

Collective effervescence: Designing MOOCs for emotion and community

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This paper shares the experiences of a course team in designing and delivering a massive open online course (MOOC). It offers insight into how their approach can help build learning communities and enhance pedagogy for online learning through a return to best practice. It will discuss how a combined approach of using a core site in conjunction with social media platforms can temporarily overcome the functional limitations of xMOOCs, more deeply engage students, and improve moderation. Central to this, the concepts of collective effervescence and radical inclusion are shown to be effective principles of course design which facilitate ongoing support networks - an effective and sustained strategy for combating pluralistic ignorance within research education contexts.

Keywords: MOOCs, moderation, community, emotion, social media, learning design

As Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) increasingly become more common they are prompting more public discussion about education (Ebben and Murphy, 2014). This raises the importance of establishing best practice in this new sphere. In 2014, the Australian National University (ANU) became a global partner of edX and began offering MOOCs on this well known platform. This paper discusses the design process, implementation, and educational outcomes for one ANU MOOC entitled *How to Survive Your PhD*. Delivered over 10 weeks in late 2015, weekly modules sequentially focused on a specific emotion common in research study, such as Frustration (Module 4), Fear (Module 6), Boredom (Module 9), and Love (Module 10). More than 15,000 participants were enrolled and weekly were asked to watch a 1-2 minute video, read around 500 words, and complete either a short forum-based or social media activity reflecting on that week's topic. A final, peer-assessed activity was required to complete the course. Overall, this course aimed to encourage higher degree research (HDR) students and supervisors to improve their understanding, management, and support of emotions in the research workplace. This was achieved through scaffolding an experience of "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, 1976) using the guiding principles of radical inclusion and community building to foster mutual support networks. In this paper, we draw on recent theories of MOOC design and facilitation, facilitator reflections, surveys and feedback collected from participants to argue that connectivist aims can be achieved within the limitations of an xMOOC platform through the addition of social media. The surveys were designed to collect feedback, measure participants' satisfaction, and engagement, and allow the teaching team to adapt to the needs of the community. Two surveys were administered during the course: the first in week 1 (n=1400), and a mid-course survey in week 5 (n=297). Ultimately, we found that inclusion and community were best encouraged and enhanced online through implementing activities specifically designed to promote interaction, engaging in active and consistent moderation, and through 'media events' held with the intention of bringing people together.

Literature on pedagogy and teacher experiences in MOOCs is a growing area for research. Though still limited, the majority of articles focus on the effectiveness of MOOCs as a viable educational tool and the lack of a dedicated pedagogy (Bali, 2014; Pilkey, 2014). The complexities of teaching in MOOCs is largely absent from the debate (Ross *et al.*, 2014). Bayne and Ross address MOOC pedagogy as an emergent area, highlighting that pedagogy is not necessarily embedded in platform structures but instead “emerges in complex negotiations between platform, the teaching approaches of the academic team developing the course, disciplinary and institutional norms and expectations, and the pattern of learner interactions” (2014, 37). Crucially, they advocate for a move away from the binary distinctions of cMOOC (driven by social learning and pedagogical innovation) and xMOOC (institutionally-focused and reliant on automated assessment and video-lectures). In the case of our MOOC, the team faced the design challenge of overcoming the limited potential for connectivist learning within an xMOOC system because the course dealt with emotional resilience and support, yet was delivered on edX - a traditionally instructivist platform. Despite potential platform limitations, we were inspired by Bayne & Ross (2014) and also influenced by Wasson’s (2013) assertion that learners’ resilience could be fostered via smaller sub-groups within the massive numbers enrolled. Drawing on this foundation, our course design thus aimed for the MOOC to prompt a spirit of collective effervescence, where individuals could come together to share an experience to collectively reflect on some of the common emotions experienced during the PhD process, workshop new responses and approaches to these feelings, promote unity, and ultimately create a better sense of community (Durkheim, 1976). In our MOOC, we found that social media, in multiple forms, creates a vital nexus around which these types of learning communities can be formed and maintained. This approach was vital in addressing the core purpose for why we built and implemented a MOOC in the first place.

Why build our MOOC?

