Engagement or alienation? Reflections on MOOC design, facilitator role, and context

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Preview: In this piece, I reflect on my experiences as a participant in different types of MOOCs. In doing so, I consider how factors such as MOOC design, structure, delivery; facilitator role; and the context (background, culture, expectations, motivations and interests) of the individual and other participants impact the MOOC experience. The largest and most well known MOOCs don't always result in the most personally engaging or inspiring experiences. However, even smaller MOOCs that focus on building a community of active and inspired learners need to be mindful of supporting a diverse range of voices.

> *Key words*: MOOC design, delivery platforms, facilitator role, pedagogy, context, community, diversity

Learning experiences—and the benefit we gain from them—are always significantly influenced by our own context: the background, motivations, expectations, and interests we bring to the experience. I am an Australian of Chinese heritage, but a native English speaker from a Western country (Australia). As an elearning designer working in a corporate / organisational learning context, I am comfortable with open online experiences, literate in technology, and fairly savvy with the use of multimedia and social platforms. In this sense, when I participate in MOOCs that are taught largely by academics from European and North American universities, I am an "insider" in various ways.

Against this backdrop, what I have found from participating to various degrees in different types of MOOCs, is that the most personally engaging experiences don't always come from the "best" MOOCs taught by "star" professors at the most prestigious universities in the world. These courses are often hosted on well-known, mainstream MOOC platforms delivered according to prescribed, standardised instructional design

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models. For me, it's the educators who may be from smaller universities but with a genuine interest in experimenting with online learning pedagogies who are offering the most interesting and engaging MOOC experiences. Often these are relatively low-structured learning experiences focused on bringing people together to explore complex topics on open web platforms. Even these experiences, though, can unintentionally exclude some participants, if a diverse range of voices is not explicitly supported.

My MOOC experiences

My overall experience of MOOCs has been very positive, but what I've realised is that the benefit I derive depends on how actively I participate—and in particular, the degree to which I form meaningful connections with other participants. This is commonly a measure of the time and effort put into cultivating and building connections, and how easy and accessible it is for me to connect meaningfully to other participants within the MOOC itself.

     I've actively participated in 3 MOOCs: Gamification via Coursera, Exploring Personal Learning Networks (#xplrpln) via NorthWestern, and Rhizomatic Learning (#rhizo14), nominally via P2PU (but in reality everywhere on the open web). The Gamification MOOC is hosted on Coursera, one of the largest and most publicised MOOC platforms. It is taught by a well-known professor and was recommended to me from members of a LinkedIn group I follow. I found the content interesting, completed all requirements as stated, and even applied some of the concepts in my work. But: I never felt *deeply* moved, challenged, or inspired. Nor did I connect with anyone in the course. Due to the size of the MOOC (tens of thousands participating), I found the sheer number of disparate conversations in the discussion forums overwhelming and hard to follow.

     I discovered the Exploring Personal Learning Networks 'open online seminar' (xplpln) directly via Jeff Merrell, one of the course facilitators. Jeff was someone I'd connected with a few months earlier through a conversation we had on his blog. The design of this MOOC focused on exploring an ambiguous, real world problem. This provided opportunities to engage deeply and meaningfully with other participants, and this engagement for me, led to a number of ongoing professional collaborations and side projects with participants who became close ties in my Personal Learning Network (PLN) after the course finished.

     I heard about the Rhizomatic Learning (Rhizo14) MOOC through one of the xplrpln participants. This 'course' was pitched by the facilitator, Dave Cormier, as an experiment in rhizomatic learning. A key motivator for me in experiencing MOOCs is to explore the boundaries of what's possible in online learning—I saw Rhizomatic Learning as one such opportunity.

     One of the key, connecting experiences I had in Rhizo14 was an emergent poetry collaboration, which I attempted to chart in a storify here: https://storify.com/tanyalau/the-spreading-rhizome. An experience which started with poems left by participants in the comments of one of my blog posts, leading to audio-visual remixes, and culminating in a week-long, seven-person poetry collaboration across twitter and soundcloud. At the time, it felt like this experience emerged as if by

magic (and perhaps there was a little of that thrown in). But examining it more critically, there are a number of components which I think contributed to the emergence of this experience:

- **MOOC design, structure & delivery:** Rhizo14 had very minimal 'design' compared to most MOOCs. There was no prescribed content, no set activities or readings - simply a (deliberately) provocative question posed each week by Dave Cormier, which participants could respond to in any way (or not, as the case might be). Most wrote (or responded to) blog posts. There was also little structure, other than the weekly question/theme posed. In fact, Dave Cormier asked participants to think of the MOOC more as a 'party' or 'camp' rather than a 'course'. Delivery platform was equally open ended: participants were simply instructed just participate on whatever platform/s they currently used: Twitter, Google +. Facebook, blogs … and/or (if desired) the P2PU platform that the MOOC was officially hosted on.
- **Role adopted by the instructor / facilitator**: Dave Cormier adopted the role of self-confessed 'party host', positioning himself more as experimenter / explorer inviting others to join in his rhizomatic journey rather than an all-knowing guide leading charges through a tour of well-travelled destinations. In general it seemed he tried to mingle through the party, participating and commenting in conversations as he moved through it.
- **Background, culture, expectations, motivation, interests, and outlook of other participants:** the majority of those who participated in the poetry collaboration were from Western, English-speaking countries (United States, Canada, Britain, Australia), and most (as I understand) native English speakers. It seemed many had experience (some fairly extensive) actively participating in (or initiating) open online creative collaborations (e.g. via Rhizo14, DS106, or other MOOC experiences), and were literate in technology, multimedia and social platforms like twitter, G+, blogs, soundcloud, zeega, and others.
- **My background, culture, expectations, motivations, interests and outlook:** I was at Rhizo14 to join Dave's experiment, seeking to explore what was possible in open online learning, make new connections, and engage in new learning experiences. Prior to the emergence of this poetry collaboration, I'd had experiences either writing, sharing or receiving poetry with at least four of the seven people who ended up being involved in this collaboration. I was almost exclusively interacting in Rhizo14 via twitter and blogs.

