Chapter 4
Genres in the MOOCology of Writing: Understanding Cloud-Based Learning through a Genre-Activity Analysis

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ABSTRACT

With constant emergence of cloud services and platforms for learning at a global scale, the field of education is in the midst of exploring and adapting to new pedagogical features afforded by these environments. Among the most debated is the development of MOOCs, short for massive open online courses, which pose questions to the traditional brick-and-mortar teaching model and implore new ways for instruction and learning. While some studies have looked at the effectiveness of MOOCs as a mode of delivery, there still lacks a genre approach to analyzing MOOCs as socio-rhetorical systems that have complex relationships with other social entities in the larger ecology of learning. With an eye toward how writing is taught and learned in the MOOC context, I investigate the kinds of course genre invented or reimagined by the cloud technologies and pedagogies afforded by MOOCs, and how those affordances facilitate writing instruction. Specifically, I use Activity Theory to highlight the genre activities specific to two composition MOOCs. By situating these MOOCs as activity systems, I offer an informed observation on the genre components affecting how students learn about writing in MOOC settings. These insights lead to numerous pedagogical implications, including the need to treat MOOCs as an emerging learning ecology that is different from conventional models.

INTRODUCTION

MOOCs, short for massive open online course, had all the rage from all around the world when Stanford computer scientists Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig, along with their instructional team, designed a tuition-free artificial intelligence course, taught over the web to hundreds of thousands of students in 2011 (Leckart, 2011). More recent hype began in the fall of 2011, when over 450,000 students signed up for
a computer science course offered at Stanford University. Within months of the Stanford experiments, a few start-up companies debuted in the name of giving “everyone access to the world-class education that has so far been available to a select few” (Coursera.org, 2015). Coursera, a for-profit educational technology enterprise founded by Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller from Stanford University, is among the several “social entrepreneurship” companies that partner with “top universities in the world” to offer free online courses (Coursera.org, 2015). Other massive open course providers include Udacity, edX, Khan Academy, Peer-to-Peer University (P2PU), Udemy, and NovoEd, just to name a few.

Amidst the media’s continued representation of MOOCs as both opportunities and disruption to higher education systems, scholars and researchers in rhetoric and composition have taken interests to further understand MOOCs as communities of learning (Krause & Lowe, 2014). Of particular interest to writing specialists is research suggesting that learning to write in the digital environment is complex in ways that go beyond texts and students’ learning abilities. For instance, at Michigan State University, researchers in the WIDE (Writing in Digital Experience) research center study ways in which learning takes place in digital, informal learning spaces have identified different types of rhetorical moves that take place in those spaces and moments of change as expressions of participant learning (Matrix, 2015).

In 2013, the MOOC Research Initiative (MRI) was founded to advance MOOC-related research. Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, MRI seeks to further evaluate MOOCs and how they impact teaching, learning, and education in general. In its inaugural year, MRI offered a total of $400,000 grants to interested academic institutions to examine the efficacy of early MOOC models for various learner audiences and in a wide variety of contexts (MOOC Research, 2015). More than 20 reports were produced at the international conference MRI hosted at the University of Arlington, Texas, in December 2013, most of which compared various learning models—traditional, online, hybrid or blended models—to the MOOC model. An area in learning assessment that was of particular interests to most of these studies are participant engagement. For example, John Witmer and his team at Mt. San Jacinto College was interested in what engages students in a remedial English Writing MOOC. Similarly, Bruno Poellhuber has led a team of researchers to survey the relationships between participants’ attitudes, their motivation to learn, and engagement level in a MOOC. Duke scholars Denise Comer and Dorian Canelas, on the other hand, have conducted a multidisciplinary inquiry into peer-to-peer interaction through writing using discussion forum and peer assessment data in two MOOCs.

Picking up from the momentum of these studies, I seek to complicate the notion of online open writing instruction from a different perspective—through an analysis of the genre components within the MOOC setting and how they mediate learning activities in those contexts. For the purpose of this edited collection, I argue that MOOCs are cloud-based learning environments wherein students and instructors utilize interactive features from anywhere, anytime, any device, and anybody, for pedagogical purposes. With communicative functions such as discussion forums and peer-to-peer assessment interfaces, MOOCs enact digitally networked learning communities that are unprecedented by any learning environments before. I have playfully coined the term “MOOCology” in the chapter title to call our attention to the notion of learning ecology as enacted by a cloud-based environment like MOOCs. Underpinning the present study is such acknowledgment and the curiosity for ways a genre analysis might inform us of writing and learning in these emergent settings.

With an eye toward how writing is taught and learned in the MOOC context, I investigate the kinds of course genre invented or reimagined by the technologies and pedagogies afforded by MOOCs, and how those affordances facilitate writing instruction. To do so, I use Activity Theory to highlight the genre activities specific to two composition MOOCs. In this chapter, I first outline the MOOC model of