

# **x v c: Hybrid learning in, through and about massive open online courses (MOOCs)**

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**2355 words** not counting Reference list

## **Abstract**

[This abstract is an edited advance on the one originally submitted.]

MOOCs are a rich “third space” where the hybridisation of practices and meanings in and about higher education is proceeding rapidly. Network, content, task, community and project-based MOOCs, xMOOCs and cMOOCs and more have been identified. But, the proliferation of types and designs emerging is only part of the story. With “free” MOOCs, quality difference drives choice and motivation is called into question. The design and development of MOOCs is influenced by different beliefs in the course team, different agendas in the funding bodies and different institutional priorities. The external environment, history and even ideas are actors in development. And, people’s experience of MOOCs is highly varied. MOOCs show that learners will make of the course what ever they will. Drawing on our experience of one of the UK’s first MOOCs, we suggest that MOOCs are rapidly hybridising novel (phenotypical) expressions of higher education that bear consideration as cultural, political and linguistic learning phenomena of identity, literacy and community. Hybridity in and through MOOCs is one way of experiencing and understanding rapid evolution in higher education at this threshold moment.

## **Keywords**

open education practice oer mooc online learning higher third-space

## **Introduction: the MOOC phenomenon hype cycle**

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are a recent phenomenon. From their origin among hardy academic *voyageurs* in Canada some five years ago (Downes & Siemens, 2013) through the explosion of interest in elite US universities in 2011-12 to the spreading emergence of things called MOOCs as we write, the field is shifting, definitions are proliferating, and new platforms are being deployed. As well as a field, a market of sorts is emerging, quite fiercely, some might suggest. This market-like phenomenon with venture capital, big data, and many actors, is fuelling expansion in open educational designs. We are probably at a “peak of inflated expectations” (Gartner, 2013). Some voices, notably traditional university presidents (Kingkade, 2012) and academics (Kolowich, 2012 and see Rees 2012 & 2013 for a particular example) are sceptical. Should we be issuing a warning about the looming “trough of disillusionment”?

In this paper we first consider MOOCs as a field in which difference is being created. We then consider types of MOOC emerging. Given the presumption that the “open” in MOOC for now means MOOCs are free to the learner, we identify some institutional motivations for “giving

away” courses. Then we observe from experience creating our own MOOC in 2012 and MOOCs in which we have participated, that learners create multiple experiences within any MOOC. Given these many factors, we suggest MOOCs offer unlimited possibility for hybridization: sporting novel educational forms with at least metaphorical possibility of producing unpredictable but significant evolutionary, transformative features in individuals, groups and institutions.

One way of helping designers address this is to take a third space perspective (Bhabha, 2004). MOOCs, in our view, should admit the uniqueness of each person, actor, understanding or context as a “hybrid”. We conclude that viewing MOOCs as hybrid learning phenomena through the lens of Third space theory might be a way of helping institutions, designers and learners to appreciate and develop in and through the MOOC experience.

## ***Types of MOOC***

In an expanding market actors in the field need to create difference in order to stand out among rapidly proliferating offerings (Levitt, 1980). MOOCs, for the moment, are proliferating. And, MOOCs, for the moment, are differentiating. A taxonomy is emerging.

In the early days there was one kind of MOOC (Cormier & Gillis, 2010). In 2012 observers began to notice two broad categories. "Network-based" cMOOCs (Lane, 2012) are the earlier form, based on connectivist learning principles (Siemens, 2005). "Content-based" xMOOCs (Lane, 2012) are the more recent phenomenon emerging from Stanford and MIT, described by Siemens (2012) as monstrous and attracting upwards of 150,000 participants. As Peter Sloep (2012) observed, the key difference between these two different types of MOOC is one of underlying beliefs, which inevitably affect learning. So, are they categorically different?

We observed that a simple binary taxonomy could be differentiated (Roberts, Mackness, Waite, & Lovegrove, 2012). cMOOCs have an explicit pedagogical perspective based on social constructivism, dialogic learning and actor networks. They might be described as philosophically idealist. They instantiate this perspective through distributed open learning platforms often based on WordPress and Moodle, and intentional social media conversations; not only may you use Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, your own blog, and so on; you will not be able to join in the conversation unless you do. cMOOC designers took an almost Freireian, radical, learner-centred approach, inviting participants to create the course syllabus from knowledge objects of their world. cMOOCs clearly challenged institutional prerogatives of access, assessment, learning environment and intellectual property conventions.

xMOOCs, on the other hand appeared to take a tacit pedagogical perspective. Though they did not state it explicitly, they were instructivist, teacher and institution-centred, cognitivist, pragmatic and realist (Rodriguez, 2012). They asserted authenticity in respect of employability. Content, skills and roles, rather than community, seem to be the priority. They instantiated this perspective through consolidated, in-house engineered platforms, using only incidental social media conversations. They represented an institutionally-centred counter position to the cMOOCs.

