Distance Education

A phenomenology of learning large: the tutorial sphere of xMOOC video lectures

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A phenomenology of learning large: the tutorial sphere of xMOOC video lectures

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The current discourse surrounding Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is powerful. Despite their rapid and widespread deployment, research has yet to confirm or refute some of the bold claims rationalizing the popularity and efficacy of these large-scale virtual learning environments. Also, MOOCs' reputed disruptive, game-changing potential for education remains unsubstantiated. A sober counterbalance is needed, in particular, via attending to students' everyday accounts of the complex realities of learning in these massive online courses. This article reports on an exploratory, phenomenological study of the xMOOC learning experience. Our interest was not the xMOOC experience of students in general, but in its singular, *lived* particularities. What we discovered was a unique and intimate tutorial sphere that seemed to develop for some xMOOC students in the context of the video lectures, an experience sometimes marked by a sense of fandom surround.

Keywords: eventedness; MOOCs; phenomenology; student–teacher relation; tutorial sphere; video lectures

Introduction

Most of us have grown up with faces on television that look back at us, talk to us, even when we ignore them. They smile at us, and seem to address us personally. But they cannot see or hear us, and we may or may not know who they are. Increasingly, in societies where screens are prevalent (e.g., TV, cinema, computers), our encounters with fellow human beings are mediated in ways such as this. Has the ubiquitous intervention of screens in our lives thus made it harder to understand and communicate directly with one another? Or, have screens extended our capacity to empathise and "socialise", bringing us face-to-face with people and points of view that we otherwise would never have encountered? (Gerbaz, 2008, p. 17)

Sebastian Thrun, co-founder of Udacity, declared bluntly that:

Education is broken. Face it … It is so broken at so many ends, it requires a little bit of Silicon Valley magic … If you look at Stanford, they are wonderful but they are small, by choice … What is missing is scale. (Wolfson, 2013)

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By scale, Thrun means massive, as in massive open online courses (MOOCs). Video game theorist and MOOC critic Ian Bogost (2013) countered that "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." Bogost's tongue-in-cheek humor aside, the claim that the MOOC learning experience is essentially the traditional lecture reformatted for popular screen begs verification in the field: Is learning in a MOOC like sitting in a lecture hall, except online? Or watching a sitcom? Or is it, as Thrun (cited in Wolfson, 2013) suggested, more like a massively scaled up version of the Stanford experience? Thus, we may rightly inquire, what is it really like for students to learn in a MOOC?

This article reports on preliminary findings of a phenomenological study examining students' accounts of their everyday experiences of learning in MOOCs.[1] In particular, the study gathered and analyzed experiential "MOOC moments" recollected by xMOOC completers, that is, "learners who completed the majority of the assessments offered in the class" (Kizilcec, Piech, & Schneider, 2013, p. 3). Through phenomenological analysis of these completing students' lived experience descriptions (LEDs), 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.

MOOC research: an overview

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, scholarly journal articles, academic reports, and conference proceedings are beginning to appear with accelerating frequency, reporting primarily on single case studies, student survey data, and analyses based on a 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.

There is already a well-established body of scholarship on e-learning in higher education, open learning, as well as informal learning experiences in a wide range of virtual spaces, including online communities, social media, and Wikipedia. Yet, for the most part, extant MOOC discourse has noticeably disregarded this pre-MOOC e-learning literature (Daniel, 2012; McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Cormier, 2010; Siemens & Downes, 2011). Nonetheless, MOOCs—with their large-scale, open-access global enrollment—may also turn out to be "a different animal" (Breslow et al., 2013, p. 24) requiring new study. As happens with the arrival of any new educational technology, critical discussion is often hampered early on by a lack of evidence-based research in the midst of polarized rhetorical claims and commitments: MOOCs are "a tonic for an ailing education system say some, a poison for Universities say others" (Haggard, 2013, p. 12). Too, pedagogies evolve as teachers and students explore the unique affordances of the new learning environment, while the supporting educational technology architectures also undergo rapid development, articulation, and expansion.

Student experiences in MOOCs

Empirical studies of students' MOOC learning experiences are so far limited. A variety of quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to gather student learning data, including surveys, self-report instruments, semi-structured interviews, as well as big data—learner-generated numerical data-sets—that are tracked at the MOOC site. The latter allow researchers to perform large-scale educational data mining and learning analytics.

