Teaching Presence in MOOCs: Perspectives and Learning Design Strategies

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Abstract

Despite the rapid growth of massive open online courses (MOOCs) in recent years, a fundamental question is still being debated widely in the education community: how to design and deliver MOOCs and move them away from the banking model of education (Freire, 1974), in which the teacher has traditionally been the central authority. Our goal in this paper is to improve the MOOC pedagogy through the lens of teaching presence. We argue that teaching presence is much more than just a facilitation strategy; rather, teaching presence is about creating a meaningful and receptive relationship between and among learners. To accomplish this we propose that instead of a single facilitative role there is a diversity in teacher roles. Teachers can themselves become learners in their own classrooms, as well as enabling and encouraging learners also take on the role of teachers in this open learning process. This leads us to propose the notion of hybrid presence, a construct that emerges out of authentic relationships among esteemed co-learners (Rheingold, 2014) in an open educational environment. This hybrid presence is particularly evident in community-based MOOCs. To aid in the design and facilitation of such MOOCs we propose three interrelated learning design principles aligning with the notion of hybrid presence: *prepare to cede authority*, *embrace plasticity*, and *be present with fellow learners*.

All the learning design principles we propose highlight approaches that are responsive to the affordances of connectivity and diversity on the World Wide Web. In the first principle *cede authority* we suggest that MOOC instructors see themselves as conveners of MOOCs, and that they see the learners as co-learners in their educational journey. The second principle *embrace plasticity* draws attention to the importance of being receptive and responsive to the direction and nature of learner voices in distributed networks. Finally, in the last principle *be present with fellow learners* we suggest using tools that foster mutual empathy and awareness for both learners and teachers to be present in the environment in authentic ways. Each principle is illustrated with specific examples from different types of community-based MOOCs, such as Change11 MOOC, Rhizomatic Learning, MobiMOOC 2011, and UNIV 200: Inquiry and the Craft of Argument.

Keywords

Hybrid presence, instructional design, learning design, massive open online course, MOOC, open pedagogy, teaching presence, teacher roles.

Introduction

The proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is no doubt one of the most talked about and debated educational phenomenon of the past few years. The disruptive, or revolutionary, potential of MOOCs in higher education is at the core of these discussions (e.g., Friedman, 2012; Hyman, 2012; Yuan & Powell, 2013). Indeed, the hype surrounding MOOCs pushes educators to think critically about the purposes and structures of traditional education, both residential and online. In addition, open online courses are remarkably easy to access, providing a free educational opportunity for anyone who has the resources and skills necessary to participate in a networked environment, thus potentially providing fertile ground for educational equity.

However, as Farmer (2013) argued, there is not yet sufficient evidence to suggest that MOOCs "are a '[d]isruptive [i]nnovation' that will resolve issues of access and cost" in higher education. First, as Bali (2014) noted, MOOCs are "the next logical step" in the evolving landscape of online education (p. 44). We believe ignoring this historical fact opens the doors to misinterpretation of the MOOC phenomenon and misinforms the potential trajectories of open online courses. Second, classifying MOOCs as a single entity is problematic, as there are significant variations in MOOCs in terms of educational vision and overall course structure (Bali, 2014; Bayne & Ross, 2014; Ross, Sinclair, Knox, Bayne & Macleod, 2014). Third, we argue that issues of access and equity cannot be addressed simply by putting free content on the web. In order for learners to benefit from this *educational opportunity*, to be full participants, and to reap the benefits of these free offerings, they need, at the very least, to have a certain level of proficiency in various literacies, and be self-motivated. These are, by and large, traits generally acquired through formal education. Finally, there is a need to further examine the meaning of disruption in education. We argue that real change in education is a collective effort that *evolves* as a result of the interaction between social, economic, political, and cultural realities of a society or community. In other words, education as a public good is not as flexible a domain as consumer products or services to be "disrupted" as a result of a single action, product, or philosophy (Kim, 2010; Knoll, 2009).

Instead, we propose to direct our attention to innovations that are much smaller in scale: pedagogical innovations that may go unnoticed in everyday practice. We believe the future success of open online courses lies in how well we foster meaningful and memorable learning experiences through effective pedagogies and learning design. Yet, as Bayne and Ross (2014) argued, "[pedagogy] has been noticeably under-represented" in the MOOC discourse (p. 4). Furthermore, teachers' roles in MOOCs are "both significant and neglected" (2014, p. 18).

