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Foreword: MOOC Studies Well Past the Year of the MOOC

Alan Girelli

University of Massachusetts Boston, alan.girelli@umb.edu

Leslie Limon

leslie@leslielimon.com

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Special Issue on MOOC Design and Delivery: Opportunities and Challenges

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Alan Girelli,

University of Massachusetts Boston

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Apostolos Koutropoulos,

University of Massachusetts Boston

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Leslie P. Limon, copy editor
and revision advisor

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FOREWORD: MOOC STUDIES WELL PAST THE YEAR OF THE MOOC

Alan Girelli – CIEE Editor-In-Chief / Leslie Limon – Copy Editor, Revision Advisor

As we move nearly a half-decade beyond *The New York Times*' declaring 2012 the "Year of the MOOC" (Pappano, 2012), the range of discussants involved in discourse on MOOCs has narrowed, yet the sophistication of scholarship produced continues to deepen. This second in a two-part series of special issues of *Current Issues in Emerging eLearning* celebrates this rich, new scholarship on MOOC theory and practice. Volume 3, Issue 1: *MOOC Design and Delivery: Opportunities and Challenges* presents an underlying argument: that the MOOC frontier can inform our decisions regarding all manner of educational approaches, from clickers in the classroom to evolving competency-based models. Given CIEE's "intentionally eclectic" mission to promote "scholarship on the disruptions teaching with technology bring to all segments of the marketplace" and to publish "critical assessments of eLearning in its many forms,"¹ upcoming issues of this journal will provide heterogeneous coverage of eLearning topics, though editorial board members welcome this opportunity to share a second collection of important MOOC research studies in this publication.

The issue opens with Robin Bartoletti's *LEARNING THROUGH DESIGN: MOOC DEVELOPMENT AS A METHOD FOR EXPLORING TEACHING METHODS*, a case study of the role self-reflection plays in the design process. Bartoletti describes how designers' concerns regarding MOOC "interaction and dialogue led her design team to construct knowledge through *reflection-in-action* (at the moment of teaching) and *reflection-on-action* (action planned before or after teaching)." Ultimately, she concludes:

The technology tools and pedagogical practices utilized in MOOCs vary from those used in more traditional online education. The methods of content delivery and instruction may be different as well. However, interaction in a MOOC remains the crux of the matter, just as in other delivery formats. (p. 13).

Many of the authors represented in this special issue share Bartoletti's view that evolving tools and teaching methods can empower learners but also can impose potentially unwelcome demands upon learners. Therefore, these evolving tools and methods represent both opportunities and challenges for designers and instructors. Some authors take an arguably extreme stance regarding the changing

¹ Quoted from the CIEE "Mission and Scope" page on web at <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/ciee/aimsandscope.html>.

definitions of the roles of learner and teacher, as in the case of the second and third articles in this issue. These two articles provide complimentary autoethnographies of 'rhizomatic' learning, centered on experiences within the now famous "#rhizo14" MOOC. Bali et al describe how "[te]acher and student roles are radically restructured," in rhizomatic learning: "Course content and value come mostly from students, not the teacher, who, at best, is a curator providing a starting point and guidance" (p. 44). Honeychurch et al applaud the way rhizomatic learning "effectively decentered content almost entirely," (p. 37) but acknowledge some participants "expressed discomfort with the lack of formal structure, the laid-back facilitation," and other non-traditional aspects of the rhizomatic teaching and learning scenario.

For those who embrace this new learning situation, however, the consequences are lasting. In *HOW THE COMMUNITY BECAME MORE THAN THE CURRICULUM: PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES IN #RHIZO14*, Sarah Honeychurch et al chronicle a phenomenon Bartoletti describes as "one of the most fascinating parts of the ETMOOC experience ... that the community continues to thrive nearly three years after it first formed ..." (p. 20). Honeychurch et al similarly identify long-term affiliations among participants as an unintended benefit of participation in a connectivist MOOC. The authors attribute their ongoing gains from the course to the course emphasis on contribution and creation encouraged by a sense of 'eventedness' rather than content mastery. Notably, while this study includes commentary from #rhizo14 originator, Dave Cormier, the study names Cormier last in authorship and qualifies his role as 'facilitator' of the MOOC:

Cormier did not prepare the curriculum and content in advance. Instead, as facilitator, he watched as participants chose from content already available on the web and repackaged that to suit themselves, or created their own content and interacted with each other's original or curated content. (p. 28).