## **Hybridization in MOOCs**

Between xMOOCs and cMOOCs, intermediate (hybrid) forms, syntheses, compromises or novel solutions, arise. Watwood (2013) observes @robhogg68 "working on an archive of #edcmooc tweets." He reports 6,711 messages from 2,180 users: active, intentional social media conversations in a Coursera xMOOC with 40,000 registrants. Is that an xMOOC or a hybrid? Lisa Lane has observed a third kind of MOOC, which she called "Task-based" (Lane, 2012). Jim Groom describes ds106 as a "community" rather than as a course (ds106, 2013). OLDSMOOC

defines itself as "project-based" (oldsmooc, 2013) and "blended". Network, content, task, community, project and blended may all be valid differentiators of MOOCs. But, MOOCs also show that learners will make of the course what ever they will (Lukeš, 2012). MOOCs offer an unlimited number of possibilities for hybridization because, whatever else, they offer participants the opportunity to fashion their own learning according to their needs. Bonk (2013) identifies 22 types of MOOC with 20 Leadership Principles and 12 business models. The numbers are changing and boundaries are fuzzy. There is stratification going on at the innovative end of traditional educational institutions.

## **MOOCs as platform**

And, at this time, the first (and second) movers in the xMOOC sphere: Coursera, Udacity, FutureLearn and EdX are primarily offering themselves as platforms for delivery and market-quality assurance of MOOCs. Content is provided by contractors, clients or discipline communities. Every platform provider makes a big thing of it being a prestige collection: Harvard and MIT; Stanford, Edinburgh and others; the UK Russell Group and the Open University; Google, Microsoft and the Khan Academy. Apple and iTunes U almost seem also-rans.

## ***First steps in learning and teaching (FSLT): a case study in MOOC design***

### **What kind of beast was this MOOC?**

In May and June 2012, the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD) ran one of the UK's first MOOCs. First Steps in Learning and Teaching (FSLT12) was described as a "small open online task-based MOOC" (Mackness, 2012). FSLT12 was part-funded by the JISC/HEA Open educational resources, phase three, programme and led by Oxford Brookes University. FSLT12 aimed to leave participants after 5 weeks better informed about teaching and learning in higher education and confident that they could try out new things. Through the MOOC they should also have strengthened - or maybe discovered - a professional support network.

FSLT12 was not massive in the x-MOOC sense. FSLT12 had 200 participants: five times bigger than our usual Ed Dev module. In order to pilot the assessment process for accreditation we offered up to twenty five (25) participants the opportunity to receive individual feedback from tutors on their activity on the course. Those who stayed the course (some 60) and those who in the end enrolled, were assessed and received certificates (14) were active, engaged and reported positive outcomes (Roberts, 2012).

### **FSLT design process**

The design and development of FSLT12, was influenced by different beliefs and experience in the course team, different agendas in the funding bodies and different institutional priorities. External factors were agents in the process, too.

The stakeholders each had their own agendas. The JISC was funding the production and reuse of open educational resources and developing models and testbeds for their deployment. This suggested a content-centred, resource-based learning design. The Higher Education Academy wanted the course to implement the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF HEA, 2013) for teaching in higher education, suggesting an outcomes and standards-based continuing professional development (CPD) design. Oxford Brookes University had an existing

New Lecturers programme and a series of validated modules and CPD short courses, into which FSLT12 had to fit, suggesting structural, institutional design criteria.

We used a systematic approach (Laurillard, 2004) focussing on the learners, the activity and the quality regime under which the course would be accredited but the design as implemented was, inevitably, a compromise.

### **Intended learners**

The course was targeted at new lecturers, PhD students who teach, and people moving into HE from industry. And, a number of course participants fit those categories. There were people who were completely new to HE, and to learning online, but who had chosen the course because it was more convenient than its face-to-face equivalent. Other participants were MOOC 'veterans', and experienced lecturers, interested in refreshing their practice, or sharing their experience. About half came from outside the UK.