Classification of MOOC students by engagement and intention

Littlejohn (2013) conducted a mixed-methods study ($n = 29$) of learners' patterns of engagement in Siemens and Downes' (2011) *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge CCK2011* cMOOC. The study identified three levels of engagement: lurkers, passive participants, and active participants. Hill (2013) suggested adding a fourth category or "archetype" (¶ 9) of MOOC engagement: "drop-ins" (¶ 13). He defined drop-ins as students who are active participants but only for a selected topic or discussion thread in the course. Using a self-regulated learning self-report instrument combined with semi-structured interviews, Milligan, Littlejohn, and Margaryan (2013) further reported that students' patterns of engagement in the *CCK2011* cMOOC were affected by multiple factors including student confidence with the technology, prior experience with a cMOOC, and motivation.

Using learning analytics findings across three xMOOCs, Kizilcec et al. (2013) also distinguished four types of student engagement categories: completers, auditors, disengaged learners, and samplers. Koller, Ng, Do, and Chen (2013) argued the importance of separating out MOOC "browsers" from "committed learners," whom they defined as students "who tend to stay engaged throughout most or all of a class" (¶ 7). They proposed a further sub-grouping of committed learners: passive participants, active participants, and community contributors. Passive participants engage through watching videos, attempt few assignments, and have limited forum participation; active participants engage in all course content aspects of the MOOC and include the subset "course completers"; community contributors are also a subset of the active participants, but they additionally generate new content such as through discussion forums. Such attempts to construct a taxonomy of MOOC student engagement patterns, motivation, and intent are helpful. However, as with all such classification systems, they shed limited light on the experiential lifeworld dimensions of learning in a MOOC.

MOOC retention rates

MOOC completion rates average under 10% (Jordan, 2013), with Coursera courses reporting closer to 5% (Koller et al., 2013). Expressing concern regarding low completion rates, two xMOOC data mining studies of "first MOOCs" (edX's *Circuits and Electronics* and Duke University's *Bioelectricity*) proposed that "persistence" is a key variable determining student success (Belanger & Thornton, 2013, p. 8; Breslow et al., 2013, p. 14). In examining the issue of low retention rates in MOOCs, Koller et al. (2013) suggested that comparisons with traditional, university-based courses may be inappropriate since, unlike a paying college student, a significant portion of the non-completing MOOC population may have had limited

commitment and no need to complete the course. They concluded that MOOC student retention must be weighed in terms of student intention and commitment, not sign-up vs. completion rates.

Other MOOC student survey studies and big data learner analyses have and will continue to be published at a breathtaking rate for at least the next couple of years. Learner analytics are giving new, objective glimpses of student behavior and are revealing previously untracked learning activity patterns online. Student survey data and semi-structured interviews generate primarily subjective opinions and general impressions of learning in a MOOC. However, none of these studies are positioned to address the unique, pre-objective, pre-subjective, everyday "realities of learners' *actual*" experiences (Selwyn, 2009, p. 74; italics in original) in MOOCs. Without a methodical gathering and analysis of students' pre-reflective experiences in these large-scale learning environments, only minimal light will be shed on the "in the wild" lifeworld of MOOCs. Simply: we are missing a phenomenology of the MOOC learning experience.

MOOC experiences reported by students in the field

A number of MOOC participants have blogged or otherwise recorded their experiences online. For the most part, these journals have consisted of general observations and opinions about MOOCs—as one would expect to generate via survey or semi-structured interview—rather than detailed, lived-through descriptions of learning. Nonetheless, some experiential material is discoverable amid this wealth of online records. For example, TIME's *MOOC Brigade* (2012) series provides some excellent examples of experientially rich recollections. Below are two excerpts from this series: one from technology writer Harry McCracken, who completed Coursera's six-week *Gamification* MOOC by Kevin Werbach, and another from personal finance writer Brad Tuttle, who undertook Coursera's *Introduction to Mathematical Thinking* by Keith Devlin. Tuttle (2012) wrote:

> By the time the seventh e-mail about coursework and assignments arrives in my in-box, the guilt is too much to take. The online class I signed up for started on Sept. 17, and as the unopened emails pile up from Coursera, I haven't watched a single lecture or done any work. But hey, having the flexibility to take in lectures at whatever pace you please is one of the attractions of such courses. The fact they're free is another. In any event, it's time to buckle down.