The third article in this issue, *WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LEARN AND PARTICIPATE IN RHIZOMATIC MOOCs?: A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF #RHIZO14*, provides a companion autoethnography. Maha Bali et al present the rhizomatic model of learning as "not simply greater than the sum of its part/icipants," declaring that to understand rhizomatic learning we should "[t]hink of a conscious mind emerging from the orchestrated firings of a cluster of neurons" (p. 42). Bali and her co-authors describe a learning model devoid of central authority but in no way dispute Cormier's importance to their experience in #rhizo14. Rather, they applaud his temperance and humility, commend his ability to set up learning situations, and then remove himself as an obstacle to their co-exploration of ideas. In his narrative, co-author Lenandlar Singh writes that "these MOOCs allow you to be you. You can become the self-appointed facilitator" (p. 49). Statements of this ilk suggest the rhizomatic model provides a hyperbolic example of the

disaggregation of the teaching role, a trend closely associated with online learning paradigms. Norman Friesen and Judith Murray maintain that “‘disaggregation’ of instructional role and content is already commonplace in universities and distance education institutions” (p. 202). Adèle Bezuidenhout places disaggregation amid a cluster of interrelated phenomena addressed by authors throughout this special issue:

The rapidly evolving nature of the distance educational context has implications ..., for example the emergence of open educational practices, the increasing range of distance education providers including virtual universities and private providers, the paradox of increased access versus accessibility of the internet in developing countries, cloud-based learning, increasing sometimes unrealistic expectations of online students, connectivism, and the disaggregation of the academic role (Naidu, 2014). The change in teacher roles from mainly being a content creator, to acting as discussion leader to becoming a critical friend and co-learner (Anderson and Dron, 2011) corresponds with the development of the different generations of distance education. (2015, p. 2)

The fourth article in this special issue, *QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS: A USER EXPERIENCE PERSPECTIVE* provides a qualitative, empirical analysis of learners’ perceptions of current delivery technologies. The study points out flaws in current evaluation methods of online delivery, offering both a critique and an alternative evaluation schema. The study underscores important, problematic aspects of user experience identified by other authors in this issue. Specifically, Zaharias and Pappas examine how the evaluation of conventional learning management systems (LMS) “focuses only on the capabilities in relation to administration and management of teaching and learning” but lacks “a conceptual framework and evaluation model of LMS through the lens of User Experiences (UX) research and practice” (p. 62).

Design of these environments has to support a whole range of learners’ needs. Learners seek opportunities to apply their knowledge to solve real problems; they want to be able to explore new contexts; they need to find connections and build communities of practice (Lombardi, 2007). Especially for building communities of practice, we see that key tenets of connectivism (Siemens, 2004) suggest meaning-making and forming connections between specialized communities are important activities. Emerging learning technologies such as MOOCs try to incorporate these kinds of opportunities in order to provide rich and meaningful learning experiences. We assert that modern LMS platforms also need to evolve towards these directions. (p. 71)

From this analysis of user centered design in personal learning environments provided by Zaharias and Pappas, the issue moves to the fifth article, a discussion by author Matt Crosslin regarding user centered design of instruction itself. FROM INSTRUCTIVISM TO CONNECTIVISM: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF MOOCs presents a framework for analyzing the goals of a proposed MOOC to determine appropriate epistemology, methodology, communication types and power structures. While Crosslin's analysis remains largely at the theoretical level, his work closely parallels Bartoletti's case study of design team members' processes for exploring, rejecting, and adopting various design models for their specific MOOC purposes. As do all authors in this issue, Crosslin acknowledges the significant influence connectivism exerts on MOOC design. Calling for "unbiased alignment of course goals to epistemology [as a means to] set the foundation for the design stage," Crosslin writes:

