ways literacy is practiced within a specific community including rural communities in the North Carolina Piedmont region, Midwestern communities, and various extracurricular writing groups. In their examination of local literacy practices, the authors demonstrate the value of these practices with the local context to the specific community in spite of the fact that these literacy practices are often marginalized and subordinated to institutionalized school literacy. Although these studies are incredibly useful for their attention to literacy practices within local communities and contexts, they focus on relatively contained

communities that are formed on the basis of shared identity characteristics such as geographical location, gender, or race. Additionally, the texts tend to contrast community literacies with school literacies. But a space such as *Rhetorical Composing* that is neither community nor school complicates this division, especially considering the instructional team's encouragement for students to share their local literacies in an educational space. In order to understand how community functions in a space such as a MOOC, where many different, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting identities meet, it becomes important to pay attention to the identity performances of participants within the online space. What happens when transnational and translingual identities are brought together to form a community in a digital environment?

The complication of identity in online spaces has been explored by scholars such as Lisa Nakamura (2002), Sherry Turkle (1995), and among many others (Gatson, 2011; Reid & Boyer, 2013; Thomas, 2007; van Doorn, 2013). Jeffrey Grabill and Stacey Pigg have recently discussed the methodological and theoretical difficulties of tracing discourse and identities through online spaces due to the asynchronous, non-linear, and fragmented nature of online interactions (2012). In their study of the comments found on *ScienceBuzz*, an educational science blog, Grabill and Pigg examine the rhetorical usage of specific identity performances in order to engage in conversation and structure arguments. The authors utilize the concept "identity-in-use" in order to understand how participants "draw on parts of their identity to accomplish other goals within the conversation." In this sense, the online participants strategically deploy certain aspects of their identity in order to engage with other participants, whether their rhetorical purpose is to establish credibility, make a claim, or invite other perspectives. The Grabill and Pigg study is also useful because it examines a learning community that exists outside of a structured program. The participants are brought together outside of an institution or structured space such as a classroom by a mutual interest in science, and therefore, their interactions with each other as they engage in community building are interesting to consider in other extracurricular spaces. In the digital space environment where there are relatively few rules and conventions structurally in place, the questions follow a different tack: how do participants create a shared set of conventions to guide interactions? How do identities contribute to these interactions? How do these conventions and identities impact the learning process?

Based on these understandings of community and identity, in this article, I refer to learning communities in order to describe the collaborative interactions that took place among students (and instructors) in various spaces in the MOOC for educational purposes. These interactions, like programmatic learning communities common in higher education, were designed to "build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students, faculty, and disciplines" (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004). The term "learning community" also recognizes the liminal

existence of MOOCs as an extracurricular and yet curricular opportunity. The learning community of the MOOC is an educational space (albeit a not-for-credit one) initially created by instructors, but it becomes a community based around the interactions of students who are motivated by their own individual learning objectives and needs. Ultimately I adopt the term “learning community because of the connections forged by students based on shared and diverse identities, experiences, and languages in order to meet their educational goals.

Analyzing Student Interaction in Discussion Forums

In order to assess how enrolled students negotiated the various identities present in the course in order to form learning communities, I examined the *Rhetorical Composing* discussion forums. Although students and the instructional staff utilized a variety of online spaces to engage one another like a Twitter hashtag, a Google+ community, and multiple Facebook groups, the discussion forums were easily accessible to all students as part of the Coursera platform were more heavily used, and focused more on the course content and objectives than the other social media sites. Throughout the duration of the MOOC, the discussion forums for *Rhetorical Composing* included 6548 threads, over 20,700 unique posts, and an additional 9172 comments contributed by over 2500 students. Several of the discussion threads were created by the instructional team as activities related to course content; however, most of the threads and posts were created by the students themselves based on their own perceived need.

