

Snapshots from the Lived World of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): A phenomenological study of learning large

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Abstract

This paper reports on preliminary findings of a phenomenological study examining students' everyday experiences of learning in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). The current discourse surrounding MOOCs is powerful, with promises of an epochal shift in post-secondary education, unprecedented openness, democratic pedagogies, less hierarchical knowledge creation, and unimagined scalability: all of which require critical examination. But with a brief five-year history, research has yet to confirm or refute these bold claims rationalizing the popularity and efficacy of these big virtual learning environments and their disruptive, game-changing potential for education. A swift and timely "counterbalance to some of the more hyperbolic elements of current discourse" is needed, in particular, through providing accounts of the complex realities of learners' actual experiences (Selwyn 2009). The study collected and analysed experiential moments recollected by "completers" while learning in a Massive Open Online Course. For the purposes of this study, a "completer" (Kizilcec, Piech & Schneider, 2013, April) was defined as a student who enrolled in at least one MOOC and in which they accomplished the majority of activities, assignments, quizzes and/or examinations set out by the curriculum. Data was generated via two main sources: written self-protocols (daily journals maintained by four adults engaged in a self-chosen MOOC) as well as in-depth phenomenological interviews with six MOOC completers recruited via snowball sampling. Our study revealed several surprising results. The MOOC completers consistently described a unique and powerful sphere of intimacy that developed for them with their MOOC instructor, most especially in the context of the pre-recorded instructor videos. Too, our findings seem to confirm Cormier's (2009) conjecture that "eventedness"—the sense of specialness characteristic of other "big", shared events like a rock concert or major sporting event—may uniquely distinguish MOOCs from other online learning experiences. The paper provides several rich, experiential "snapshots" or textual descriptions of learning moments and recollected events in a MOOC. Through phenomenological analysis of these lived experience descriptions, we show how the virtual learning landscapes afforded by these large-scale online environments may create unique conditions, situations, and relations of pedagogical effect and influence.

Keywords

Eventedness, Massive Open Online Courses, MOOC, online learning, networked learning, phenomenology.

Research Context

Videogame theorist and recent MOOC critic, Ian Bogost (2013) recorded the following observation in *The Atlantic*: "Both MOOCs and flipped classrooms still rely on the lecture as their principal building block...The lecture is alive and well, it's just been turned into a sitcom." Tongue-in-cheek humor aside, Bogost's provocative statement aims to counterbalance some of the more hyperbolic claims being made about MOOCs in the popular and academic press. Indeed, the current discourse surrounding MOOCs is powerful, with promises of an epochal shift in post-secondary education, unprecedented openness, democratic pedagogies, less hierarchical knowledge creation, and unimagined scalability: all of which need to be more closely examined. But with a brief five-year history, research has yet to confirm or refute the bold claims rationalizing the popularity and efficacy of these big virtual learning environments and their disruptive, game-changing potential for education. A swift and timely "counterbalance to some of the more hyperbolic elements of current discourse" is needed, in particular, through providing accounts of the complex realities of learners' actual

experiences (Selwyn 2009). This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a phenomenological study examining such accounts of students' everyday experiences of learning in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

To-date, much of the critical scholarly discussion regarding MOOCs has been unfolding in editorial pieces, op-eds, online professional magazines, the popular press, the blogosphere and even "open letters". Meanwhile, scholar journal articles, academic reports and conference papers are beginning to appear with accelerating frequency, reporting primarily single case studies, student surveys, and big data learning analytics based on a newfound wealth of student log data. Attempts to frame the MOOC phenomenon theoretically have focused primarily on connectivism (Bell 2010; Kop 2011), complexity theory (deWaard et al 2011) and other socio-constructivist variations (Clarà & Barberà 2013; Wegerif 2013), which have also served to strongly differentiate dialogical, connectivist cMOOCs from more "monological", instructivist xMOOCs.

Student experiences

Empirical studies of students' MOOC learning experiences are so far limited. Littlejohn (2013) conducted a mixed-methods study (n=29) of learners patterns of engagement in Siemens & Downes (2011) *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge 2011* cMOOC, and identified three levels of engagement: active, lurkers and passive participants. These results are comparable to Kizilcec, Piech & Schneider (2013, April) learning analytics findings across three xMOOCs; their study showed four distinct student engagement trajectories: completers, auditors, disengaged learners and samplers. Two other xMOOC data mining studies of "first MOOCs" (edX's "Circuits and Electronics" and Duke's "Bioelectricity"), both expressing concern regarding low completion rates, forwarded "persistence" as a key variable determining student success (Belanger et al 2013; Breslow et al 2013). A handful of other MOOC student survey studies have been published, but none have methodically addressed the everyday "realities of learners' actual experiences" in MOOCs.

Aims and Objectives

This research asks: What is it like to learn in a MOOC? Our study was limited to ten participants who reported having successfully finished at least one MOOC, in an effort to gain insight into a "complete" massive open online course experience and to establish a possible baseline for future research.

Research Design

The study is situated within a qualitative research methodology, "phenomenology of practice" (van Manen, 2014). This methodology was developed specifically for studying educational environments *in situ* (van Manen, 1990) and is adept at uncovering and fostering practical insights, communicative thoughtfulness and ethical sensitivities in professional teaching practice. As such, phenomenology of practice is ideally suited for revealing the rich, complex realities of everyday student learning experiences in MOOCs, *and subsequently building pedagogically responsive insight* for educators, instructional media experts and software architects who design, build and work in these environments. With origins in continental philosophy, phenomenology is directed towards exploring the everyday structures of "pre-reflective" human involvements, i.e., how human beings experience their everyday lives rather than how they may conceptualize, theorize or even rationalize it afterwards. The aim is to "lay bare and exhibit" the ground of a given human experience—the phenomenon—and attempt to preserve it in its lived entirety (Heidegger, 1962, p. 23).

