

Pondering Change and the Relationship of Prior Learning Assessment to MOOCs and Knowledge in Higher Education

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While it's become trite, almost a cliché, to bellow "the future is NOW!" in heralding or documenting societal or educational marches forward, perhaps in some cases it's true, or close enough to being true so as to be eerily prescient. One of these two conditions may in fact describe the current furor around the creation and management of the open educational resource (OER) and its close relative, the massive open online course (MOOC), the frameworks that have arisen to house them (OERu, Coursera, Udacity, etc.), and the many types of responses – pedagogical, political, financial – of higher education institutions to these innovations.

The MOOC juggernaut has many implications for institutions of higher education but none is more pressing and contentious than the issue of assessment and credentialization. Lawrence Bacow, past president of Tufts University and an online learning scholar, was referring to assessment when he suggested that it remains "unclear how traditional universities would integrate the new technologies" (Lewin, 2012). This paper, in focusing on issues of assessment, will discuss specifically the role of assessment as a learning activity in prior learning assessment (PLA) and the potential offered by PLA for assessing MOOC learning toward academic credentials offered by accredited institutions of higher learning. More broadly, the paper also will consider the nature of knowledge and the role of MOOCs as learning opportunities and as disruptive technologies. A short history tracking the evolution of this phenomenal movement and locating the current place of MOOCs in our field introduces the paper, followed by an overview of MOOC issues currently under discussion in the field.

Situating OERs and MOOCs in Higher Education in 2013

In 2008, George Siemens and Stephen Downes offered what would come to be known as the first massive open online course to 25 tuition-paying students at the University of Manitoba's Extended Education division. The course, *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge*, gave rise not only to Siemens' theory of connectivity but also to the term MOOC and to its underlying concepts: courses that are open to a large number of enrollees, of all sorts, at no cost. Over 2,000 "general public" students took the connectivism course along with the paying students. MOOC course content was made available in a number of technology-enhanced ways: asynchronous discussions using a learning management system (LMS), blogs, synchronous meetings, Second Life, podcasts and other Web-based resources.

Other courses built on the MOOC model followed, with the MOOC breakthrough occurring in 2011 when Stanford University presented three MOOCs, each attracting over 100,000 registrants. Thereafter, MOOC developments included many major American universities offering their own courses, forming partnerships with other agencies and collaborating on various models, for-profit and not-for-profit, to enter the MOOC market. Institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Michigan, Princeton University, Wellesley College, Georgetown University and the University of California joined Stanford, adding their longtime reputations as educational heavyweights to the mix. The major players today, as of the time of writing, are the consortium organizations Coursera, Udacity and edX (MIT and Harvard).

Learning with MOOCs

A full understanding of MOOCs as innovative (disruptive?) educational technologies will help to frame the discussion of assessment that follows. What does the MOOC structure comprise? What does it offer, both to institutions and learners, as MOOCs purport to present opportunities for thousands of learners around the world to enroll in university courses at institutions that would otherwise be inaccessible to them because of physical distance, cost or admission criteria?

MOOCs as online learning. An unsettling problem with MOOCs was broached recently in the article “Accreditation in a Rapidly Changing World” (LeBlanc, 2013) where the author wrote:

Historians of this period, possessing the clear-sightedness that only time provides, will likely point to online learning as the disruptive technology platform that radically changed higher education, which had remained largely unchanged since the cathedral schools of medieval Europe. . . .” (para. 1)

This is not true, and is no doubt understood by the author not to be true, as he follows immediately with this ameliorating statement: “Online learning is already well-understood, well-established and well-respected by those who genuinely know it” (para. 2). Herein lies the problem. Online learning has *not* been the disruptive technology to higher education tradition; ironically, it has taken the creation of MOOCs to awaken the world to the potential of online learning. Equally ironically, MOOCs may indeed turn out to be the straw that breaks higher education’s back. MOOCs may be the game-changer, the fork in the road. It is important to note, however, that MOOCs and online learning are *not* synonymous and should not be confused with each other, although they sometimes overlap.