In this context, it is less surprising that a poetry collaboration like this emerged as it did. The low-structure, minimalist, experimental design of Rhizo14, with "community as curriculum" as its strapline, made it permissible for collaborative poetry and art making to be a legitimate form of participation. And indeed—not just permissible—but encouraged (collaborative art tended to get shared, tweeted, and commented on in Rhizo14). The 'party host' role adopted by Dave introduced a backdrop of fun to the MOOC experience, decentralised control, production and dissemination of content and enabled participant-driven gatherings/collaborations like this to form with no involvement at all from the instructor/facilitator. The metaphor of 'arts and crafts tent' (e.g. like at a

festival) was used at times during Rhizo14 to describe these emergent creative gatherings. Thus, this activity fitted nicely with Dave's Rhizo14 'party' metaphor. The background, expectations, motivations, interests and outlook of those I shared the experience with was also similar to, and aligned with mine.

In short, highly positive, inspiring and impactful MOOC experiences don't just 'happen'; they happen because these factors—MOOC design, structure, delivery, facilitator role, background, culture, expectations, motivations and interests of participants and individuals—align at the right time.

So, what of MOOC participants who don't happen to share the same background, culture, expectations, motivations, interests, outlook? Heli Nurmi (a Rhizo14 participant), shared her thoughts on her rhizo14 autoethnography post www.helinurmi.fi/blog/my-autoethnography-about-rhizo14/. Her perspective reveals the sense of exclusion that can arise when an individual doesn't share what seems to be the dominant background, interests and outlook of other participants in a MOOC:

> b. ***inclusion/exclusion*** *in this community. I continue by telling which parts I ignored and why. I noticed interesting experiments with words and poetry but I did not want to participate because English is not my native language. I heard discussions around some names and cultures, music which I could not follow. That brings an experience about exclusion even it is not meant to be. This 'culture' increased into the end and I stopped writing. A good example is the new topic 'Lunatics from asylum'—not funny at all in my eyes. I don't know the TV programmes or movies, from which that concept comes, and I do not care. I stopped following the FB group.*

So, can or should anything be done about the formation of subgroups in MOOCs? By their nature, any subgroup results in the exclusion (however unintentional) of others. However, subgroups, collaborations, and sub-communities within MOOCs may also be seen as both natural and desirable - it's one way that participants create shared meaning, content, and understanding, particularly in chaotic, complex, and/or low-structured environments. And if an individual's personal goals for engaging in the MOOC includes finding new people to connect with, they will naturally seek out others with similar interests.

It's when the interests of these subgroups start to dominate the conversations and activity of the MOOC as a whole, that perhaps an instructor / facilitator should step in to try and minimise the dominance and help promote other, quieter voices.

As Mariana Funes, in her reflections on Rhizo14 observed mdvfunes.com/2014/03/18/wanna-do-a-cmooc/ :

> *I feel the course attracted very different types of people, but that this diversity was managed out through a group dynamic that excluded what the majority did not approve as the 'received view' of what it meant to be a 'rhizomatic learner/educator'.*
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> *This meant some people left or remained quiet as they realised what the majority supported. I feel that the majority (unsurprisingly to those who know power dynamics in groups) looked to the hosts for what was okay/not okay. I did not see much by way of supporting the importance of diversity in action rather than*

theory. I did see judgment of academics, theory, linearity, explanation, reification, and books. You were definitely the right kind of 'one' if you believed in emergence, non-linearity, poetry and art rather than theory and explanation.

Lessons and take-aways

As a participant in different types of MOOCs I've found that the largest and most well-known MOOCs, tightly structured and designed to scale to massive numbers, can also be alienating learning environments where it may be difficult to make meaningful connections with fellow participants. Smaller MOOCs, where the focus is on exploring complexity and fostering an active community of learners are more likely to result in experiences that inspire and lead to meaningful connections that are sustained long after the end of the MOOC.

One of the key lessons that I have taken from my MOOC experiences is that regardless of how participatory the learning experience is designed to be, it is worthwhile for MOOC instructors or facilitators to be mindful that participants are likely to look towards them for guidance on behavioural norms within a MOOC - and that they have both the power and responsibility to model attitudes and actions that support the full range of voices in a MOOC to be heard.