In this paper, we build on Bayne and Ross's (2014) call for a need to focus on MOOC pedagogy as a highly visible, demanding, situated, and emergent practice using the construct of teaching presence. More specifically, based on Rodgers and Raider-Roth's (2006) work, we approach teaching presence as creating a meaningful and receptive relationship with learners. We also place a spotlight on the diversity of teacher roles in openly networked environments. We then discuss the notion of "learners as teachers" and how this reframing calls for a reconsideration of the two distinct presences, learner presence and teacher presence, by adding to this a third presence that is a hybrid of the two. This hybrid presence is particularly useful to consider in community-based MOOCs. Finally, through the lens of hybrid presence, we suggest learning design principles for educators to consider in designing open online courses.

Perspectives on teaching presence

As defined by Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001), teaching presence is "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes" (p. 5). According to this perspective, teaching presence is directly related to active or visible teaching and is required to build a successful "community of inquiry" (2001). Everything a teacher does to guide and support learners actively, for example, giving directions, organizing or facilitating class discussions, and giving feedback, may be considered as part of teaching presence.

Aligning with the community of inquiry framework, Pacansky-Brock, Leafstedt, and O'Neil-Gonzalez (2015) conceptualized teaching presence, empathy, and awareness as building blocks of effective facilitation in online learning environments. According to these scholars, teaching presence is a strategy to increase learner engagement—it is part of a method to "humanize online classes." Similarly, Kilgore & Lowenthal (2014) argue that "one thing that often separates a good online course though from a bad one is an active, caring, present instructor who has not forgotten the importance of the human touch" (p. 2), which, according to Ross, Sinclair, Knox, Bayne and Macleod (2014), could also be extended to the tools we use. Even automation can be an extension of teacher presence as long as there is a meaningful "partnership with code" (Bayne, 2014).

Teaching presence as authentic relationship with learners

We also advocate for humanizing online classes to make them much more than mere content delivery. However, we argue that teaching presence is more than a collection of facilitation techniques. According to Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006), teaching presence is tied to the lived experience of teachers; it is a *shifting* and *evolving* process rather than a directly measurable, or an immediately visible, construct. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) note:

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> [We view] teaching as engaging in an authentic relationship with students where teachers know and respond with intelligence and compassion to students and their learning. We define this engagement as 'presence'—a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step. (p. 265-266)

Thus, teaching presence can be conceptualized as a construct that encompasses *both* empathy and awareness. Further, it can be argued that in an online context teaching presence is more than synchronicity, direct communication, or visibility through multimedia; rather, it is about creating and maintaining a meaningful and receptive relationship with learners. The framing of teaching presence through relationships also calls for a need to focus on the learner presence in the environment as well, because as Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) asserted "[t]o be in connection with another human being a person needs to see and be seen by the other" (p. 274). Our focus in this paper is *hybrid presence*, a construct that emerges out of authentic relationships in a networked environment, which we explain next.

Hybrid presence

One of the notions that we consider key to our proposed learning design strategies for MOOCs is the notion of a hybrid presence: one that is not firmly set in either teacher presence, or learner presence, but rather somewhere in between. In traditional learning environments, even though we can design with learner-centered pedagogies in mind, there is still an institutional pull toward a central authority. This authority has traditionally been the course instructor, who obtains their power and authority from the institution that puts them in the instructor's position. The instructor sets not just the bureaucratic aspects of the course such as goals, objectives, deliverables, and deadlines, but also sets the tone and scope of the course, and thus frames boundaries that learners may not necessarily be welcomed to surpass. Learners in such environments, even when allowed to play freely and explore, are still being directed to do so. This maintains a clear separation between teaching and learning presence.

In networked learning environments, however, these roles are not always as clear cut, especially in MOOCs characterized by active learner participation, shared experiences, and community building. As Kop, Fournier, and Mac (2011) noted, teachers can have complex and multidimensional roles in networked learning including "aggregating, curating, amplifying, modelling … coaching or mentoring." These are also roles which can be adopted by learners in community-based MOOCs, such as connected courses (http://connectedcourses.net/) or Rhizomatic Learning (http://rhizomatic.net/). Also through aggregating, remixing, repurposing, and feeding forward—roles that were described by Siemens and Downes (2011) as important for participating in MOOCs—learners can, in fact, shape the course as much as, and perhaps more than, the instructor. Thus, by reframing the role of the learner, and by acknowledging the additional roles of instructors in networked environments, we see a blurring of traditional teacher and learner roles.