This argument’s coin is very two-sided: the star-power trajectory of MOOCs has brought new attention to online learning to the extent that obtaining an education at a distance using a computer has become a reality or a probability for many. That good news is probably counterpointed by the misjudging and negative evaluation of the quality of online learning based on what has been foisted upon the public in the MOOC sweepstakes. In other words, a world previously unaware of the benefits of rigorous, pedagogically-sound online learning now equates that learning with mass-delivered courses of dubious or erratic quality with thousands of students and with high attrition rates. In this paper, then, discussions of online learning do not refer to MOOC delivery.¹

Communication and collaboration. It is a mystery to longtime online teachers such as this writer as to how a course with 100,000 enrollees manages to maintain some (any?) level of interaction, communication or collaborative learning.² The current paucity of refereed research on this issue commits those investigating it to depend on anecdotal evidence that is abundantly available on the many websites addressing higher education and learning: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Wired Campus*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Educause* and *Academe*, for example. From these sources, we learn that many MOOCs “deliver” content using the talking-head model: canned lectures topped off with automated tests and automated essay graders. It makes mathematical sense that large-scale enrollments will reduce instructor-contact. Non-collaborative learning of this type has been common in the hard sciences – engineering, computer science, etc. – although some institutions have moved toward constructivist approaches in these disciplines.³ Blog discussions have noted that MOOC instructional strategies are static, including the recording of old lectures. Discussants also note that where there is interaction and collaboration online within MOOCs, such conversation is often peer-generated or peer-led. Within the constructivist framework, this is considered good activity. “Seeding” questions to an online group is a popular strategy in online instruction, and the subsequent actions of monitoring, commenting and guiding online conversations constitutes a sturdy pedagogical approach that has received much critical attention from the field’s research community (Conrad, 2007; Gabriel, 2007).

However, the critical element to online instructional success following this model is instructor presence, involvement and feedback (Garrison, 2000). Given this understanding of the online format, the lack of instructor presence in MOOCs is worrisome, even alarming. Similarly, the substitution of peer-led exchanges for

instructional presence is counter to many educators' sense of the importance of the teaching role (Anderson, 2008; Brookfield, 1990; Garrison, 2000).

Peer evaluation. Following on the heels of a MOOC's reliance on learners to initiate and/or lead activities among its thousands of enrollees, peer evaluation has become a MOOC staple, for example, in Coursera courses (Cronenweth, 2012). Sometimes software-assisted, sometimes permitting written commentary, the use of peer evaluation, in this educator's opinion, has limited value and limited reliability, especially when used summatively in courses designed or intended to seek credit toward a postsecondary credential. In stating this, I do not disparage teaching and learning philosophies that value group work, learner collaboration or constructivist principles that value learners' prior experience and encourage learners to bring that knowledge forward in the creation of new, shared knowledge within the group. However, encouraging student engagement and participation – and thereby, one hopes, cognitive growth – within an instructor-designed or instructor-led framework is a far cry from instructor abnegation. Cronenweth (2012) wrote: “This form of ‘crowd-sourced commentary’ helps create a learning community – so why not build the community even further by empowering learners to evaluate one another?” (para. 4). The abbreviated answer, from the instructional and cognitive point of view (space prevents a discussion of the organizational or sociological point of view) is simply that learners are learners because they do not yet have the scope or depth of relevant knowledge that teachers do. In many cases, as well, they lack the process skills to manage the “classroom” effectively. As such, peer-led evaluation does not comprise an adequate summative assessment strategy.

Cheating, plagiarism, identity and “who are you?” MOOC discussions have raised a number of other issues that *purport* to be, or may appear to some to be, MOOC-originated; but these are in fact issues that have been topics of interest to online researchers and scholars for some time. Establishing the “true” identity of online contributors is one such issue, and those skeptical of online learning have long asked how it can be possible to determine actual identity and therefore ensure that no academic dishonesty is occurring. The simple but evasive response is that no one can ever be sure of students' identities, and that cheating and plagiarism will always occur no matter what precautions are taken. (Educators have heard all the stories.) The more complicated answer involves creating learning activities and assignments that dissuade cheating due to their complexity, their dependence on continuity and integration, and their dependence on students' individuality and “situatedness”; in other words, authentic assignments that require students to draw on more than rote memory or the reproduction of course material. A recent red herring discussion on MOOC-related sites involves the possibility of identifying students by key stroke intensity, voice recognition and Webcam shots; however, for each technical “solution,” a denying counter argument can be made. A telling insight to academic dishonesty arises from the fact that cheating and plagiarism has been found to be as rampant in non-credit MOOCs as it is in credit courses (Young, 2012)! Although this is a sad statement on human nature, it should not be used to gauge the integrity of MOOCs, one way or the other, or their value as learning activities.