In order to better understand the role of identity in forming online learning communities, I examined a subforum on the larger discussion forum that was created specifically to address the multilingual nature of the course. I focused on the “Writing and Learning in a Global Context” subforum because although many of the other subforums also addressed diverse identities and multilingual experiences, this subforum was explicitly created to encourage students to share their experiences learning English or other languages and to engage with other students whose experiences may be similar or different. This particular subforum was created by the instructional team prior to the official launch date of *Rhetorical Composing*. In spite of focusing specifically on this subforum, this forum still contains a total of 61 active threads. These threads often contained multiple posts and involved several participants. The most active thread featured 63 posts from 43 individual students. In order to further narrow the field and achieve a representative sample, I eliminated threads that contained only one post or one participant⁶, which left 32 eligible threads. Threads with only one post or participants were removed from the study because there was not enough interaction

⁶ Although a full analysis of why some threads did not receive responses is beyond the scope of this paper, an early theory for this situation may be that most of these posts were authored by anonymous students. The role of identity and personal connection are further explored in this paper.

with other participants to analyze. Out of these 32 remaining threads, I examined the top 11 threads by number of posts, and all of these posts contained at least 10 posts from multiple participants.

I analyzed the data by coding the threads using a discursive scheme based on Grabill and Pigg's codes from their work on the *ScienceBuzz* blog comment sections. Grabill and Pigg used a grounded theory approach to develop their coding scheme, and they identified four major discursive moves in the comment section (building an argument, exploring new ideas, building a writer's identity, and building a community identity) with more specific moves under these umbrella terms. Because of the shared interest in how identity was discursively deployed, I began coding the "Writing and Learning in a Global Context" subforum using the Grabill and Pigg codes of "building a writer's identity" and "building a community identity." Although I adopted these broad umbrella terms and several of the specific moves from the Grabill and Pigg study (articulation of a role, invocation of education, use of values, use of affect, construction of a connection between ideas/people, articulation of a shared role, articulation of a shared experience, and invitation), I expanded some of their codes and created several other codes to account for other discursive elements I saw occurring in the discussion threads. I added the following codes to the ones borrowed from Grabill and Pigg: articulation of a composing problem, articulation of a role, articulation of a new idea, description of composing process, discussion of geopolitical affairs, invocation of goals for course, invocation of language, invocation of past experience, invocation of status, sharing learning strategies, and directing peers how to engage. These additional codes expanded Grabill and Pigg's coding scheme in order to account for the global identity of the students and the explicit learning objectives and content of the course.

The discursive coding yielded a total of 1005 instances of 32 codes throughout the 11 discussion threads. The most common code occurrences were invocation of past experience (102), response to specific student (98), construction of a connection between ideas/people (89), generalization about composing process or language (87), and description of personal composing or language process (62). The codes with the fewest number of occurrences included invocation of education (8), directive to peers about how to interact (3), making assertion about pedagogy (1), and use of values (0). Although I began with Grabill and Pigg's coding set because of my shared interest in how identities were discursively expressed in online discussion communities, the results of my coding suggest that the discursive moves present in the *Rhetorical Composing* discussion forums differ significantly from Grabill and Pigg's findings especially as related to the role of individuals as experts. Whereas the Grabill and Pigg study found the users in an online discussion forum relied on assertive, discursive ways of establishing their ethos as individual experts, in the *Rhetorical Composing* MOOC,

students were more likely to make connections with other students or ideas in the forums and establish ethos through these connections.

Massive Community, Massive Identity

Based on the discursive coding and the relative frequencies of code occurrences, several trends regarding identity, expertise, and learning interactions emerged. The most common code occurrences emphasized some aspects of personal identity, namely past experiences both biographically and with composing and language processes, as well as connecting to other individuals in the course by responding directly to one another and making connections with their ideas and histories. The codes with the fewest instances emphasized an individual's education and credentials, or provided directives to other students about how to engage the writer in the course. These codes occurred when writers in the course acknowledged their educational credentials or provided mandates or directives to their peers instead of inviting their peers to work with them. After reviewing the discussion forums and the coding patterns, it became apparent that building community was a primary function of the discussion forum interactions among students, and this community building work was especially accomplished through rhetorical ways of representing personal identity and interactions among English as First Language and English Language Learners.

Building Community

Some critics of MOOCs argue that the massive and physically removed course distribution can be alienating for students, a problem exemplified by the supposed lack of meaningful student-to-student or student-to-teacher interaction (Levinson, 2013). Coursera co-founder Andrew Ng has suggested that there are certain skills and experiences that university classrooms are better at developing: "One thing that Coursera doesn't do well is teach non-cognitive skills" such as teamwork (Green, 2013). Rechelle DeJong writes that the high attrition rate in MOOCs can be attributed to the "sterile, disengaged character" akin to an "intellectual IV dripping raw facts into the mind" of the online course, and if "MOOCs managed to provide opportunities for thriving discourse and flourishing interpersonal relationships, more of those students would be inclined to find the time to persevere" (DeJong, 2013). These critiques of MOOCs and education generally are important to consider; however, they rely on generalizations about MOOCs without a sustained exploration of the spaces in such sites where an intellectual community develops. The analysis of the discussion forums in *Rhetorical Composing* suggests that the longed-for "intellectual community that helps turn information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom" through a process of questioning, discussing, debating, and analyzing is present for some students (ibid).