Anyone who has registered for a MOOC with Coursera will immediately recognize Tuttle's guilt-ridden twinge as he encounters yet another reminder e-mail in his e-mail inbox. Once students have signed up, Coursera regularly pings students, issuing weekly updates and notices about important deadlines. To the delinquent student, such e-mail notifications may strike as an unhappy reminder of another unfulfilled commitment in an already overburdened schedule. Of course, as Tuttle (2012) pointed out, MOOCs' flexibility and zero cost have also allowed him to put off his participation almost indefinitely. Three weeks into the 10-week course and provoked by the e-mail, he at last decides to take the plunge. With Coursera attrition rates hovering close to 95% (Koller et al., 2013), 400+ courses on offer, and boasting more than 4 million students since its April 2012 launch, this ordinary LED also gestures to the potentially hundreds of thousands of other non-completers across the globe who have been and will continue to be plagued

by such guilt-inducing MOOC e-mail moments on a weekly basis. For a small percentage, the reminder may press the student to at last commit.

McCracken (2012), who finished Werbach's *Gamification* with a respectable 83% and thus earned a certificate, recorded the following post-completion MOOC moment:

> As I rummaged through my records [in the MOOC], I learned that I was penalized for completing the third homework quiz a day late. That surprised me, because my memory was that I squeaked it in right before the deadline of 9 pm on Sept. 18. Wrong! It was due at 8:59:00 pm, one minute before 9 pm. I apparently pressed the submit button at 8:59:32. On Coursera, being 32 s late counts as blowing the deadline by an entire day, which seems mean. And hey—I completed the final exam four days ahead of schedule, without receiving any bonus points for doing so. Upon learning about this infraction, I seethed briefly and considered complaining about the unfairness of it all in the forums. If I'd done so, I wouldn't have looked like the lone churl: the message boards are rife with students squawking about course policies, second-guessing the questions in the quizzes and begging that the rules be bent for one reason or another. I found most of their gripes to be preposterous and decided not to join their number.

McCracken confronted helplessly, but not without angry indignation, an unforgiving deadline that was incorrectly enforced 60 s prior to the advertised quiz completion cut-off. Of course, assignment and examination deadlines have long provided necessary course structure for teachers, as well as (artificial) motivation for students to progress their learning. But teachers and students also recognize that such deadlines are often arbitrary and may not always be defensible pedagogically speaking. In the case of the Coursera quiz (and other online learning management systems with similarly precise but incorrectly calibrated timing algorithms for flagging late assignments), the arbitrariness of, but also the contractual aspect of, such deadlines is momentarily foregrounded for McCracken. His reduced grade is unfair and maddening. Perhaps the moment now lives silently for McCracken as a lingering distrust that Coursera will not always give credit where credit is due. Indeed, the notion of assigning and being given credit underpins much of what transpires not only in a MOOC, but also the educational system more generally. Credit is currency, a lucrative market logic much on the minds of both universities and venture capitalists.

Evident too is the student's perception of the great-unwashed masses of others also inhabiting the MOOC. McCracken (2012) was aware that some contingent of his fellow MOOCers were busy on message boards, "squawking about course policies, second-guessing the questions in the quizzes and begging that the rules be bent for one reason or another" (¶ 5), a conversation he chose not to join at that moment. Echoing Tuttle's (2012) vivid description of his moment of resolve in the wake of a battery of reminder e-mails, McCracken's quiz deadline anecdote provides a compelling example of the nuanced singularity but also the recognizability of the xMOOC learning experience. Such anecdotal evidence gives us front row seat access to the differences of meaning significance a MOOC may make in the larger educational sphere and in the lives of students more generally. As McCracken (2012) added, "the fact that I was even temporarily ticked off about my grade is probably a good sign that the class was meaningful; if it hadn't been, I wouldn't have cared" (¶ 6).