Another MOOC issue, related to learning integrity and also, ultimately, assessment and credentialization, involves levels of socialization or non-socialization, and what is termed “non-cognitive” or non-academic learning. This important issue is germane to the discussion of what matters – to learners and their employers – about their learning and its relevance to personal and professional development. The argument begins by assuming that traditional universities provide opportunities for non-academic learning – teamwork, cooperative learning, etc. – and socialization –becoming socially mature and developing interpersonal skills. Conversely, distance learning was initially criticized for being “lonely” and alienating (Eastmond, 1995). However, years of online learning research have shown conclusively that learners can be, if they choose, fully immersed in virtual social activity; that the exchange of social data is active and productive; and that soft skills or non-academic skills related to teamwork, collaboration and organization are, in fact, key to online success (Conrad, 2007; Kemp, 2006).

MOOCs in the broader education world

Beyond the immediate pedagogical concerns raised by MOOCs, two further issues are presented here. The MOOC discussion must address a large and very real issue that, while external to the logistics of running courses that are designed to take in 100,000 people, is key to the future of higher education. The issue is that of engagement, which in turn includes sub-issues of elitism, mission, role and the contribution of the university to the public good. In a recent presentation to the Sixth Annual World Universities Forum, the president and vice chancellor of Simon Fraser University in Canada centered his address around the notions of democracy and the engaged university, calling for increased university engagement with their publics and communities in order to serve as “thicker, stronger” forms of democracy (Petter, 2013). In articulating the role and mission of universities to “create an educated citizenry,” to develop leaders and to generate critiques, policy and knowledge, Petter also acknowledged universities’ failings, caused largely by their vacuum-like, ivory tower mindset and existence. Nowhere in his address did Petter call for MOOCs to move universities more accessibly into the general population’s field of vision. An oversight? Doubtful. Those who profess cynicism or caution over the future of MOOCs might regard MOOC champions as business opportunists rather than educational philanthropists.

The business of MOOCs. There is certainly a business around the marketing of MOOCs, as there is with all educational enterprise. Many MOOC providers have formulated their offerings based on astute business partnerships with existing foundations or institutions and many potential MOOC providers are searching for appropriate business models in order to sustain themselves. While MOOCs purport to offer much cheaper or free education to learners, there are in some cases hidden charges – for materials, readings and/or books. The important financial crunch of interest to this paper, however, concerns assessment. The assessment of MOOC learning is what defines the gap between the accessibility of those courses and their integration into credentialized higher education, assuming successful course completion; however, that is determined by MOOC providers. Still, filling the gap, however, is as dependent on finances as much as on pedagogy. Currently, many diverse costing models exist among consortiums and partners such as Coursera, Udacity and Open Educational Resource University (OERu)⁴ (Kolowich, 2013c).

The preceding section has discussed higher education’s current trending phenomenon, massive open online courses (MOOCs), in order to adequately situate MOOCs within this discussion of learning and assessment in today’s newly “opening” learning environment. It also highlighted various controversies already swirling around MOOC presence.

Assessment: Bringing MOOCs Into the Higher Education Fold

This paper rests on the premise that there *ought to be*, or needs to be, a viable system of assessment introduced that will enable accredited institutions of higher education to award credit to learners who have successfully completed an open course somewhere. Is this the way to go? Respected longtime educator and innovator Tony Bates (2013) suggested in his blog that in reviewing recently published work on this topic that he doesn’t necessarily think so:

the problem I had with all three papers is that they start from a premise of trying to ‘fit’ or articulate open learning with conventional credentialing, rather than seeing open learning as a goal in itself that may need to develop its own forms of assessment. (Review of Papers section, para. 21)

To be fair, many educators’ current perspectives on assessment are indeed traditional and narrow. Examinations, for example, are limited in their usefulness, especially for older and mature learners who respond more enthusiastically to authentic assessment (Cranton, 2001; Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2002). Learning, in the view of many educators, is easily boxed up in neat cognitive packages and therefore assessed equally as easily and formulaically. Less traditional educators – and many adult and open and distance learning (ODL) educators fall into this category – understand that learning is messy, overlapping, circular, experiential, political, cultural and affective (Bandura, 1971; Dewey, 1938; Fenwick, 2006; Francis-Poscente & Moisey, 2012; Harris, 2000; Peters, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Conducting effective assessments is equally so (Fenwick, 2006; Travers et al., 2011) and innovative educators continually seek new approaches.

The issue of assessment, however, is different and separate from the issue of credentialing; further, the relevance of credentialing by institutions of higher learning is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. A recent example of traditionalists digging in their heels in the credentialing arena, cited in *Inside Higher Ed* (Tilsley, 2013), concerned the discontinuation of the recognition of advanced placement (AP) courses from high school students' test scores toward degrees at Dartmouth College. Given this reality, proponents of open learning, OERs and MOOCs are struggling with – one could say racing toward– finding business and pedagogical models and financial solutions to help them move toward addressing the nagging question of the credentialing of open learning. Finding appropriate, rigorous assessment strategies, acceptable to those who credentialize, is essential to this process.