### **Distributed collaboration**

Communication between people rather than interaction one-to-one with content was a condition, in line with institutional priorities. Group-work or collaboration and peer mentoring was favoured over solitary self-assessed engagement with content or highly dependent, one-to-one feedback with a tutor. That said, from experience tutors felt comfortable engaging closely with sets of eight to 10 people. Scalability may be limited for participants heading towards university accreditation and professional recognition. New assessment forms may be needed.

### **Quality assurance**

Quality assurance regimes exerted structural pressure to think in terms of levels and scales. We started thinking 5 credits/50 hours postgraduate level (seven in the UK QCF). The minimum credit weighted module issued by Oxford Brookes University is currently 10 credits/100 hours. We discovered through the pilot that in 5 weeks of professional engagement active participants could easily notch up 100 hours. We are redeveloping the module as 10 credits and working this into a wider scheme of 10 and 20 credit, level seven learning modules leading to a range of academic and professional qualifications.

### **Economic contribution**

The institution also wants a means of making the course a net economic contributor to the institution. We suggest that the supported, assessed MOOC route with a widely networked community around it could be worth at least as much to a participant as a closely tutored, unaccredited CPD course of similar duration in a walled garden. Open, wild gardens and walled gardens each have their attractions.

### **MOOC motivation**

These are among motivations considered strategic in the MOOC conversation as identified by a recent working group at Oxford Brookes University:

- Improving global learner experience
- Social/Global/Community mission
- Continuing professional development (CPD) for all
- Enhancing reputation, increasing global visibility, showcasing own expertise
- Growth area for HE has been online

- Entering untapped markets or serving existing markets in new ways.

## ***MOOCs as third spaces***

Understanding the MOOC phenomenon awaits the results of many projects just now producing results [including our own Waite, *et al.* in submission, 2013]. We suggest that what we are seeing is rampant hybridization. But, the hybridity is not simply that of a dialectic between x and c-type types of MOOC and then the next antithesis/synthesis. MOOCs of various sorts are being continually "interbred" to produce new variants. A focus on the course and the platform ignores the experience of the MOOC learner. Higher education is, in part, about developing awareness of one's own and one's discipline's essentially hybrid nature (Lukeš, 2012). The individual or idiosyncratic curriculum of each learner, as well as the institutional, pedagogical, political and other overt and covert curricula of higher education all combine or hybridise in contextually unique variants for each learner.

MOOCs are rapidly hybridising novel (phenotypical) expressions of higher education that bear consideration as cultural, political and linguistic learning phenomena of identity, literacy and community. How to express this new educational phenotype? We suggest that viewing MOOCs through the lens of the "third space" might help make sense of the MOOC experience.

## **The concept of the third space**

The concept of the third space (Bhabha 2004) is widely used (Licona 2005; Levy 2008, 44). Skerrett (2010, 67) associates it with a multiliteracies approach (New London Group 1996). Third space theory has been applied to the pre-school space within which children learn to read, bringing domestic and school literacy practices into their own constructions of literacy (Levy 2008). Another contemporary construction is that one space is the domestic sphere: the family and the home (Walsh 2006, 125). A second space is the sphere of civic engagement including school, work and other forms of public participation. Set against these is a third space where individual, sometimes professional (Hulme, Cracknell, and Owens 2009; Whitchurch 2008, 377) and sometimes transgressive acts are played out: where people let their "real" selves show. Sporting associations may be labelled as third spaces (Ruddock 2005, 373). Often bars and nightclubs are so labelled (Law 2000, 46–47).

## **A purpose for MOOCs in change**

MOOCs are a rich "third space" where the hybridisation of modes and meanings in and about higher education is proceeding rapidly. Higher education is always explicit about identity development. Values-based criteria in proliferant professional recognition schemes attest to this. Origins as a learner, a lecturer, a researcher, a professional, a graduate are all important. But, these "cultures" have no priority, one over the other. MOOCs call academic identity into question and offer new ways to engage professional and cultural/civic identities. Hybridity experienced in and through MOOCs can be seen in participants, course leaders, institutions and in the MOOCs themselves. Hybridity is one way of recognising and sensing the almost quantifiable, rapid evolutionary change that we are seeing in higher education: a threshold moment.

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Please cite this work as: Roberts, G *et al.* (2013). x v c: Hybridity in through and about MOOCs. In Proceedings of OER13: Creating a Virtuous Circle. Nottingham, England.