[I]f analysis suggests the power structure inherent in the learning goals leans toward connectivism, course design would need to include relatively little direct instruction, and would involve more ill-structured problems, interactive exercises, learner-determined activities, and even artifacts based on learner preferences rather than pre-determined structures (such as papers, tests, etc.). (p. 90)

Donna Harp Ziegenfuss provides the sixth article of this special issue: CLOSING THE LOOP: BUILDING SYNERGY FOR LEARNING THROUGH A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MOOC ABOUT FLIPPED TEACHING. This case study explores use of a "backward design process" to render a faculty professional development MOOC providing "an online project-based learning experience that integrated learning about the flipped classroom and about how to flip a classroom as the participants designed flipped teaching materials" (Abstract, p. 103). "Closing the loop" refers to a conclusion drawn from the case study: that course designers and instructors should rethink how they monitor and assess learning in MOOC contexts. When Ziegenfuss suggests "technology tools and online learning environments are being heralded as possible solutions to make teaching and learning more efficient, effective, interactive, and collaborative" (p. 108), she invokes a theme pervasive throughout this compendium: the interaction of method and technology serves as means to an end: to make (or allow) the learner to take responsibility for learning, and to create an 'anti-pedagogy,' in the sense that learning ceases to be about what the teacher does to/for the students, ceases even to be about what the teacher facilitates, but rather becomes about what learners do for themselves, each other, and the teacher.

Ziegenfuss describes how, during data collection, her research team "interviewed some participants who appeared to be 'lurkers' in the course asking about their actual engagement with course content" (p. 113). "MOOCs are often

criticized for the low MOOC completion rates,” she notes, questioning “is this really a good measure of MOOC learning?” (p. 113). Here Zeigenfuss introduces sentiments echoed by authors who contribute the seventh article of this issue, “WHO IS A STUDENT: COMPLETION IN COURSERA COURSES AT DUKE UNIVERSITY” (Goldwasser, M. et al). The Duke University authors identify challenges created by the lack of “clear operational definitions about who constitutes a learner at the outset of the course,” then examine “factors that predict different learner participation levels,” noting “the decision of which definition to use should be intentional,” based on the purpose of an analysis of MOOC participation (Abstract p. 125). The researchers’ methodology underscores their chief concern in the study:

[W]e present different ways to define a student based on course activities. This includes defining a student as someone who: 1) enrolled in the course, 2) ever visited the course website, 3) watched any video lecture, 4) viewed the discussion forum, or 5) submitted any graded assignment. For each of the five possible definitions, we present regression models that indicate the likelihood of various demographic measures correlating with someone fitting the definition of a student. (p. 129)

The Duke team suggests “useful information about when and how individuals use course elements, regardless of whether they ultimately complete the course, can inform understandings regarding learner engagement with the material” (p. 128).

Each of the three articles that close this special issue address aspects of learner engagement among MOOC participants. The eighth article is titled APPLYING A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY INSTRUMENT TO MEASURE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LARGE ONLINE COURSES. With this study, Carol A.V. Damm joins Zacharias and Pappas in examining massive learning in corporate contexts. Zacharias and Pappas examine learning through a survey conducted among participants using “a well-known industrial e-learning portal, elearningindustry.com” (p. 67), whereas Damm’s study reports on engagement in situations in which a “U.S. book publisher (BP) offers online courses with an average course participation of 400 students on a commercial learning management system ... headlined by authors of popular books that this organization publishes ...” (p. 141). Damm notes:

One challenge of an online course is to keep students motivated and ensure their absorption of the material. The large number of students who register for Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) but do not complete them, and/or do not stay engaged throughout, has been a principal component of the criticism of the efficacy of this course genre for making quality education available to all. (p. 142)

Damm sets out to learn why the publisher's "courses suffer from two of the standard problems associated with Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs): high dropout rates and inconsistent participation among all but a small percentage of learners" (p. 142). She studies students "using a mixed methodology based on the validated Community of Inquiry (CoI) survey" to learn if "low engagement rates in large online courses correlate with weak social presence, teaching presence, and/or cognitive presence," and to discern if the CoI instrument can measure "student's engagement or non-engagement with a large online course" (p. 140).