For example, in Rhizomatic Learning (e.g., http://z.umn.edu/rhizo14), while there may be a weekly prompt from the course facilitator, learners do not necessarily follow the directives of the course facilitators. Learners can deviate from the pre-determined weekly topic in class discussions and craft their own pockets of participation around topics of mutual inquiry. Furthermore, participants have the capability of extending the duration of the official course. This is something that was observed in Rhizomatic Learning 2014 (rhizo14) when participants started recommending and pursuing topics after the course was formally over (Cormier, 2014). As such, learners approach the course directives as suggestions for a given module, and interact with fellow participants in both a teaching and learning capacity, leading us to the notion of hybrid presence, one which is fluid and encompasses both teaching and learning presences.

In the next section of this paper, we propose some key learning design principles aligning with hybrid presence, which we believe has significant potential in improving the MOOC pedagogy.

Learning design principles

The MOOC format(s) hold unique challenges for instructors and learners, ranging from course design, to feedback, to the scope and aims of assessment, to copyright considerations (Koutropoulos & Zaharias, 2015).

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Presence, and what it means to be present in the course is also one of the central challenges. For example, "the low barrier to entry and departure" (Koutropoulos et al., 2012, p. 11) of most open courses can attract a large numbers of learners who may all have varied and conflicting goals to those of the course designers. Learners may not be interested in completing the course or actively participating in class activities—their movements through the course may not even be visible in the environment (deWaard et al., 2011; Kop, Fournier, & Mak, 2011). However, we believe, as Morris and Stommel (2013) argued, that "meaningful relationships are as important in a class of three as they are in a class of 10,000. In fact, the best pedagogies are co-produced and arise directly from these relationships." Bali (2015) provides some insight on how to approach this seemingly impossible task:

> You cannot possibly know every individual or see every blog post, comment, or tweet. This often means that you will miss some things, and in missing them, miss entire consequences built upon them. So there will also always have to be a humility of "knowing we do not know.

With the humility of knowing we cannot know, and we do not need to know, everything in an openly networked environment, we suggest the following learning design principles as a starting point to design for hybrid presence:

Prepare to cede authority

In traditional coursework there are various ways in which the instructor of the course is *the* authority of the course. This authority can exist in areas of content, course structure, course flow, course assessments, and if need be, course related discipline. This authority sets boundaries for the course and for the learners in that course. Topics, approaches, and ways of knowing outside of those boundaries are not always encouraged, because the instructor might also has a mandate to stay within those boundaries. Individual MOOCs do not exist in highly regimented academic environments, and they are not necessarily part of established curricula. This freedom of entry and exit, and the freedom of learners to explore in consequence-free environment may explain the lack of participation reported in the MOOC literature (Koutropoulos & Zaharias, 2015), as compared to traditional course participation.

Given this freedom of learners, instead of looking to traditional models of classroom authority to encourage sustained participation, we suggest that MOOC instructors see themselves as conveners of MOOCs, and that they see the learners that sign up for the MOOC that they convene not as empty vessels to be filed by new knowledge, but as esteemed co-learners (Rheingold, 2014) in their educational journey. The course convener may not be the only one that has a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the topic. Since MOOCs attract participants with varied levels of prior knowledge, learning opportunities exist not just from a top-down direction, as we see perhaps in traditional classrooms, but rather they exist in a networked manner where learning opportunities can come from any source.

Ceding control can range from the traditional inclusion of guest speakers, to promoting and permitting esteemed co-learners to take control of the course, or some aspect of the course. The former example can be seen in action in the Change11 MOOC (http://change.mooc.ca/) where each week promoted different people to the spotlight of the MOOC, while the latter example can be seen in action in Rhizomatic Learning 2014 (http://z.umn.edu/rhizo14) and Rhizomatic Learning 2015 (http://rhizomatic.net/) MOOCs, where learners either took control of the course once the MOOC formally ended (rhizo14), or jumped in and started working on proposed topics for the given week when the course converner was late in proposing the weekly topic (rhizo15). This deviation from the original plan helps cultivate not only learning, but also a sense of ownership in the course, which we explain further in our next principle "embrace plasticity."