The students enrolled in *Rhetorical Composing* fostered a learning community by connecting and engaging with other students, ideas, and situations in the discussion forum. Community formation was facilitated partially through the connection afforded via the Coursera forum capabilities such as replying to posts and comments in a nested hierarchy or the ability to tag students in posts. This platform infrastructure enabled students to reply directly to each other's posts and keep a running discussion between the initial poster and subsequent replies. Additionally, the platform allowed students to vote up or down a particular post using reputation points. Posts that were seen as helpful or made interesting connections were up-voted, and overly critical or inflammatory posts tended to be down-voted. Although this voting feature was available on all of the threads and posts, relatively few students utilized the voting feature. For example, the thread "I have an issue: I only write under inspiration," which was created explicitly to seek advice and strategies for invention and composing from the other student writers, received zero points in spite of numerous contributions from multiple students sharing their strategies (I have an Issue: I only write under inspiration, 2013). Even though the Coursera platform made available various ways for students to connect, respond to, and support one another, the student-to-student communication proved more effective for developing community.

In addition to the technological affordances embedded within the course platform that facilitated community formation, the students themselves also connected to each other through discursive moves such as referencing each other by name, addressing the group, and affirming one another. One code, "Response to a specific student," was catalogued 98 times throughout the 1005 code instances. In many of the replies to a post, students referred to each other by name. Beginning a reply to a post with an address to a specific student such as "Dear Anne" or addressing the entire group with "Hello everybody!" were some of the simple yet effective and affective ways that students began to form community (Hello, 2013). The act of responding to a specific person by name demonstrated that students were engaging with each other as individuals not as decontextualized comments. This facilitated an environment where students felt personally engaged in a community of peers. Similarly, by addressing the entire group, students were invited into conversations by the posters who welcomed and encouraged others to get involved. These initial connections were further developed by the act of affirming one another. Affirmation of another student occurred approximately 40 times in the corpus. Often the affirmation was linked to a specific idea put forth by another student and served as a point for initiating a connection. For example, in one thread, a student compliments another student's video that was shared in an earlier post, and then he engages directly with the ideas she raises in her post before sharing his own thoughts (Responses to Global Englishes Level Up Challenge, 2013). These acts of referring to one another by name, addressing the larger group in

conversation, and affirming each other contribute to the sense of community in the MOOC. These rather simple acts of personalization make all the difference in a massive course by connecting individuals and their ideas to one another.

The dialogic nature of the discussion forums in which students referenced ideas or comments from previous posts as foundations for their own contributions resulted in the formation of a learning community. Students also invited other peers to contribute solutions to specific learning or composing problems or to provide new perspectives on an idea. Students do not simply approach the discussion forums with a task-based mindset, or the need to post because of an assignment prompt. The discussion forums instead function as a place to take the course content and raise questions. This resulted in exchanges of composing and language learning methods, directives to peers on how to best engage in learning behaviors, and meta-level commentaries on what it means to learn a new language and the writing process.

Understandings of Personal Identity

As previously discussed, community is built upon shared identities and characteristics and a sense of identification with others in spite of differences. Students in the course used several markers of personal identity such as geographical location, occupation, education, language, and past experiences in order to identify themselves. These identity markers served to broadcast the differences of the students enrolled in the MOOC: students geographically located themselves in small towns in Serbia to South Africa and central United States⁷. In spite of the range of differences, the students had one common feature: their enrollment in *Rhetorical Composing*.