In the ninth article of this issue, Julia Parra continues discussion of the complex design decisions that impact learner engagement in MOOCs. Parra's case study, *MOVING BEYOND MOOC MANIA: LESSONS FROM A FACULTY-DESIGNED MOOC*, records the efforts of this instructor/designer/researcher to wrap a traditional graduate college course regarding learning design, technology and innovation around a MOOC of the same topic using ADDIE design principles. Working through successive approximations across multiple semesters, Parra has revised a course she runs within a conventional LMS, concluding:

Current LMSs are not conducive to massive collaborative group projects as I design them. Collaborative group projects will not be a part of my design for the next MOLO. A MOLO just about collaboration is possible but collaboration, as part of the MOLO learning design, still needs work. (p. 197)

Essentially, Parra arrives at the conclusion Zacharias and Pappas reach: that one needs a different sort of personal learning environment to support MOOC participation. Parra's statement of limited success running a MOOC through a conventional LMS contrasts sharply with the #rhizo 14 autoethnographers' narratives regarding their effective learning and engagement using social media platforms. After acknowledging the challenges she and learners faced participating in the open version of her course, Parra cites "a MOOC learner and researcher from Rwanda" to explain her own motives for continuing to offer MOOCs (p. 175):

Bernard Nkuyubwatsi (2013) ... focuses on the role of MOOCs in democratizing education. ... Nkuyubwatsi also sees MOOCs' potential for "improving the quality of access to higher education" through the affordances of openness, flexibility, and 24/7 access. (p. 175)

Parra applauds the achievements of her graduate students, closing her case study with accounts of their gains through the course, including this narrative:

One student, literally the only student at our university from his country, shared during a face-to-face class conversation that the Internet access in his country is inaccessible and that his hopes were that when it becomes more available, he wants to be ready for his people with resources for teaching and learning English. This student has made incredible progress, coming from a country where he had no access to the Internet to recently being hired as a K12 technology coordinator. (p. 201)

Fittingly, the tenth and final article of this special issue on MOOCs provides a case study leading to the conclusion that scholars from low-and-middle-income countries (LMIC) should begin producing their own MOOCs. In PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE OF THE FIRST MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSE (MOOC) FROM PAKISTAN, Syed Hani Abidi, Aamna Pasha and Syed Ali examine why enrollments in MOOCs remain low among peoples from low-and-middle-income countries.

The authors describe their launch in 2014 of a three-week course that “covered current concepts and techniques used in computer-based drug design,” a course that “attracted 230 enrollments including undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate students, healthcare professionals, researchers and university faculty” (p. 206). The study analyzed learners’ perspectives on the course “[u]sing data gathered through an online survey” regarding “concerns and expectations their participants identified, and what might be the factors deterring a potential LMIC participant from enrolling in a MOOC” (p. 207). The authors conclude:

The prospective LMIC MOOC participant is eager to partake of resources that are time- and cost-efficient, and are effective in enhancing knowledge and skills. However, to make the future MOOC experience more rewarding it is imperative to spread computer literacy more widely in the LMICs. Moreover, LMIC nations such as Pakistan acknowledge their own unique learning cultures and experiences when they produce and share their MOOC offerings with the world. (p. 211)

This heartfelt and carefully researched argument from Pakistani scholars, coupled with Parra’s inclusion of encouraging news from the Rwandan academic, Bernard Nkuyubwatsi, suggest the MOOC community may be reinvesting in the promise proffered by early advocates, including the *New York Times* which was offered in this bold statement in 2012: “Welcome to the brave new world of Massive Open Online Courses – known as MOOCs – a tool for democratizing education” (Lewin, 2012).

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