

Third Spaces of Learning in Open Courses: Findings from an Interpretive Case Study

Suzan Koseoglu

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Minnesota, kose0031@umn.edu

Abstract

In this case study, I present an interpretive exploration of five open participants' learning experiences in a massive open online course (MOOC), which was offered by a higher education institute in the United States as a general education course in research writing. There were two types of enrolment in the course: formal (students who enrolled in the course for credit, six sections) and informal (open participants). Open participants had access to the public activities of the learning community, but they did not receive any academic certification, evaluation or grading from the instructors.

Blogging was central to all educational activity in the course. Learners and instructors openly blogged during the course and beyond in response to the class assignments and on other areas of interest. In this study, participant blogs are conceptualized as social spaces created by a multitude of interactions (e.g., with content, instructors, other learners, the imagined audience). These spaces were a starting point for the researcher to examine five open participants' learning activities in the course. Primary data collection methods included interviews, participant observations, and document and artefact analysis. Thematic analysis of data illustrates how open participants participated in the course in multifaceted and unique ways and created third spaces of learning—spaces where formal and informal skills, networks, and identities intersect and create opportunities for authentic interaction and knowledge building (Cronin, 2014; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995).

I present two typologies that point to the self-directed and emergent nature of open participation within those spaces: (1) open participants created unique course histories through their blogs, (2) open participants did not follow the formal learning path. These findings suggest that the traditional markers of success in formal education (e.g., sustained engagement, course completion, directly measurable outcome) are insufficient to frame participants' involvement in open online courses. The diversity in learner goals and roles calls for a need to shift the focus of open online courses from the *end product* to the *learning process* and challenges formal narratives of success and failure in open online courses.

Keywords

Blogs, blogging, case study, interpretive research, massive open online course, MOOC, third spaces of learning.

Research Context

The context of this study is an eight weeklong massive open online course offered by the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). UNIV 200: Inquiry and the Craft of Argument (unofficially: *Living the Dreams: Digital Investigation and Unfettered Minds*) was a general education course in research writing with six sections (Campbell, 2014). The course was offered for credit to VCU students (registration in each section was limited to 20 students), but the majority of learning activities were opened up to the public and people were encouraged to join the course as open participants.

The learning objectives in this course were loosely defined as the course instructors openly acknowledged and celebrated the unpredictable and emergent nature of learning outcomes in a course on research inquiry. Instead, the course designers had multiple visions that shaped the course structure and activities. *Creating deep intellectual engagement in a collective space*—a space of inquiry and curiosity, where learners "develop the

awareness, skills, habits and dispositions necessary to take full advantage of the affordances of the Web" (<http://thoughtvectors.net/how-to-participate/>)—was an overarching theme frequently emphasized by the instructors. The primary medium for this desired engagement was learner blogs.

Each section in the course had a separate site (a clubhouse) designed and facilitated by the section instructor. The common meeting place for each section and open participants in the course was thoughtvectors.net. The course hub aggregated the course activities distributed over various social networking platforms such as Twitter, Google Plus, YouTube, and user blogs (see Figure 1).

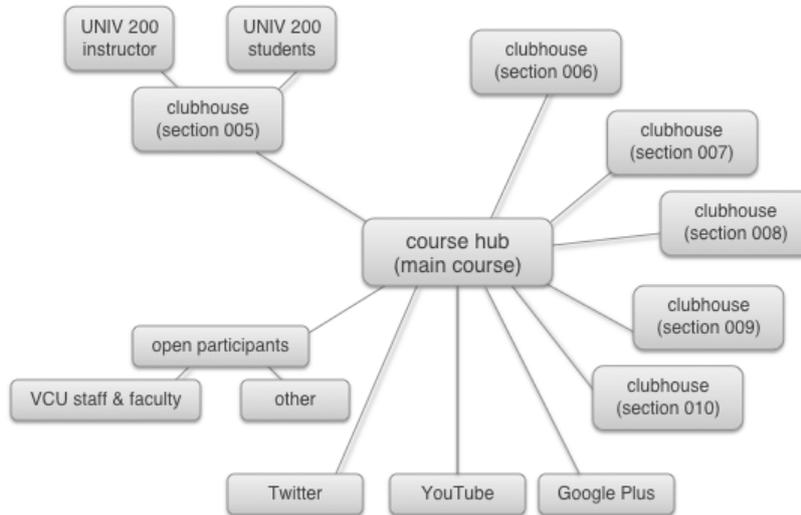


Figure 1. The organizational structure of UNIV 200: The Inquiry and the Craft of Argument.