One of the most common ways in which students in the course identified themselves was by their status as a language learner or writer. "Invocation of status" was a code that occurred 38 times in the corpus. Status here was taken to mean when a student shared his or her relative level of experience in terms of language or writing, such as identifying herself as a native speaker or assessing her language or writing skills. Out of the 38 occurrences, only two instances could be considered unequivocal declarations of expert status. The other instances of status involved students identifying themselves as having various levels of experience and expertise, and often these claims to expertise involved complicated disclaimers that undermined their claim. Given the demographics of the course and the high proportion of students who already had a postsecondary degree, it was unexpected that the students would identify themselves as novice writers. However, given the context of the interactions, a massive online course focused on composing skills in English, this identification as a basic speaker or

⁷ A student created a Google Map that allowed students to pinpoint their location. The map is available at <https://www.google.com/maps/ms?msid=212015682517356661355.0004dacd66017e1ccbfb4&msa=0>

writer of English makes more sense in terms of fostering identification with other students. The noncompulsory educational setting attracted students who wanted to improve their composing and communicative skills. When invoking status, there were two primary distinctions: students who identified themselves as English language learners and students who identified themselves as “native”⁸ English speakers.

Many of the writers who invoked their status identified as English Language Learners. However, this identification as a language learner was valued within the community as opposed to being seen as a deficiency. The ELL writers used this identification as a language learner to offer new perspectives or learning strategies on writing or language processes. In one thread “I vote for ‘standard English,’” a thread explicitly created in reference to one of the course content videos that presented the idea of multiple world Englishes, a student identifies herself as a native Russian speaker after making the claim that “standard English (I would better call it ‘right, ideal English’) is the aim everybody should reach” (I vote for “standard English”, 2013). This post initiated an in-depth exploration among several ELL and EFL students on the purpose of language, the construction of standard languages, and the relative benefits and challenges of recognizing a single or multiple Englishes. The varied language and cultural experiences present in the discussion contributed to a richer debate and understanding of what is at stake when discussing English throughout the world than in a homogeneous setting. The interactions among ELL and EFL students will be further explored in the next section.

For the writers who identified English as their primary language, this invocation of “native” status was not conflated with expert status. The identification as a “native” speaker was complicated by the frequent presence of disclaimers, which shared the ways in which the writer did not identify as an expert in English. For example, one student writes, “Although English is ‘native’ to me, I grew up in a home where grammar, syntax, just about everything of the Standard English was different to that of school” (Rhetorical Composing’s Global Englishes Page, 2013). Another student writes, “English is my primary language and, fear my largest weakness” (Essay in a week, in need of tips, 2013). In these examples, the writer undermines the monolithic image of the native speaker as having complete control over the language and its various expressions. They also question what exactly it means to be native. The writer in the first example uses scare quotes around native to suggest that it is a construction, specifically one that depends on one’s position relative to the Standard English taught in powerful institutions (reminiscent of Heath’s influential study of the Roadville and Trackton communities in *Ways with Words*). By juxtaposing her position as English as a

⁸ I use the term “native” here because this is how the students in the course identified themselves in multiple instances. A few students referred to English as their “primary language,” but overwhelmingly students identified as native. Students who spoke other languages also tended to use the term native to describe their first language.

First Language speaker (a position that would typically be seen as having some power and privilege) with her experience at home (where the English spoken was not similar to that of school and therefore valued less) the student astutely complicates the binary of native and non-native language speaker by suggesting nativeness is not a homogenous, powerful status equally available to all but is imbricated in power structures.

Other students also joined in the debate regarding terms such as “Standard English,” “Englishes,” and “native” in order to untangle the assumptions and values implicated in each of these terms. Although the students utilize the language and concepts such as lingua franca, Standard English, and Englishes present in the suggested course materials⁹, most the responses focus on sharing personal experience that have provided a new insight into language diversity. In the thread “I vote for Standard English,” an extended discussion emerged in which students debated the merits of learning a standardized form of English, the presence of multiple varieties of English and other languages, and the perceived benefits and challenges to these perspectives on Global English among other topics. The thread is initiated by an ELL student who writes, “I think that standard English (I would better call it ‘right, ideal English’) is the aim everybody should reach,” an opinion based upon her desire to communicate clearly (I vote for “standard English”, 2013). This post is then followed up by another student who questions “[W]hat is ‘Standard English’? ... If you ask any one of the people from the different regions what Standard English is, they will tell you it is the English that THEY speak of course!” (ibid). In this thread, the most common code occurrences are invocations⁹ of past experience, geographical location, language, and descriptions of personal. There are no overt references to the optional course materials. Instead, students rely heavily upon their own experiences with locations, languages, and other personal details in order to make sense of the complicated topic of power and language diversity. This is perhaps one of the greatest benefits to MOOCs; the opportunity to interact with a diverse student body in allows students to develop new perspectives on broad issues such as language diversity in addition to improving their writing or other academic skills.