Methodology

Our research asked: What are completers' experiences of learning in an xMOOC? 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 xMOOCs 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 toward exploring the everyday structures of pre-reflective human involvements, that is, 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

For this research, we generated data via two human science methods: 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 (Kizilcec et al., 2013) recruited via snowball sampling. Raw journal and transcript data were examined for LEDs. LEDs are moments recollected by the study participants while learning in an xMOOC, and specifically exclude their personal opinions or generalizations about the experience. The term *lived experience* has special methodological significance for phenomenology and refers to "our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 35). Phenomenological inquiry depends on a collected base of such remembered, pre-reflective or lived-through moments. This body of evidentiary material serves to orient all subsequent phenomenological analysis and reflection on the phenomenon, here, on the student experience of learning in an xMOOC.

Data analysis

Once raw data were generated, the interview transcripts and journals were culled for LEDs. These pre-reflective descriptions were then subjected to phenomenological analysis via the application of multiple heuristics including thematic, existential, and eidetic reflection (Van Manen, 2014). Existential reflection examines experiential data across five existential dimensions: *lived* time, *lived* (and extended) body, *lived* space, *lived* things, and *lived* relation. Lived time, for example, is distinguished from objective clock time: when one is engaged in a conversation with a good friend, time may seem to fly by or even disappear; whereas when one is sitting in a dull lecture, time slows to a crawl; all the while, the clock ticks away without variation. Eidetic analysis employs techniques such as comparing the lived dimensions of MOOCs to other online learning environments or face-to-face lectures, as well as those of completers to samplers, for example (several of our completers were also auditors, disengaged learners, and "sampling learners" in other MOOCs), as per the learner categories described by Kizilcec et al. (2013, p. 175). Thematic analysis is used to explore the

underlying meaning structures of the human experience. Phenomenological themes are not intended as generalized outcomes of the research—as is proffered in some forms of qualitative inquiry—but as heuristics to help lift up and uncover possible meanings inhering in a particular MOOC moment.

Although our analyses uncovered multiple themes, in this article, we focus on only two aspects of the student's *relational* experience of learning in an xMOOC. We examine (1) the relationship a student develops (or not) with the instructor in the context of prerecorded teaching videos and (2) the relationship students perceive with other xMOOC students en masse (as opposed to with individual peers).

A preliminary phenomenological analysis of the lived pedagogical relationality of xMOOCs

xMOOC videos may open an unexpectedly intimate tutorial sphere with the instructor

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.[2] (xMOOC participant)

Over the course of a few weeks, the student 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 (xMOOC participant), 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 xMOOCers 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 e-mail 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" (xMOOC participant) pedagogical relationship is reminiscent of the private educational sphere of the tutorial. The term *tutor* comes from the Latin *tutus*, which means to "watch over," and thus the Old French *tutour* for "guardian, private teacher" (Online Etymology Dictionary,

2001–2014). The MOOC instructor is clearly not in a position to watch over and attend individually to each of the thousands of students in this originary pedagogical sense. Nonetheless, an xMOOC student may have a very real and palpable sense of *being watched over* through the perception of being addressed in just such a personal, tutorial manner. The full reciprocity of a one-to-one, teacher–student tutorial relationship may not be possible in an xMOOC, but the addressive or "speaking directly to me" (xMOOC participant) dimension of a teaching tutorial may have found new pedagogical footing in this massive online learning world.

The prerecorded interjection may be felt as a special, private address in the immediacy of the now

Another MOOC participant describes watching Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor emeritus Walter Lewin deliver quirky, compelling in-class lectures and Physics demonstrations. Lewin's lectures had been recorded a decade earlier (in 2002) and were now integrated into an MITx MOOC, *Electricity and Magnetism*.[3] Then, unexpectedly, during one of the video lectures, the frame freezes, and Dr Lewin interjects that he had made a mistake there—it was an audio addendum directed to the current MOOC goers. The student smiles, recalling the moment: "He was talking to all of us, of course, the ones taking the MOOC. But he was also talking to me. That's how it felt."

Here, the professor's interruption of his recorded lecture stream foregrounds the immediacy with which the student perceived Lewin's voice, a moment encountered as a direct, personal address occurring *in the now*. Watching the recorded lectures, the student found himself sitting attentively *in* Lewin's class—a unique experiential confluence of viewing the 2002 lecture *and* belonging to the MOOC course more than a decade later. Lewin's voiceover, directed to all the current MOOC students, was in this online learning world apprehended by the student *both* as one of the many MOOCers, but also in a remarkably intimate way: "He was talking to all of us, … [b]ut he was also talking to me." Of course, the possibility of perceiving such a personal, pedagogical address had already taken root in the many MOOC video lectures given by Lewin that proceeded this moment. Is this then Bogost's (2013) traditional lecture but reformatted for the small screen? Or is it more akin to Thrun's Stanford experience (cited in Wolfson, 2013) but scaled up? Or perhaps it is something else?

One might imagine a university student, sitting among his peers in a chalkboard-lined MIT lecture hall watching the wacky pedagogical performance art of Walter Lewin. Suddenly, the legendary professor turns to the sea of avid students and confesses that he has made a mistake and must begin again. For the MOOC student, this aside was heard as directed not only to the whole class, but also to himself in particular. To gain a better sense of the latter experience in a face-to-face lecture situation, imagine now that Dr Lewin turns directly to this one student, perhaps addressing him by name or by way of a wink, and shares the same communiqué. Everyone in the class hears the aside, but the statement is clearly intended *for* this one student in particular. In such a moment, the student is called—perhaps even finds himself thrown—into a one-to-one student–teacher relational sphere in the midst of the larger class. Depending on how the student felt about being singled out in this way, the many eyes of the class may seem to suddenly bear down upon him, or alternatively, fade dramatically into the background. In an xMOOC, however, the online student lives with little fear (though perhaps a little desire) that the instructor

might unexpectedly single him or her out in front of the entire class: the MOOC is open and accessible to thousands, and yet the student nonetheless experiences the professor via the video in a remarkably face-to-face manner. The sphere of pedagogical relation that seems to manifest in the context of the xMOOC videos is intimate and personal; and while the experience of this unique tutorial sphere may be *shared* by many across the globe, it is assuredly felt as special and private.

Addressing students as a class in an xMOOC video may engage a sense of belonging and commitment: "Hello, 8-O-2-xers! How's it going? Don't give up, I know its hard, but don't give up!"

> The forums were useful for feedback some of the time, but the best thing was the short little video segments the instructor posted saying, "Hello, 8-O-2-xers! How's it going? Don't give up, I know its hard, but don't give up!" It made the difference between me quitting at the end of the 2nd week. (xMOOC participant)

It is difficult to estimate the difference a teacher's tactful and carefully timed words of encouragement can make to a struggling student. Indeed, is it really possible to ascertain what exactly in these words delivered via a brief video segment meant for this xMOOC student? Here, the instructor clearly knows that such support may be needed by his students, the 8-O-2-xers, at just this juncture, as well as at other key moments during the course. The student hears the instructor's words as, "I know you're going right into the deep end, don't quit! Stay on a couple more weeks, I promise you it will be worth it." She feels acknowledged in her struggle so far, and that the instructor understands but is also anticipating the difficulties that may lie ahead: nonetheless, he is cheering her on. Too, her status as *his* student is underlined: she is greeted as one of the 8-O-2-xers. She belongs to *MITx 8.02x– Electricity and Magnetism*, and her professor cares that she continues.

As every seasoned teacher knows, there is no magic formula for offering words of encouragement. The meaningfulness of a teacher's words inheres in the context of the class; the particularities of the subject matter; the prior background, the aptitude and interest, the unique personal situation and motivations of the student. Yet, it is also clear that the teacher's ability to surgically declare where the shoals of despair may lie along the academic journey and offer a reassuring pedagogical hand on one's shoulder may imbue the struggling student with the courage to proceed despite uncertain odds. Such sensitive understanding of the patterns of learning that may inhere in a particular course of study may also engender trust in the struggling student, and give her or him the courage to stay committed, to persevere despite current and anticipated future difficulties.

The instructor may be perceived as being "always there" for the student via the xMOOC videos

Another student describes a comparable moment after being away from the MOOC for more than a week:

> I log into the MOOC, realizing that I have so much to catch up with. My sense of panic at being behind starts to fade when I open the video to see the instructor, Steve, is talking to me as usual. It seems that he is always living there waiting for me! (xMOOC participant)

In the video, Steve, the instructor, appears for the student in the immediacy of her lived now. Despite the student's almost two-week absence from the course, it seems the conversation rapidly picks up from where the student had left off—not only does the student feel enabled to reacquaint herself with the course content, but she quickly falls back into the instructor's familiar way of talking and the welcoming atmosphere of the lecture. Such a felt, lively presence of the other in asynchronous, online pedagogical spaces has been noted elsewhere (Adams, in press; Friesen, 2011a). Too, the notion of *teaching presence* in online learning environments has generated significant scholarly attention over the last decade (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Baker, 2010; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). Especially remarkable here is that in this massive enrollment context, the teacher's presence is apparently not only felt by the student, but also is perceived as being "always … there … for me!" Moreover, this sense of being there is apparently realized in the context of the now much maligned pedagogical form: the lecture (Friesen, 2011b).