Research Focus

My focus in the study was on open participants' learning experiences in the course. More specifically, I wanted to find out why they joined the course, the ways in which they participated in the course activities, and gains from participation, if any. I also examined common themes in participation patterns.

Open participants were invited to the course as *co-learners* and *energy inputs*. They did not receive any grading or formal feedback from the instructors or certification from the institution showing that they followed along and completed the assignments. It is not possible to know the exact number of open participants in the course, as the learning activities were distributed across multiple platforms. The open nature of the course is also likely to have caused a large number of lurkers who did not initiate any communication with others. In the study, I focused on a small group of open participants who had syndicated their blogs on thoughtvectors.net before the research started. These participants were active at least once during in the course.

Methods

Design

I framed the research as an interpretive case study and adopted the steps for naturalistic inquiry in the research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2013). The research process began in the natural setting of the online course. I observed and participated in the class activities to make sense of the unfolding course in June and July 2014. These unstructured observations and my reflections on them naturally led me to an emergent design (the research focus and questions were established over time). Using a purposive sampling strategy, I identified five open participants to include in the study and examined their blogs as a starting point. Interviews with four of those open participants were held between February and April 2015 to contextualize and critically reflect on preliminary findings.

Participants

I have examined the online activities of five open participants in the course (one male, four females). Four open participants were located in the U.S. and one participant was in the U.K. during the live course. All participants are professionals with at least a four-year college degree.

Data Collection

Primary data sources in this study are participant blogs, semi-structured interviews with four open participants, a case study journal with analytic sides (rough, unedited notes) and memos (more refined texts for the purpose of self-reflexivity and transparency). Secondary data sources are course documents and artifacts (e.g. the syllabus, videos) and the course Twitter feed.

Data Analysis

Aligning with the philosophy of hermeneutic interpretation, a thematic analysis (Aronson, 1995; Tracy, 2013) was employed in this study. Because of the interpretive nature of the research, data analysis and data collection went hand-in-hand in most occasions. During this process, I constantly iterated between the particulars in the data (small details), the wider context as revealed in course related activities, and my overall understanding of the course context through personal observations and reflections. The analytic memos and sides were particularly helpful in this process because I was able to reflect on the data and note interesting or common patterns of learner activity. The goal was to create “typologies” (Tracy, 2013, p. 210) that built a coherent and consistent argument. The alignment of two of the research questions and typologies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 <i>Alignment of Research Questions 1 & 2 and Typologies</i>			
Research Question(s)	Typology	Themes	Indicators
If open participants created third spaces of learning, then: (Q1) What were some common themes across these spaces, if any?	Open participants created unique course histories through their blogs.	Learner-driven decisions. Mature online presence. Authentic identities.	Choices of blogging platforms, blog post content and metadata (e.g., tags, categories, titles, publishing dates).
If open participants created unique course histories, then: (Q2) What did their participation patterns look like?	Open participants did not follow a formal learning path.	Diverse entry and departure points. Deadlines as suggestions. Re-framing assignments as blog posts. Diverse roles.	Blog post content and metadata (e.g., tags, categories, titles, publishing dates) and remarks during the interviews.

IRB Approval

This study received approval from the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in June 2014.

Thematic Analysis of Data

In this section, I present two interrelated typologies I identified through thematic analysis of data:

- 1 Open participants created unique course histories through their blogs
- 2 Open participants did not follow the formal learning path.

I observed that open participants organized their blogs and the content of their blog posts according to what was meaningful and relevant for them. While blogging, each open participant made many decisions driven by their interests and prior experience. For example, they decided when to publish their posts, chose blog post titles and archived their work through tagging and using existing or new blog post categories. These simple acts are significant when we consider the fact that open participants were responding to formal assignments, or the formal course, in a way that made sense to them most. The authenticity of the blogging spaces in this study aligns with the notion of *third spaces of learning* (Cronin, 2014; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995)—spaces where the scripts of formal and informal learning intersect and create opportunities for learning to occur in emergent ways. I highlight below four aspects of participation that deviated from the formal course structure in those spaces:

- Open participants had diverse entry and exit points.
- Open participants interpreted assignment deadlines as suggestions.
- Open participants blogged about their experiences (as opposed to posting assignments) in the course.
- Open participants were not just students; they had diverse roles in the environment (e.g., energy input, network provocateur, learning resource, embedded librarian).