Some of the writers also included a disclaimer to their native status that identified their previous experiences that made them aware of the struggles English Language Learners face when learning to write a new language. One student writes, “I’m a native speaker, but I taught EFL as a student to teenagers, and having discussed the frustration that slowly extending vocabulary can cause learners, can I suggest...” (Your strategy for learning a variety of English?, 2013). Another student shares, “Although English is my primary language, I feel I can share my experiences with learning

⁹ The suggested course materials for the “Global Englishes” section included a welcome video from professor Cynthia Selfe and graduate student Jen Michaels on creating a welcoming environment for diverse learners and a series of video interviews from Ohio State University students David Wandera and San Hee Ryu on their experiences as English Language Learners.

languages in general that might be useful” (ibid). In these cases, students invoke an expert status as “native” or “primary” speakers of English, but they use this status and past experiences with language learning to offer assistance to other students in the course.

In the discussion forums, the divides between expert and novice, English Language Learner and “native” speaker, are complicated by the ways in which students identify and value their status. Rather than support a binary understanding of language acquisition that privileges native status as an authority, the students recognize their individual strengths and weaknesses and form a learning community to pool educational resources. Whereas the *Science Buzz* study conducted by Grabill and Piggfound participants used personal experience and identity as authority in order to establish their rhetorical authority, in *Rhetorical Composing* participants deployed personal experience and identity as non-experts in order to establish their ethos and contribute to a learning community.

Interactions Among English Language Learners (ELL) and English as First Language Speakers

As previously discussed, one of the most common ways in which students identified themselves was in reference to the languages they knew, the order in which they learned them, and their relative skill level. The students rarely invoked their expert status except when they were able to offer suggestions, feedback, or support to other students who identified as novices. When students did claim an expert status based on the primary or native language, they did so in order to complicate what it means to be native and to also separate native from expert. Given the significant percentage of students in the initial demographic survey who identified English as a second, third, or even fourth language, it’s important to examine how the interactions among ELL and EFL student facilitated to a language learning community.

Several of the discussion threads within the “Global Englishes” sub-forum were initiated by students who identified a specific language or composing problem and invited other students to help. In the thread “Essay in a week, in need of tips,” an anonymous student from Estonia presents a problem beginning an assigned essay. He writes, “My biggest nemesis is that when I need to write something important, my mind just goes blank and I just can not generate any ideas, which leads to the fact that my stories end up half-baked” (Essay in a week, in need of tips, 2013). In this opening post, the student identifies a composing issue that transcends the multiple languages he speaks. He then goes on to invite other students to help him, stating “I was hoping that you, dear courserian, could help a young man out with some tips. I do not need help with grammar but I would really appreciate that you share your experiences and suggestions on the topic” (ibid). The ensuing responses to the original post from both

self-identified ELL and EFL students tended to fall into two categories: shared concerns with language or composing processes and suggesting strategies for composing.

In response to the “Essay in a week” thread, several students similarly posted about their discomfort with aspects of writing in a variety of languages. This shared unease with language and writing contributed to the sense of a learning community as students identified with one another and supported each other to improve their skills. As one student from Lithuania writes, “Ok, I see I am not the only one here whose native is not English and I feel a release now. I have the same fears as you, guys, cause I use English not very often!” Another student from Afghanistan writes, “I really suffer from same fears, the fear of making mistakes, fear of grammar, fear of losing mark :)” before detailing his torturous writing process and ending with a concern that he will not overcome his fear of writing. One student responds to this fear of, “Oh dear [student name]; English is my first language... Even with this background I can tell you that it takes me MANY, many days to write a paper, a column or a newsletter. ... You’re brave and you’ve already started to overcome your fear by signing up for this course.” Throughout this discussion thread, students of all nationalities and languages shared their same fear of writing, a fear that for some of them seems to stem from concerns regarding language usage and correctness, for others from invention processes, and still others’ lack of motivation. Regardless of the specifics of their identified fear or discomfort writing, the students validate each other’s feelings and support one another by connecting through their shared emotion. ELL students are not separated from EFL students as both groups recognize the presence of fear in their composing process even if the fear originates from different points or experiences. Through their recognition of mutual concerns and composing challenges regardless of language experience in a group setting, the students gain new perspectives, strategies, and resources about language.