Nonetheless, it seems that at least in the xMOOC context, the lecture as a pedagogical form—whether as footage of an actual lecture (e.g., Walter Lewin's 2002 chalkboard and demonstration Physics lectures (Lewin, 2012) or Harvard University's Sandel's (2005) interactive justice lectures) or made-for-MOOC, speaking-to-the-camera video clip lectures as described in the anecdote above—has found new and meaningful pedagogical life. As Friesen (2011b) has pointed out, the constructivist stereotype of the lecture as a "simple transmission of knowledge" (p. 95) is clearly mistaken. Rather, the lecture is more a kind of "hermeneutic speech act" (p. 100) that nowadays is augmented with a range of computing technology enhancements but also continues to rely on traditional rhetorical "dramaturgical" effects and tricks (p. 101). Such authorial lecture performances seem to have the capacity to speak to a student in a manner akin to the way the good author can engage his or her reader. Yet, unlike a novelist, the talented xMOOC lecturer-instructor appears immanently present to the student, or perhaps more accurately, in the midst of the xMOOC video, the instructor's authorial performance is made immediately manifest for the student. But just as the words and letters on the page disappear for the absorbed reader, when learning from the xMOOC video lecture, students leave behind the digital world of the xMOOC and instead find themselves captured by the unique tutorial sphere occasioned by the instructor.

The mood of the MOOC may involve an atmosphere or ambient sense of "eventedness"

An IT professional who has taken multiple xMOOCs describes his experience in edX's first MOOC, *Circuits & Electronics: MITx 6.002x*:

> In a weird kind of way, I was getting a personal lecture from Agarwal, 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, Agarwal 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 go see U2 and I am so far away, but I can still see Bono on this massive screen, by the time the sound gets to me, the people are already dancing or waving and cheering out of sync, and his lips are moving up on the screen. So 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. (xMOOC participant)

This xMOOC student describes developing a close pedagogical relation with his instructor while simultaneously distantly perceiving his participation in a special event—reminiscent of a rock concert—that had gathered fans from across the world. Here, another experiential theme—"eventedness"—proposed by Cormier (2009), suggests itself. Cormier conjectured that eventedness, a sense of shared specialness characteristic of large-scale, fan-based public events (e.g., a rock concert or major sporting event), may uniquely distinguish MOOCs from other everyday online learning experiences.

Not all our study participants described such an ambiance of eventedness in their xMOOCs. However, one participant, who had taken an xMOOC that had not attracted many participants, keenly felt its unexpected absence:

> I login on Canvas and look for the information for the first week. I complete the video tutorial, and start going through the other links. There is little guidance, I don't know if I have correctly understood the required activities. I feel a little overwhelmed. I am supposed to choose some readings among the reference list, but which ones are the more relevant to the topic of this week? Which ones does the teacher recommend? I notice that there's no interaction yet: no messages, no announcements, and no signs of the others. I am sure this will be some interactions when I reach to the co-op tasks, but where are the people now? I start to feel a bit lonely. (xMOOC participant)

Later in the course, the student reported having several opportunities to interact directly (online) with the MOOC instructor, and very much appreciated the one-to-one correspondences with her. Yet, he also expressed disappointment that he had not experienced a "true MOOC" (xMOOC participant), that is, an online course that attracted thousands of students from across the globe. Throughout, he found himself occasionally looking for all the others, but only ever encountered a few.