It is interesting to note that all open participants in this study are "drop-outs" statistically: four participants slowly faded away towards the middle or end of the course and only one participant completed the final inquiry project. Yet, based on the content of their blog posts and participant interviews, I argue that none of these participants were disengaged with the course in a traditional sense. In fact, the diversity of participant roles reveals that open forms of engagement in this context were quite different than traditional learner engagement commonly marked by active and sustained participation and completion of assessments. This calls for a need to carefully re-consider the strong emphasis on outcome in measuring the success of open courses, which I discuss next.

Discussion and implications

As early as 2009, Fini argued that using traditional terms such as "course" or "attrition" may not be relevant to MOOCs because learners do not necessarily seek a passing grade or an official acknowledgment of their participation. In fact, studies consistently show that most MOOC participants are interested in informal opportunities for "professional development" and "personal growth" (Fini, 2009, p. 7; Yuan & Powell, 2013). Yet, the existence of a formal course is important for such opportunities to occur because as Downes (2013) argued, the "creation of temporary and bounded events" is a force that draws learners into the environment in the first place. Also, as I have observed in this context, the instructional design and pedagogy can encourage learners to focus on the process of learning and inquire topics that they are interested and feel passionate about, which can then be pursued further beyond the temporal boundaries of the course, thus creating authentic forms of engagement. Here I define authenticity as "having a sense that one is operating from a sense of self that is defined by oneself as opposed to being defined by other people's expectations" (Kreber, Klampfleiter, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt, 2007, p. 39). This type of authenticity challenges traditional and top-down notions of success and failure in open courses. Indeed, the traditional markers of success in formal education (e.g., sustained engagement, course completion, directly measurable outcome) are insufficient to frame participants' involvement in open courses because of the diversity in learner goals and roles. They may, in fact, be detrimental to the learning experience because of the strong emphasis they create on the outcome rather than the learning process. Thus, perhaps we can think of a course as a hub in a learning journey, somewhere to rest and meet fellow learners. Further, we can argue that educators' primary role in this process is not to make judgements based on performance and outcome, but to encourage learners to continue their journey with inspiration, wonder and curiosity.

References

- Aronson, J. (1995). A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 2(1), 1-3. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2069&context=tqr>
- G Campbell. (2014, April 25). Our summer cMOOC: Living the dreams [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.gardnercampbell.net/blog1/?p=2260>
- Cronin, C. (2014). Networked learning and identity development in open online spaces. In S. Bayne, C. Jones, M. de Laat, T. Ryberg, & C. Sinclair (Eds.) *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 405-411). Retrieved from

- https://www.academia.edu/7434202/Networked_learning_and_identity_development_in_open_online_spaces
- Downes, S. (2013, April 24). The quality of massive open online courses. Retrieved from <http://cdn.efquel.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/7/files/2013/05/week2-The-quality-of-massive-open-online-courses-StephenDownes.pdf>
- Fini, A. (2009). The technological dimension of a massive open online course: The case of the CCK08 course tools. *International Review Of Research In Open And Distance Learning*, 10(5).
- Gutierrez, K., Rymes, Betsy, & Larson, J. (1995). Script, counterscript, and underlife in the classroom: James Brown versus "Brown v. Board of Education." *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(3), 445-71.
- Kreber, C., Klampfleitner, M., McCune, V., Bayne, S., & Knottenbelt, M. (2007). What do you mean by "authentic"? A comparative review of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58(1), 22-43.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications: California.
- Tracy (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley-Blackwell: West Sussex, UK.
- Yuan, L., & Powell, S. (2013). MOOCs and open education: Implications for higher education, JISC CETIS White Paper. Retrieved from <http://publications.cetis.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/MOOCs-and-Open-Education.pdf>

Acknowledgements

This research wouldn't have been possible without the generous support of Gardner Campbell, the Vice Provost for Learning Innovation and Student Success, Dean of University College, and Associate Professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University. Also special thanks to Jon Becker, Bonnie Boaz, Ryan Cales, Jason Coats, Laura Gogia, Jessica Gordon, and Tom Woodward for their kindness and support throughout the research.

This research is supported by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota.