Foreword

THE HONEYMOON’S OVER, NOW WHAT? CONTEMPLATING THE NEXT-GENERATION MOOC

_History demonstrates that the advancement of technology is not a steady upward curve. There are flat periods, upwards spurts, and even reversals._ —Brian Herbert and Kevin Anderson, _Dune: House Atreides_

It’s 2:37 a.m.

I’m sitting up in my bed, eyes wide open, the agitation winning out over the exhaustion. I told myself I wouldn’t let Dan get to me, and yet here we are. Instead of sleeping, I find myself busy mentally drafting a reply to a comment he had left in a MOOC discussion thread several hours ago, the latest in a barrage of stem-winders: why should he let participants who didn’t even grow up learning English review his writing? Why can’t the course instructors grade the assignments themselves? Why aren’t the instructors more responsive? Are they harvesting email addresses to sell to spammers? I had a feeling that Dan thrived on the attention he got from the instructors whenever he lobbed these little bomblets—as the old internet adage goes, don’t feed the proverbial trolls—but there was something about getting called out in a semi-public discussion forum that made it hard to resist.

In academia and the popular press alike, we often talk about MOOCs in terms of how incredibly big they are (the “M” stands for “massive,” after all), but they can sometimes get very small, nit-picky, even petty. My engagement with Dan illustrates this phenomenon perfectly. And it’s during moments of frustration such as this that I find myself asking: What are we doing? Is it working? Is it even worth it? With reflection, I now realize that much of the anxiety I felt during that initial run of our MOOC had a good deal to do with the uncertainties of what the experience was _supposed_ to be like.

With the Rhetorical Composing MOOC, a ten week, rhetoric-themed course originally developed by a team of five OSU faculty members and two graduate students and first launched on Coursera in the Spring of 2013¹ we certainly had more than our share of essential support from our university—an instructional designer who regularly consulted with our team, ready access to studio space, the assistance of several tech specialists who helped with video production, file storage, and data management—but in some ways we were flying blind. Not only were MOOCs themselves fairly new, there were also not very many writing-based MOOC predecessors to look to when developing our course².

Consequently, and much like those old cartoons where the character lays out new lengths of track while on a forward-moving train, we learned important lessons along the way that we ended up implementing as the course played out in real time. For one, we realized fairly early on that something as simple as a change in the term of address we used—from “student” to “participant”—resulted in a less

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¹ Trademark of www.coursera.org
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regimented and reductive way of interacting with the group. The meaning of that switch signaled for
the crowd, and for us, a different, more fluid dynamic between instructors and learners, and influenced
their interactions and ours moving forward. Building off of that realization, we worked to reshape
the course curriculum so it wasn’t too traditional and class-like, promoting robust backchannel chatter, offer-
ing optional gamified activities, and the like. Then there was the global reach of the MOOC platform;
suddenly, issues such as which time zone to adopt for our assignment deadlines began to crop up (we opted for UTC, incidentally). At one point, we decided to relax and extend our once hard deadlines when
some participants mentioned experiencing access issues (rolling brownouts in Egypt, for instance) that kept them from submitting their work on time. One of our biggest realizations was that we needed to pay greater attention to multi-language learners in our course design, since they comprised a significant percentage of total enrollees. We did this by offering MLL-specific discussion topics, producing video
content about “World Englishes,” inviting guest Paul Kei Matsuda to do a live Q/A with the MOOC, and
generally encouraging practices of generous reading during the peer review process. Of course, as I
describe these decisions in hindsight, they all seem to make perfectly obvious sense, but when you’re
propelled, as we were initially, by a series of tight rolling deadlines, the opportunity to sit and reflect on
them is at best a luxury that we were unable to afford.

Now that we have seen more than a decade of MOOCs, the initial period of improvisation and ex-
perimentation—the exhilaration and anxiety of flying blind—has passed. The MOOC fever that gripped
higher education in the early teens has subsided, the enthusiasm for a liberatory, democratizing online
education waning (a familiar narrative to those in the field of computers and writing), tempered by the
realities of the costs associated with specialized labor, technical resources, and hosting, among other
factors: according to a recent U.S. News and World Report article, institutions such as Georgia Institute
of Technology, University of Illinois, and Arizona State University are already well underway to figuring
out how best to monetize the MOOC, offering credit-bearing versions at prices that undercut their
traditional course offerings—Georgia Tech even offers a low-cost masters in computer science com-
prised entirely of MOOCs (Haynie, 2015). That is why this particular collection poses such a necessary
intervention in the next-phase development and implementation of writing-based MOOCs. Given the
far-flung, multilingual, and large-scale diversity of MOOC learners, the central concern—how best to
teach writing at scale in online spaces—is one that we as educators interested in and committed to open-
access distance education ought to be prepared to address.

To that end, Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCs raises critical questions concerning what
MOOCs are (or aren’t), what they’re good for (or not), who they help (or hurt). The chapters throughout
this collection address a wide swath of topics, every one of them a pressing issue for thinking through vital questions concerning what place MOOCs should occupy in the ecology of writing instruction. As
Marilyn Cooper (1986) argued years ago, writing is shaped by the real-world social contexts in which it
takes place—in this specific instance, the scale, scope, and reach afforded by the MOOC platform necessitates closer examination as well as experimentation (pg. 373). Among the issues taken up in this
collection: classification, critique, ethics, accessibility, economics, identity politics, labor politics, assess-
ment, the ever-changing dynamic between learner and instructor. All of these are, to be sure, complex and daunting topics, but each contributor to this volume tackles them in a uniformly thoughtful and clear-
eyed fashion that is at once critical without being defeatist, hopeful without being overly enthusiastic.

I’ve long been a fan of the edited collection as an important scholarly vehicle, one capable of offering
readers the immense value of multiple perspectives. Under the guidance and direction of a thoughtful editor or editors, they are curated sites of sustained and multi-faceted critical inquiry on a given topic;
this collection is no different in that regard. Taken as a whole, Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCs allows us to glimpse the next generation of MOOCs, leading us to create more effective, useful, inclusive online educational experiences for a global community of learners. Faced with a future plagued by rising tuition costs, shrinking government subsidies, and other budgetary crises in higher education, it is essential that we continue to develop alternative ways of reaching out to those who wish to learn—whoever they might be, wherever they might live, and for whatever reasons they might have for doing so. And if we as compositionists are not among the ones acting as agents of this change, we risk having it foisted upon us—and potential learners the world over—in ways that fail to achieve consequential outcomes for authentic learning.

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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 The core team for the Rhetorical Composing MOOC consisted of Kay Halasek, Kaitlin Clinnin, Susan Delagrange, Scott DeWitt, Jennifer Michaels, Cynthia Selfe, and myself. Initially funded by a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop writing-based MOOCs utilizing open educational resources, it was one of five such courses launched in 2013. Since that initial launch, a second iteration ran on Coursera in Autumn 2014, and a revised version recently ran in the Summer 2016 on Canvas.

2 Prior to the launch of the Gates-funded MOOCs, Coursera offered one discipline-specific writing-based course: “Writing in the Sciences,” facilitated by Stanford’s Kristin Sainani.