Meanwhile, stepping into the void described above, several innovations attempt to change the nature of credentialing, and thereby challenge its stranglehold on “certified” knowledge. One of the most interesting of these is Mozilla's Open Badges. In introducing its Open Badges system several years ago – a system that provides an online record of acquired competencies and skills – Mozilla stated that learning happened everywhere but they also recognized that it was often difficult to get recognition for skills and achievements that happen online or out of school.⁵

On more traditional fronts, several American postsecondary institutions have announced models for accrediting MOOCs. San Jose State University, for example, will partner with Udacity, a for-profit provider of MOOCs, to create three math classes that will be available free, online; students who want to obtain credit from San Jose State University will pay \$150 tuition. (Regular tuition for credit courses ranges from \$450 to \$750.)

Even more recently, the American Council on Education has announced its endorsement of five MOOCs for credit (Kolowich, 2013b). The courses, from Duke University, the University of California at Irvine and the University of Pennsylvania, are offered through Coursera. Kolowich points out however, as has *consistently* been the case in the eventual accreditation of MOOCs toward a university credential, that acceptance of the MOOC for credit remains the decision of the degree-granting institution to which the learner takes his or her completed MOOC. Nonetheless, ACE's president declared the council's decision to be “an important first step in ACE's work to examine the long-term potential of MOOCs” to deal with issues such as “degree completion, increasing learning productivity, and deepening college curricula” (Kolowich, 2013b).

In response, however, the president of Excelsior College indicated that his college would not accept ACE's recommendation for the Coursera courses' credit award, citing inadequate assessment protocols, thereby highlighting once again the largest obstacle – and source of resistance – to MOOC initiatives. Perhaps ironically, however, Excelsior has partnered with the Saylor Foundation and the company StraighterLine (a straighter line to a credential?), regarding them as “natural partners” because “they share the same end goal. That is to make higher education ‘more of a buffet and less of a fixed meal’” (Fain, 2012, Preventing “Link Rot” section, para. 11).

Does Excelsior's position indicate a stalemate, or as this author queried in a recent article, “way-finding, fork in the road, or the end of the line?” (Conrad, 2013, p. 1). While doubtful that we are seeing the end-of-MOOCs based on this current situation, Excelsior's stance echoes Tufts' past-president Bacow's concern – and the concern of many others – regarding the integration of MOOCs into mainstream higher education. The salient issue here is assessment; prior learning assessment's role as an assessment activity is examined here in light of its value to the MOOC discussion.

Prior Learning Assessment, Learning and the Assessment of Learning

PLA, in its many forms, has already provided solutions to issues arising from the inadequacy and narrowness of the assessment of learning for those seeking credentialization in higher education by accommodating

learning's diversity and messiness through authenticity, flexibility and learner-centricity. The latter especially is tempered, always, by institutions' political and policy realities; hence, although foremost in mind, practitioners' desires to honor learners' needs and situations are met to varying degrees. An example of this is the limit that most institutions set on the amount of PLA-awarded credit that learners can receive and/or apply to their programs. That said, the principles and theory underlying *good* prior learning assessment practice provide ample latitude for novel and meaningful approaches to assessment.⁶ Some of the vehicles used in prior learning assessment include learning portfolios,⁷ hands-on demonstrations, interviews and combinations of all of the foregoing including, as well, examinations, projects, audits and narratives.

While paper portfolios have been around a long time, their recent incarnation as electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) has aroused new interest in portfolios as viable vehicles for assessment, due largely to the electronic version's flexibility, portability and bells-and-whistle attractiveness. Several associations and conference groups have grown up around the exploration of e-portfolios in the last few years, notably ePic, held annually in London, England and AAEEBL (The Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence-Based Learning), held annually in Boston, Mass.

The essence of the learning portfolio remains the same, however. What follows is a description and a discussion of the PLA process and its value to learners as a learning activity, resulting in, as has been described by PLA learners, a deeper understanding of the knowledge that they have previously obtained (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010).