Limitations

This research did not set out to represent all completer experiences of xMOOC videos. Rather, the purpose was to provide examples of meaningful xMOOC student experiences in an effort to uncover new and possibly fruitful avenues of research in this nascent educational field. Several of our study participants reported participating in MOOCs that they did not persist with. LEDs from these not-completed MOOC experiences were not included here. Nor were some of the other larger phenomenological themes we uncovered, for example, the temporal rhythms of the xMOOCs and the quality of relationality with individual others (peers). Instructive, too, were some of the frustrations and setbacks that these students described encountering. However, such difficulties and disappointments are reserved for future phenomenological analysis. Finally, we recognize the landscape of MOOCs is changing swiftly; thus, our study may be of transient historical significance. Nonetheless, we suggest that revealing the everyday experiences of xMOOC students today may provide critical glimpses for instructors and MOOC design teams members for future efforts.

Discussion and conclusion

Long before MOOCs arrived on the scene, the field of distance education had developed a significant history experimenting with video telecommunications (e.g., telelectures, telecourses, video-assisted independent study—VAIS), which included one-way pre-recorded/broadcast as well as two-way interactive video and television courses. Beare (1989), for example, compared the effectiveness of classroom lectures being delivered in-person, via telelecture, or by VAIS, and concluded there was no significant difference in student grades or course satisfaction. Interestingly, the lack of student–teacher interaction in the VAIS case did not appear to have a negative impact. In a review of 40 research studies involving the use of video- and computer-mediated learning, Merisotis and Phipps (1999) reached a similar conclusion: the academic performance of distance education students was on par with their campus-based peers, and student attitudes toward the use of video was generally positive. More recent research comparing on campus lectures with online streaming videos has also concluded that "the extent to which students attended lectures or watched them online was not related to examination performance" (Bassili, 2008, p. 129).

Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, the lecture as a pedagogical form has been the subject of increasingly hostile commentary (Friesen, 2011b). This antagonism is popularly expressed in the constructivist adage that the teacher should no longer be a "sage on the stage" (representing the "traditional" teacher-centric, transmission model of education) but a "guide on the side" (King, 1993, as cited in Friesen, 2011b, p. 95) (representing the newer, student-centric, socio-constructivist stance). A similar theoretic bifurcation has occurred in the cleaving of MOOCs into instructivist (i.e., direct instruction) xMOOCs and constructivist (or connectivist) cMOOCs. Ironically, even before MOOCs, there existed little evidence in the research literature to suggest that one approach is necessarily *better* than the other for all purposes. Moreover, with the multimodal, interactive possibilities that MOOCs of all shades afford—from discussion forums to informal Facebook collectives to local gatherings—it seems hard to abide a radical anti-lecture position.

In this regard, our study reveals several surprising results for constructivists and connectivists. Our xMOOC completers consistently described a unique and powerful sphere of intimacy that developed for them with their xMOOC instructor, most especially in the context of the pre-recorded instructional videos. Developing a sense of tutorial relationship with a top teacher and expert in the field is undoubtedly a dimension of the MOOC experience that warrants further investigation. Too, as Friesen (2011b) suggested, the lecture is a transmedial pedagogical form that is proving to be highly adaptive in our new media educational world, and should not be dismissed as an inappropriate pedagogical form for the future of education. As well, our findings 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.

More recently, Sebastian Thrun is more circumspect about his claims regarding the potential of MOOCs to remake the academy. Despite employing a range of engagement and motivation strategies to boost student participation and learning, including gamification, progress meters, and badges, Udacity's completion rate remains stubbornly low at 7% (Chafkin, 2013). Nonetheless, our exploratory study

of xMOOC completers suggests that these large-scale learning events may indeed represent a unique, new phenomenon that may be significantly different than previous online offerings. While an intimate tutorial sphere was not occasioned for all the 10 participants in our study nor across all of their xMOOC experiences, the possibility of experiencing such a one-to-one relation with an instructor of tens of thousands has rightly captured the public imagination, the fiscal attention of post-secondary institutions, and the keen interest of venture capitalists. But what to do about the other 93%?

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2014 Networked Learning Conference, Edinburgh.
2. Quotes represent material collected during interviews with MOOC completers and/or via solicited written experiential descriptions as part of a [university]-funded research project. Interviews were conducted either in person or via Skype. All names are pseudonyms. All data collection adhered to the guidelines set by the "Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans."
3. Because of the open and public nature of MOOCs, we credit the instructor and the name of the MOOC where applicable. Otherwise, pseudonyms have been employed as noted immediately above.

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