Another typical interaction in the discussion forum includes students identifying a personal language or composing problem and inviting other students to offer learning strategies or resources. The initiating posts are disproportionately authored by students who identify as English Language Learners, as in the previously discussed thread “Essay in a week;” however, many of the ensuing responses from self-identified English as First Language speakers share the same or other language or composing issues. Both ELL and EFL students respond to the invitation by sharing their varied experiences learning to speak or write in different languages. A Pakistani student suggests, “forget the grammar and syntax issues- just write,” and another student offers the advice to keep a notebook handy to write down ideas and inspiration when they occur (Essay in a week, in need of tips, 2013). When students share their resources for learning, they rarely invoke their status as an expert or novice, English Language Learner or English as First Language speaker, as compared to the posts sharing their language or

composing problems. The shared strategies such as brainstorming, freewriting, and links to articles about various writing techniques work regardless of language. The students invoke their language identity when discussing their shared fears as a way to bridge linguistic differences and foster community, but invoking their language identity is unnecessary in this context of exchanging educational resources as the interaction itself fosters the sharing of knowledge that takes place in the community.

Students who identified as ELL asked for help from EFL students, and the EFL students offered to help the ELL students with the language. When EFL students expressed their novice status and need to work on specific skills, the ELL students also offered their assistance. For example, in the thread “Essay in a week,” writers who identified as ELL and EFL began to share personal problems related to language and composing. This thread became a space for students to identify their relative strengths and weaknesses with language and composing as well as an opportunity to crowd-source solutions from others. One self-identified EFL student wrote, “I noticed that many of you express fear of writing and I can relate. English is my first language and still I experience writer’s block and continually struggle with low self-confidence in my writing” (Essay in a week, in need of tips, 2013). In this post, the student begins by recognizing and relating to a composition problem shared by many ELL and EFL students in thread, and the student later asks for resources and strategies to help resolve her writer’s block and low confidence. Several other students, some of whom identify at various parts in the thread as ELL or EFL, suggest strategies such as free-writing and brainstorming activities, direct the poster to online resources, or suggest applicable content from the course. In this sense, the ELL students and EFL students engaged in a transactional exchange in which both parties were able to contribute something to the learning of the other.

This exchange among the ELL and EFL students is reminiscent of Suresh Canagarajah’s notion of translingual literacy and the global contact zone. He writes, “In the global contact zone, interlocutors seek to understand the plurality of norms in a communicative situation and expand their repertoires, without assuming that they can rely solely on the knowledge or skills they bring with them to achieve communicative success” (Canagarajah S. , 2013). According to Canagarajah, success “requires a different attitude to communication: interlocutors are supportive and consensus-orientated as they strive to achieve their shared objectives through their divergent codes” (ibid). As previously demonstrated, the students in these particular discussion forums frequently engaged in behaviors that demonstrated support such as affirming another student, responding to another student, addressing the group, or connecting ideas or people. The interactions among ELL and EFL students formed the basis of a reciprocal learning community in which all students had the opportunity to share their expertise and benefit from the expertise of others in order to meet individual learning objectives.

Moving from Massive Course to Multilingual Community

As previously shown in the findings, the students often interacted with one another to share experiences, perspectives, and strategies on composing and language practices. Whereas the Grabill and Pigg study found that online commenters often traded on their expert status, the discursive analysis of one forum from *Rhetorical Composing* demonstrates that students were more likely to identify as novices or qualify their expert status. I would argue this identification as novice occurs for two reasons. The first reason is the context of the online space. As these forums were part of the larger *Rhetorical Composing* MOOC, all of the students were enrolled because of some level of interest in learning about composing processes and rhetorical principles. To identify as an expert would separate the student from the rest of the student community. Even students who had significant experience in writing (such as a professional writer or an English as a Second Language teacher) identified as novices who were in the course to develop their self-identified areas of weakness. The second reason for identifying as a novice was to facilitate relationship formation and community building. By identifying as a novice, students were placed on an even playing field so that all students had some areas of strength and some areas to improve upon. This facilitated connections as students could share their strengths with other students who needed help in that area, and this created a reciprocal exchange of skills and knowledge. This novice identification ultimately was the foundation for the formation of a learning community. This study is somewhat limited in that it only focuses on one specific subforum that was specifically created by staff members to address the presence of English Language Learners. It remains to be studied whether or not students employed these same discursive moves regarding identity and community building in other forums.

