

Contributions to the mosaic describing learners' experiences with open online learning

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While individual offerings of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) differ in significant ways (Bayne & Ross, 2014), this fact did not prevent exuberant authors in the mass media in 2012-2013 to proclaim that MOOCs were going to revolutionize education. In 2013-2014 anti-MOOC sentiments rose amidst concerns pertaining to completion rates, sustainable business models, and pedagogical effectiveness, and by 2015 mass media attention has largely waned (Kovanovic, in press). While there continues to be “no shortage of prophecies about [MOOC’s] potential impact” (Breslow et al., 2013, pp. 23) and research into the behaviours and activities of learners enrolled in MOOCs continues unabated, the academic community has yet to develop an in-depth and multidimensional understanding of learner experiences in these courses and the scholarly community still has “an incomplete mosaic of students’ learning experiences with open online learning” (Veletsianos, 2013).

As Veletsianos, Collier, and Schneider (in press) argue “while researchers can say with increasing confidence what they observe learners doing in MOOCs, empirical evidence on why they do what they do, how they do what they do, and what it is like to participate in MOOCs is scarce.” Thus, we developed this special issue to enhance our collective understanding of learner experiences and participation in MOOCs. The question that we invited researchers to answer was:

What is it like to learn and participate in MOOCs?

The collection of papers in this special issue brings together authors from around the world who share their research on learner experiences, perspectives, and practices.

Park, Jung, and Reeves describe their experiences as educational technology scholars assuming the roles of learners. They use Carroll’s (1963, 1968) model of school learning as a theoretical framework, and analyze data recorded in personal journals. They report commonalities and differences with regards to inputs brought to MOOC study (aptitude, cultural habits, motivations for enrolment), process (opportunity to learn, effort, ability to understand instruction, perseverance, quality of learning design, support and presence), and outputs (knowledge and skills, higher order outcomes, and social networking). These authors conclude by proposing a refined version of Carroll’s model which can provide a foundation for future research and development into the study of MOOCs.

Yin et al, examined children’s’ experiences in a MOOC as they have identified that other researchers have expressed concerns regarding how these learning environments may alter children’s study patterns and habits. This work aimed to uncover lived

experiences and results are reported in five themes: (1) The MOOC video lecture may appear to the child as meaningful but devoid of relational significance, (2) For a child, the MOOC video lectures may be “just … another DVD,” (3) With family, MOOC video lecture may become a pedagogical moment, (4) A child may see in a MOOC what an adult may not, and (5) Children may “play” with their MOOCs.

Bali and colleagues, like Park, Jung, and Reeves, used autoethnography to make sense of their experiences in open online courses. Their research aimed to uncover the factors that make MOOCs communities designed with connectivist principles endure. In their report, these authors collaboratively reflect on their motivations and engagement with MOOCs, and suggest various reasons for positive learning experiences that they had.

Schmid et al., report on a mixed methods study that examines whether MOOCs reach the educationally underserved. One of the early arguments for MOOCs was that they held the promise of bringing high-quality, college-level courses from leading academic institutions to people who otherwise would not have access to such learning opportunities. While extensive research has shown that the majority of MOOC students are not underserved in terms of educational opportunities, Schmid and colleagues present descriptions of three learner populations for whom MOOCs offered opportunities that they could not have had otherwise, and report demographic characteristics, course attitudes and intentions, as well as qualitative learner feedback from each of these groups.

Finally, Liu, Kang, and McKelroy report on a mixed methods study that examined learners’ perspectives of taking a MOOC. Specifically, the authors investigated participants’ perceptions of a MOOC’s usefulness; participants’ reasons and excitement for enrolling in a MOOC; and changes in participants’ perceptions between two versions of the same MOOC. Analysis showed that a large majority of participants surveyed were working professionals who sought opportunities and resources for their career development without the constraints of their geographical locations and time. Participants also reported course schedule flexibility, instructor credibility, and material quality as important.

Ultimately, these papers contribute the mosaic of students’ learning experiences with open online learning and improve scholarly understanding of the topic. The papers also respond to the call by Veletsianos, Collier, and Schneider (in press) to use diverse methodological approaches to understand learning and participation in MOOCs, and demonstrate the value of doing so.

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