Learners wishing to receive credit for their prior experiential learning by means of a PLA portfolio are asked to demonstrate their knowledge for assessment. Using guidelines, templates and examples, applicants assemble portfolios in which they outline their learning histories and display the knowledge they claim to have, usually in text form, supported by documentation. The many parts of the portfolio may comprise a learning narrative, a resume, a statement of educational or career goals, program information and some type of written demonstration of learning, often written in response to stated criteria that often take the form of learning outcomes at the program or course level. Situating learners within this process in an informed fashion requires careful advising and guidance, sometimes provided by specialized PLA coordinators, facilitators, advisors or mentors. Completed portfolios are assessed, ideally, by content-expert assessors, often faculty but not always, who follow explicit criteria for assessment. Generally, institutions set limits and parameters on the type and amount of PLA credit that students can apply to their programs.

The key elements to learning portfolios, therefore, are these, based on PLA's underlying principles: credit is awarded for learning, not experience; learning must be clearly demonstrated; learning must be at university level; learning must be appropriate and relevant to a learner's program (CAEL, 2006). Given this, learners, through the process of preparing a portfolio,

demonstrate their knowledge through the careful selection, reflection, connection, and projection learning artifacts that most fully exercise the scope and latitude of their prior knowledge. In so doing, learners' cognitive engagement with their learning histories gives rise to new knowledge — of self, of self situated within the trajectory of growth, and of self situated within the profession.

(Conrad, 2008, p. 142)

Learners' engagement with cognitive process – with *meta*-cognition – during the portfolio learning process brings to the fore several important pedagogical issues that reveal PLA's adult education roots and are related to foundational and epistemological issues around knowledge that underlie assessment, including not only authentic learning but also power differential, diversity and voice.

PLA portfolio learning as authentic learning

Authentic learning occurs when “materials and activities are framed around ‘real life’ contexts in which they would be used” (Herod, 2002, p. 87). The tenets of authentic learning include the following: authentic

learning is “ill-defined,” thus requiring learners to self-define tasks and activities; tasks are complex and sustained; tasks provide opportunities for applying multiple perspectives; tasks provide opportunities for reflection and collaboration; authentic learning surpasses specificity and can be both integrated into different areas and extended; authentic learning permits a variety of outcomes and competing solutions (Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2002, p. 564).

Sturdy, pedagogically-based prior learning assessment portfolios are regarded as an authentic form of assessment (Barrett, 2002; Conrad, 2008; Travers et al., 2011). The exercise of recounting and recasting one’s prior learning reflects all tenets of authentic learning. In exploring their prior learning, learners are encouraged to make sense of prior experience through careful reflection and investigation into past learning situations. *They* are the subjects of their explorations.

Learners’ engagement in a sustained and rigorous process produces a substantial product that serves, in addition to the process itself, as a token of authenticity since it is *by* the learner, *of* the learner and *about* the learner. Their lives’ events provide a tapestry of ill-defined activities that must be recalled, investigated and understood for their learning value relevant to the target outcomes. They must be placed conceptually and sequentially into both a narrative description and a well-honed demonstration of learning in a specified format. Nonaka (1994), drawing on the seminal work of Polanyi, termed this reflexive process “externalization” – the articulation of one’s own knowledge from its tacit state by putting ideas or images into words – which includes “eliciting and translating,” processes that are achieved through iteration and/or dialogue. This dialogue may take place between learners and mentors, coaches, advisors or facilitators, depending on the structure in place.

The product, the learning portfolio, forms the basis of the assessment process. Process and product, together, give learners ample opportunity to both find their voices and use them. PLA practitioners often describe the process of externalization in metaphors of “yanking” or “pulling” learners’ buried knowledge out of them. Learners report high levels of satisfaction, revelation and personal growth – in *addition* to the credit received as a result of their prior learning. Can this proven process be adapted for assessing MOOC learning?

MOOCs, Prior Learning and Knowledge: The Heart of the Issue?

Successful and rewarding PLA practice depends on and is consistent with a constructivist approach to learning and a belief in the power of authentic learning. Recent literature has suggested that a version of the PLA portfolio could be used to assess MOOC learning for credit toward credentials offered at accredited institutions (Camileri & Tannhauser, 2012; Conrad, 2013; Friesen & Wihak, 2013). Mindful of the framework within which good PLA practice thrives, the critical pedagogical and epistemological question defining the use of portfolios in MOOC assessment concerns the understanding of and the value placed upon the position of knowledge in the MOOC arena. Examining the emergent epistemological issues around MOOCs, in addressing this question, brings to mind the scrutiny accorded online learning a decade ago, when newly-important issues of community, interaction and participation peeled back the onion of the traditional higher education classroom experience that theretofore had existed as a type of closed-door whole, its parts and “exchange” largely sacrosanct and silent. Groundbreaking research in the late 1990s cast a new light on the dynamics involved in higher education learning (Garrison, 2000; also see Swan & Ice, 2010). Now, almost two decades later, what has been declared a revolution in higher education demands that the onion be further dissected (Daniel, 2012).