The findings from this study have larger implications for MOOCs and composition classrooms of all distributions and scale. First of all, much has been made of MOOCs because of their “massive” nature. Many of the critiques of MOOCs (and other online courses) have focused on the isolation students may experience in a course focused on presenting as much material to as many students as possible. At its worst, the Massive presents an aggregation of information distributed to students in a “very nonsocial media environment of quizzes, short writing tasks, and pretaped video lectures” with little space for interaction with peers, professors, or material (Rice, 2013). However, the findings from this study suggest some students enrolled in *Rhetorical Composing* had a different experience. The students shared various parts of their identities with one another, asked for help with learning objectives and larger personal concerns, and crowd-sourced solutions or feedback to composing and life skills. It is critical to note that this experience is not necessarily representative of all students’ experiences in the MOOC. Out of the eleven threads that are the subject of the particular study, there were

approximately 170¹⁰ unique students who posted to the “World Englishes” forum at least once. This is a large number for a discussion forum related to a class, but this is a very small percentage of the total number of students enrolled in the *Rhetorical Composing* MOOC, which had a total enrollment of over 32,000 students. Although there were probably a contingent of students who did feel isolated or disconnected in this MOOC, the experience that most critics of the MOOC tend to focus on, an analysis of the discussion forums suggests that many students were engaged with other students in the course and formed vibrant learning communities, and these networked learning communities additionally provided students with resources and strategies to improve their composing practices. Further work remains to be done on student interaction in discussion forums outside of the limited sample included in this study in order to understand the variety of ways students interact in online educational contexts.

It's this network of students that provides the exigence for my call for a new understanding of MOOCs as Massive Open Online *Communities*. Most of the conversation about MOOCs has focused on the allure of the Massive element because of the potential to extend the boundaries of the classroom from the ivory tower to the home of students halfway around the globe. However, 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.

In addition to the learning impact of community aspect of MOOCs, the interaction between English Language Learners and English as First Language Speakers should be examined for its potential to be replicated in traditional writing courses. In many face-to-face composition classrooms, English Language Learners are at a perceived disadvantage. These students tend to operate according to a deficit model because English is not their first or even second or third language. This results in ELL students existing on the margins of the traditional composition classroom. This experience could have been replicated in the MOOC, but the instructional team's response to the large percentage of ELL students encouraged ELL and EFL students to consider what it means to speak or write English and what contributions ELL and EFL students could each make to the course and one another. Students responded to this encouragement, and instead of the deficit model, ELL and EFL students alike were able to see how their

10 This number does not include instructional staff or anonymous individuals.

own language diversity could prove advantageous to their composing processes. This resulted in an exchange where all students could assess their own strengths and areas to improve in the composing process and know that another peer could benefit from their strengths or support them in their growth.

As this examination of the findings show, MOOCs have the potential to transform education, although not in the way passionate supporters or vehement objectors would imagine. The *Rhetorical Composing* MOOC offered students the ability to form communities to support learning in multiple ways. It is now necessary to consider how to bring some of these positive components of the MOOC back to the face-to-face classroom.

Bringing the MOOC experience back to the bricks-and-mortar classroom acts an alternative to the all-or-nothing mentality that has been the dominant discourse surrounding MOOCs. MOOCs are not necessarily going to be radicalize or replace current forms of higher education, but they do offer opportunities to reconsider and continue supporting what is important in our pedagogical practice. The MOOC experience underscores what is already believed to be important to classrooms: collaborative learning. However, MOOCs have certain affordances that traditional, physical classrooms currently lack such as a much larger and an incredibly diverse student population as well as more asynchronous opportunities for engagement. Some of the characteristics of MOOCs are possible to replicate in new forms of higher education. The increasing move towards online courses presents an opportunity to rethink the boundaries of the classroom. Online and hybrid courses can allow for multiple sections of particular courses to interact together in technological spaces such as discussion forums. Linking face-to-face courses using online spaces for reading discussions or peer review could bring the opportunities for more peer-to-peer interactions in technologically limited contexts. By extending the boundaries of the classroom to include more sections and more individuals with diverse experiences, it may be possible to replicate the massive and open format at a more local scale. We must now consider how to best facilitate the development of peer-to-peer learning networks, especially networks that include ELL students and their language experiences and skills as integral to learning, in small scale classes. Ultimately, Massive Open Online Communities offer students and instructors the opportunity to connect and learn together and from one another.

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