Data sources and analysis

For this project, data was generated via two main sources: written self-protocols (daily journals maintained by four adults engaged in a self-chosen MOOC) as well as in-depth phenomenological interviews with six xMOOC completers recruited via snowball sampling. Only one of our ten research participants reported completing a cMOOC, i.e., a MOOC where knowledge construction occurred primarily via student blogs, wikis and other social media platforms. The other nine participated in so-called xMOOCs, which were composed of weekly instructor videos, assignments, quizzes and examinations. Raw journal and transcript data were culled for Lived Experience Descriptions (LEDs). LEDs are remembered moments that occurred in the context of learning in a MOOC, and specifically exclude student opinions or generalizations about MOOCs. The term "lived experience" has special methodological significance for phenomenology and refers to "our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life" (van Manen 1990). Phenomenological inquiry depends on a collected base of such recollected, *pre-reflective* moments. Such evidentiary material serves to orient all subsequent phenomenological analysis. Once the gathered materials are culled for phenomenological data, the LEDs are subjected to phenomenological analysis via the application of multiple heuristics including thematic, existential,

and eidetic reflection (Van Manen, 2014). For example, existential reflection examines experiential data across five existential dimensions: *lived* time, *lived* (and extended) body, *lived* space, *lived* things and *lived* relation. Our phenomenological analysis is not yet complete, however we have begun to unearth some preliminary themes. We briefly present two such themes gathered from our xMOOC participants.

Preliminary Analysis

Learning in a MOOC may open a unexpected sphere of pedagogical intimacy

Reflecting back on a recent xMOOC experience, a software engineer is surprised by
... what ended up being a high degree of intimacy, or rather my sense of intimacy between me and the instructor. Surprising, because initially I think 150,000 people signed up for the course and it seemed like it should have been impersonal. It was about three weeks in when I began to have this sense—while watching the videos—like the instructor was speaking directly to me, almost as if he were just sitting across that table from me. (MOOC student)

Several of our MOOC completers described such a unique and powerful sphere of pedagogical intimacy that developed for them with their MOOC instructor, most especially in the context of the pre-recorded instructional videos. As the student above describes, over the course of a few weeks, he experienced a dawning sense that his MOOC instructor was addressing him personally in the teaching videos. Despite knowing that the instructor could not possibly be “speaking directly” to him, this unique sense of pedagogical intimacy and tutorial-like presence of the teacher persisted and deepened for the student over the balance of the course. On the one hand, the student was aware he was participating in a class with tens of thousands of others; on the other hand, in his day-to-day learning through the MOOC videos and weekly assignments, the student came to perceive the instructor as engaging him personally in a private, tutorial way. In such moments, the thought of the thousands of other MOOCers disappeared, and he found himself being personally tutored by the instructor.

The lived immediacy of the MOOC instructor for the student is characterized by a punctive, omnivoyant address: the student hears the instructor as speaking to him or her personally, though he or she may be distantly aware that the instructor is also speaking to thousands of others in exactly the same way. To address means to guide or to direct to the attention of someone, to communicate or dedicate to a particular person or location. For example, we address a letter or email to someone; we also address or call someone by name. But to be addressed means that we have been called, and our attention is prepared and newly devoted to the one who addresses us. To be addressed is to be the intended recipient, the one who is being called to turn, orient and be confronted by and face the one making the address. This one-to-one, “speaking directly to me” pedagogical relationship is reminiscent of the private educational sphere of the tutorial.

Such lived experience descriptions provide an important counterpoint to MOOC critic John Warner’s (2013, April 22) “failed” MOOC attempt: “as good as Prof. Comer’s content is, and as engaging and nice as she appears to be on screen, she and I don’t have a relationship, and when it comes to learning, relationships matter.” It may be that completers are able to develop the kind of pedagogical relationship in an MOOC that Warner clearly felt was lacking for him.

Learning in a MOOC may involve a “rock concert”-like sense of belonging

In a weird kind of way, I was getting a personal lecture...and felt that intimacy. At the same time, I had the sense of being one of tens of thousands who all were having the same experience. I didn’t feel that my experience was degraded because it was spread out over all these people, but I was fortunate enough to be a part of this community that is having this same really cool experience. Of course, [the instructor] didn’t know who the hell I was, and he probably never will...It may sound a ridiculous comparison, but the MOOC had some of the same energy as a rock concert...I am feeling this thing and I am experiencing this thing with people and it is great, but he doesn’t know who I am, even though I kind of feel like he is singing to me. (MOOC student).

Another student reports developing a close pedagogical relation with his MOOC instructor coupled with a perception of participating in a very large, shared event reminiscent of a rock concert. Here another experiential theme—“eventedness”—previously proposed by Cormier (2009), suggests itself. Cormier conjectured that “eventedness”—a sense of shared specialness characteristic of large-scale, public events (e.g. a rock concert or major sporting event)—may uniquely distinguish MOOCs from other everyday online learning experiences.

Based on our study so far, such a “rock concert”-like sense of fan community may indeed inhere for some students while learning in a MOOC.

While our analyses are not complete, we believe there is good reason to suggest that MOOCs are indeed a unique phenomenon, offering a learning environment that may be significantly different than previous online offerings. Our study revealed surprising results. Our MOOC completers consistently described a unique and powerful sphere of intimacy that developed for them with their MOOC instructor, most especially in the context of the pre-recorded instructional videos. Our findings also seem to confirm Cormier’s (2009) conjecture that “eventedness”—the sense of specialness characteristic of other massive-scale, shared events (e.g. a rock concert or major sporting event)—may uniquely distinguish MOOCs from other online learning experiences.

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