While recent discussions have raised issues of learning, assessment, authenticity and credentialization – very much the same issues that have always factored into epistemological discourse – the entry of MOOCs into the game has altered the discourse in response to a changing educational landscape that includes free or nearly-free courses, unheard-of class sizes, revolutionary partnerships and innovative business models. Within this kaleidoscope of change, the knowledge stakes – and questions around pedagogy – also have changed. This discussion is so new, and ballooning so rapidly, that academic journals have not yet caught up to it; the references

that support the discussion that follows are necessarily, therefore, anecdotal, as is most of our currently accessible MOOC knowledge.

A MOOC course offered by the University of California at Irvine recently lost its instructor when the emeritus professor of business teaching the course suddenly removed himself. In “voting with his feet,” Professor Richard McKenzie, *The Chronicle of Higher Education/Wired Campus* reports, indicated his dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of responses from students – fewer than 2 percent of the 37, 000 registered in the course were participating to a degree he considered acceptable (Kolowich, 2013a). Students, on the other hand, complained about the course’s over-heavy workload and the fact that the assigned textbook was not free. Response to this news item raises interesting questions about knowledge, the nature of learning and studentship.

In response to the MOOC blog by Kolowich (2013a), a user named “Robert Talbert” makes mention of “serious” students and the hobbling of their seriousness by “non-serious” students. For perhaps the first time, then, learners’ motivation – their level of interest in the knowledge exchange – and their resultant behavior in the group has become a factor, gauging by this discussion, in the value and quality of the teaching-learning experience. It is the opinion of some respondents that a higher quality of engagement cannot be expected in a MOOC, that a good number of participants are there only because of their curiosity. So, the playing field has shifted; the assumption of learning-in-good-faith is no longer extant. And whereas the nature of learners and their private reasons for enrolling in studies have not previously been an issue, they now contribute to condemning a delivery model or excusing it. Another respondent to Kolowich’s (2013a) blog, a user named “JD Eveland,” highlights the distinctions among learners’ motivations: how engaged do they *want* to be? “JD Eveland” sees value in participating in courses where the stakes entail “significant professional opportunities.” Learners have the choice, he or she posits, to gauge their commitment according to perceived outcomes.

What does that mean for knowledge which, to date, has been the essence around which learning is presumed to revolve – its *raison d’être*? – according to the most significant model developed in recent years to demonstrate the relationship of knowledge to the learning experience, as Figure 1, below, illustrates:

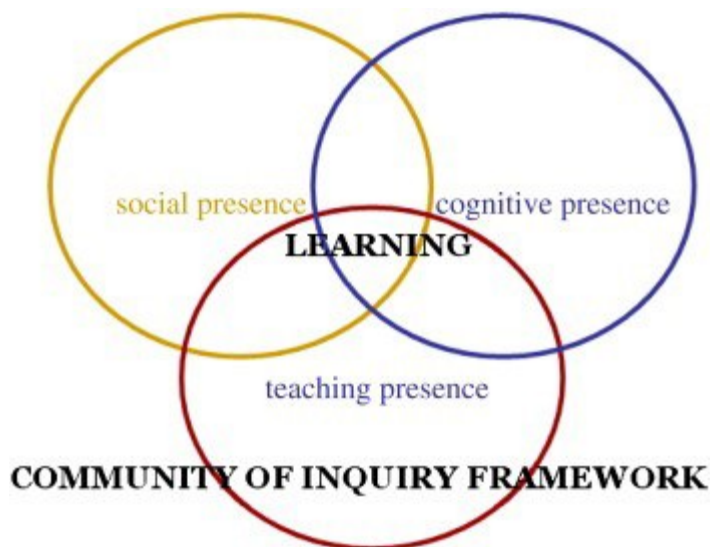


Figure 1, Community of Inquiry Framework

The relationship of learning to credentials and their viability also has been called into question. MOOC-focused blog discussions declare that degrees are meaningless because they lack quality and consistency, and their holders lack skills and the ability to perform meaningfully in the workplace (Carey, 2012). In response to this, certificates are suggested to be a more viable testimony to the acquisition of useful skills. This line of

discussion moves further into the age-old argument between training and education, and the relative value of each; between liberal arts education and vocational education; between thinking and “doing”; and into consideration of the “beauty of the learning process.”