Embrace plasticity

The distributed nature of expertise in MOOCs requires a shift from designing performance and outcome based assessments to assessments that encourage self-reflection and connectivity. For example, learners can reflect on the process of learning through tools such as blogs, portfolios, learner generated personal learning environments, and through project work. By encouraging learners to connect with one another and by encouraging self-directed learning, MOOCs can become much more of a community of learning, rather than a mechanism for central learner credentialing. As such, the direction of learning can be unpredictable and may not align with initial goals and objectives. This uncertainty can, in fact, be a strength in the environment if we allow ourselves to modify the course design based on feedback and learner activity.

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Aligning with this theme, Campbell (2014a) once noted that successful learning and teaching calls for a need to "pay attention to surprises along the way, amplify those surprises that go in a good direction, and always value that moment of surprise" (15:37). For example, from a technological perspective, the use of a course hashtag is something that brings together members of a networked community. An example of using a hashtag to bring together a MOOC community on Twitter can be seen in MobiMOOC 2011 (Koutropoulos et al., 2014). By establishing and using a course hashtag the course convener allows for the bringing together of a community across many networked spaces. This act enables learners to be active in spaces that they feel comfortable in, and does not force discussion on just one sanctioned discussion forum. Hashtags provide a marker that distinguishes posts as belonging to a specific course regardless of the space they are in. This also allows for the creation of subgroups and subnetworks of the main course, allowing them to take the course in a direction that they feel it needs to go. This enables the course convener, and other co-learners, to be members of both the 'main' course community, and members of any other community that forms in the course. While the course convener is usually the person who sets the original hashtag, learners exhibiting a *hybrid presence* in the course can create, use, and disseminate additional hashtags to create and promote subcommunities in the course. In turn, the course convener can promote such grass roots hashtags in order to raise awareness and contribute to the diversification of the course. Such responsiveness, we believe, is vital to help learners have voice in the environment and feel a sense of ownership in the course design and structure.

Be present *with* fellow learners

We suggest thinking about presence as a communal construct in learning environments: it can only exist and develop with relationships. It is vital that we choose, and encourage the use of, tools that might nurture these relationships, because they directly impact the quality and direction of the learning experience. We particularly suggest designing the learning environment around tools that foster mutual empathy and awareness. For example, a welcome video does not necessarily lend itself to mutual empathy as it is often times one-way communication. Blogging, on the other hand, allows for multiple interactions (e.g., interaction with other learners, instructors/facilitators, and content/issue of study) and has the potential to create new and unexpected paths of learning, as we have seen in Virginia Commonwealth University's (US) first MOOC, UNIV 200: Inquiry and the Craft of Argument (www.thoughtvectors.net).

This research writing course was designed around the idea of "launching thought vectors into concept space," that is, the sharing of "lines of inquiry, wonder, puzzlement, and creative desire emerging from individual minds" (Campbell, 2014b) in the communal spaces of the web. These spaces, particularly customized learner blogs, were a place for learners to be present on the web in authentic ways. The instructors of the course also blogged along learners and encouraged open reflection and transparency throughout the course and beyond. Perhaps more importantly they positioned themselves as learners in a dynamic learning community where traditional power relationships were de-constructed with mutual respect and readiness to learn from one another (Becker et al., 2014). This, we believe, is an approach that is responsive to, and that capitalizes effectively on, the diversity in MOOCs and the connections that could be made in the learning community and beyond. Note how presence in this context is not an afterthought or an add-on through multimedia; it is, in fact, an inseparable part of the learning process.

Going forward

In this paper, we have argued that the disruptive power of MOOCs is not a property inherent in either the instructional design format or the delivery method; rather, we viewed disruption in education as a complex process informed by our educational visions and pedagogy. We then suggested three interrelated design principles to improve the MOOC pedagogy through the lens of hybrid presence.

These principles should be interpreted as broadly outlined suggestions or roadmaps, as we acknowledge there is a uniqueness in each MOOC and the emergent nature of pedagogical decisions that might impact the learning ecology of a specific MOOC. Furthermore, due to the rapid rate of change in educational technologies, online learning requires constant pedagogical improvements and innovative design thinking, which may obscure the validity of some of our suggestions. Yet, regardless of contextual realities and technological advances, our hope is that pedagogies that highlight meaningful relationships will always be a primary concern in the design of any open online course. We also hope that teachers will be supported and cared for in open teaching, so that they can willingly and passionately direct their attention to the learner experience.

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