Notwithstanding the notion of the beauty of the learning process – and that may or may not refer to our historical and liberal understanding of learning-for-learning’s sake – contributors to the discussion underscore the importance of assessment. “Assessment is the primary failure of non-MOOC education ... form without substance,” wrote a user named “darccity” in response to Kolowich’s (2013a) blog discussion. User “ilhan2000” continued: But “MOOCs without a degree is [sic] nothing but a gimmick.” And so the argument continues, returning to this paper’s premise that the assessment of MOOCs, as the necessary step forward, can provide the missing link to eventual integration of open learning into credentialization. To this assumption, I propose that the question of knowledge, its shape and its ownership remains the outstanding and difficult issue – the same issue that underlies all PLA study.

Knowledge and power in learning-focused MOOC assessment

From a functional perspective, PLA offers a “leg up” to deserving learners in their educational endeavors or in their work lives by honoring their acquired expertise. Still, underneath the attempt to give adequate voice to experiential learning sits an inherent contradiction that is well understood by PLA advocates and critics alike. Validating learners’ experience, Avis (1995) warrants, could actually be a “conservative practice.” Avis is not alone in asking the question: How are learners positioned within [institutional] notions of knowledge, experience and practice? And, as subtext to the issue of “fit” within an institution’s framework, both Harris (1999) and Avis (1995) also acknowledge that experience is not neutral. “An alternative is to see it as partial, socially constructed, highly contextualized and as already embodying knowledge” (Harris, 1999, p. 126). Further exacerbating the unevenness resulting from learners’ disparate experiential bases are the various discourses within which learners are situated. Harris (1999) explained the problems that her institution identified as a result of these conditions:

In effect ... we required candidates who could write with authority in distinct genres and who could hold to a reflective/academic discourse. Candidates with different holding discourses (for example, narrative, corporate, customary) or no particular holding discourse, were less successful. We expected that ... we could ‘move the Diploma discourse into people’s heads, experientially’ ... we also floundered because we did not have the tools, authority (or perhaps even the desire) to, in effect, re-engineer the Diploma curriculum. (p. 125)

Fenwick (2006) summed it up well with this analogy: “When learning is understood to be continuously co-emergent with persons and environment ... it simply makes no sense to treat knowledge as a product that is carried around like a handbag, able to spill its contents upon request by ... assessors” (p. 298).

Fenwick’s concern, however, and Michelson’s (2006) similar reflection on the nature of the self in creating appropriate demonstrations of learning for portfolio assessment – “Where, precisely, are we standing when we ‘reflect,’ and what kind of self is constructed in the process?” (p. 449) – may be nullified in the potential application of PLA to MOOCs. Unlike portfolio learning, which, in challenging learners to draw on a lifetime of relevant experiential learning also challenges them to locate themselves *within* that learning, a MOOC-approach would be defined by the learning contained within the MOOC (or similar OERs). The subsequent reduction of the cognitive breadth and historical length of learning may likely lessen considerably, or eliminate altogether, the need for or tendency of learners engaged in PLA to elaborate on, search for, or create for themselves a new or renewed “sense of self.”

The “voice” of power in learning-focused MOOC assessment

University process is fraught with issues of power, authority and control (Foucault, 1979; Peters, 2006) and the disparity between academic discourse and learners is always present to some degree in the acts of portfolio preparation and assessment. Such differences are revealed in the nature of assessors’

feedback to PLA applicants. In their study on the language of assessment, Travers and colleagues (2011) determined the presence of such dynamics at every turn. As learners struggle to assert their voices and find language that they hope will be appropriate and acceptable to university culture, assessors – usually well entrenched in university culture – make judgments in a variety of voices, using a range of language that is dependent upon each assessor’s particular stance. Research found that some assessors simply assert their power, “depend[ing] on an authoritative voice as justification for stating that the learning occurred” (Travers et al., 2011, p. 85). And although the authors point out that, in the interests of due diligence, assessors usually provide explanation and justification in order to substantiate their assessment decisions, it remains typical that learners’ language is not privileged by a “power stance” in the way that assessors’ language is.

Application of PLA assessment protocols to MOOCs would not relieve assessors of the power differential inherent in institutional assessment. The nature of the knowledge demonstrated by learners would necessarily be, as with PLA portfolios, circumscribed by institutional requirements. In fact, efforts by early adopters and MOOC proponents to champion their cause may well result in stricter adherence to assessment protocols than is exercised in more traditional quarters. What does this likelihood mean for the knowledge brought forward by MOOC completers, and their right to their own knowledge?

At the End of the Day

Where are we, then, in the discussion of MOOCs, prior learning assessment and issues pertaining to knowledge, when the game is changing every day? New players are entering the MOOC-stakes, new deals are hatched, and postsecondary institutions of all sorts are contemplating what the new kid on the block means for them. As Sir John Daniel (2012) pointed out in recent and eloquent musings on MOOCs, they do *not* bring new pedagogy to higher education. Sadly, in fact, their pedagogy is often very primitive. Daniel also suggested, agreeing with Tony Bates, that MOOCs will not open higher education to the impoverished third world. However, both agree that something new and important is happening, something that has the potential to “do more than pay lip service to the importance of teaching and put it at the core of their missions” (p. 17).

But are MOOCs disruptive technologies, as they have been labeled by some? In considering the relationship of MOOCs to our understanding of knowledge and ownership, Briton⁸ posits that MOOCs allow a new type of knowledge commodification that threatens to shift education from a cultural practice to a marketing practice. Using the analogy of self-serve gas stations, Briton suggests that MOOCs, like self-serves, will

undercut the existing market with lower prices but once it's destroyed, the prices rise again because there's no full-service alternative: they reset the bar so no one even expects service any longer. (D. Briton, personal communication, March 14, 2013)

Those who call for change to higher education systems may welcome the resetting of the bar. Academic research, however, has yet to analyze pedagogical outcomes or effects. No conclusions are yet possible. That leaves us musing, theorizing and hypothesizing – which this paper has done at length by drawing on history, current events and some pedagogical history around PLA, OERs and assessment.

In addressing the current mythology around MOOCs, Daniel (2012) concluded that one of the positive outcomes of MOOCs that we can *almost* know for sure is that the quality of education and teaching will have to improve in this new era of openness. At a recent gathering of the professoriate to discuss MOOCs, a professor of English

suggested that professors could direct students to learn the most basic material in a course at their own pace, via online modules. Professors could then use the time saved, he said, on the parts of the course that require more thoughtful, individual attention, such as giving feedback on long essays.

‘Maybe we could have 100 people register for a seminar,’ [he] said ... students could work through the first 12 weeks independently and online, and ‘the teacher can finish the seminar five different times in the course of a 15-week semester, spending the last three weeks with each of those groups of 20.’ (Kolowich, 2013d, paras. 8-9)

Workable? Not workable? This writer suggests that the important issue here is the opening of time-protected pedagogies to new scrutiny and imagination. Dron⁸ suggests that MOOCs will make us question the point of having courses at all. And the course, especially the fixed length variety that is designed to meet institutional needs rather than pedagogic or content-related requirements, is perhaps the biggest ball and chain that holds us back from doing good teaching and learning. (J. Dron, personal communication, March 29, 2013)

Similarly, Siemens⁸ suggests that MOOCs provide “an important opportunity for academics to investigate what education might look like tomorrow” (G. Siemens, personal communication, March 18, 2013). The common denominator is clearly change. PLA supporters hope that this viable assessment mechanism can take its place in the flexibility and openness of education’s anticipated brave new world.

Notes

- ¹ Online learning in this paper refers to interactive and communicative, instructor-led Web-based courses.
- ² Of over 2,000 registrants in a Siemens-instructed course, apparently only 17 were taking the course for credit, which involved submitting papers. *This* marking load is handle-able, but the issue of interaction and communication remains (G. Siemens, personal communication, March 15, 2013).
- ³ Athabasca University, an open and distance institution, has long used portfolios for PLA. More recently, portfolios have been introduced to graduate programs in place of comprehensive exams, to the nursing programs and to the computer information program.
- ⁴ OERu is not a university but rather a consortium of approximately 25 universities, colleges and polytechnics, worldwide. See http://wikieducator.org/OER_university/Home.
- ⁵ See https://wiki.mozilla.org/images/5/59/OpenBadges-Working-Paper_012312.pdf for more information on Open Badges. An older website that promoted Mozilla’s original understanding of open learning is no longer available.
- ⁶ It’s important to both stipulate and clarify the label *good* here. As with any academic exercise, there is a wide range of practices applied across institutions. The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) articulates both administrative and academic standards to which good practice conforms. A set of underlying principles and assumptions also guide good practice.
- ⁷ A portfolio prepared for credit within a university setting is often called a *learning portfolio*, to distinguish it from other types of portfolios. Other types of portfolios include performance portfolios, showcase portfolios, employment portfolios and portfolios used for student assessment in courses.
- ⁸ Athabasca University faculty routinely engage in spirited discussion of topical educational issues that this writer is privileged to access. The writer thanks colleagues Derek Briton, Jon Dron and George Siemens, cited here, for their contributions to this discourse.

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