Retention of PhD students is a big challenge for all universities, with up to one third leaving before they finish their degree (McGagh *et al.*, 2016). In Australia this loss is a risk that must be managed by universities, who only recoup domestic students’ fees upon their completion (McGagh *et al.*, 2016). One area that has received relatively little pedagogical attention is the role of emotions in attrition. Many issues in research education are emotional yet often positioned as 'other' to problems of academic progress. In practice, however, the academic and the emotional are deeply intertwined. We know that PhD program attrition is a cascade effect where a combined range of set-backs and barriers to completion are experienced before candidates leave (Pearson, 1999). If the causes of PhD student attrition are complex, solutions must be multiple and nuanced. Lovitts (1999) studied attrition in HDR cohorts and identified ‘pluralistic ignorance’ as one of the key causes for candidates ‘leaving in silence’. Pluralistic ignorance occurs when multiple students separately experience the same issues, but, these issues are not talked about, or the feelings they provoke are normalised. Failing to realise their experience is a result of the system, not their own fault, PhD students experiencing pluralistic ignorance can tend to blame themselves for their struggle, give up, and, as Lovitts puts it, 'leave in silence'.

A MOOC has the unique capacity to reach the broader community en masse to raise up these emotional issues, discuss them on a global scale and thus break through the silences in research education. Unlike other kinds of online training, we had no way of controlling who would enrol and this made the design process extremely difficult. Morris and Lambe’s (2014) rubric identifies four different kinds of MOOC learners: the University Learner, the Professional Learner, the Self Directed Learner, and the Leisure Learner. This rubric alerted for us that our originally intended audience (supervisors) was unlikely to be our largest one. Within the participant community itself, research candidates would be ‘university learners’, seeking to better understand their experience. A research supervisor could do the MOOC and contribute to their own professional development. There are many people in administration and pastoral care positions who could be positioned as ‘self directed learners’, interested in expanding their own practice, or family members interested in learning how to better support their loved ones. Finally, the ‘leisure learners’ might be people who are thinking about a PhD or just interested in PhD student culture generally.

We countered this 'diversity problem' by designing with the principle of radical inclusion. That is, *anyone* should be able to do this course and learn something about the experience of doing a PhD. This included the moderation team, one of whom had no experience in doing a PhD, and felt very uncertain. Focusing on one emotion a week provided us with a way to encourage participants to jointly reflect from different subject positions and incorporate the richness of their collective experience in the learning environment.

The Learning Community

As previously mentioned, our course was delivered via edX. This platform was originally designed for an instructivist approach, unfortunately resulting in “the notion of large scale social learning” being absent from its “entire design” (Bayne & Ross, 2014). As an xMOOC focused platform, it functioned well for content delivery: videos and written text were easily presented to students. It was not, though, easily capable of offering social elements or sustained forum discussions. This presented a design challenge because we purposely placed a focus on discussion and reflection activities in order to scaffold participants to overcome pluralistic ignorance through

dialogue and community. Building community among learners is one of the best antidotes to this problematic state because sharing experiences and discussing strategies to common issues faced in the PhD journey assists people to realise their commonality. But with nearly 15,000 participants enrolled and thousands of daily posts in the forums alone, meaningful discussion was impossible to centrally manage due to the sheer volume of posts and the limited forum functionality. This also had implications for the training and approach taken by the moderation team.

The Moderation Community

Just as community was integral to the pedagogic design and philosophy of our MOOC, so too community was a central concept in the creation, training, and practise of the moderation team itself. Although many MOOCs tend to place a central focus on one 'superstar' academic – in this case, Associate Professor Inger Mewburn – the reality is a whole team is needed to ensure successful implementation. Drawing upon the insights of Kop *et al* (2011), we wanted to actively scaffold participant engagement, sharing, reflection, and learning through discussions on both forums and social media. To achieve this, a moderation team was essential to ensure that discussions were appropriately monitored, facilitated, and support given where needed. Our moderation team consisted of six volunteers possessing a diverse range in technological skill from absolute beginner to professional employee grade. This team constituted a community of learning in its own right as well as helping to oversee the learning of others, that is, the MOOC participants.

Creating a community of mutual support *within* the moderation team was essential because, in their own experience, the team was facing the unprecedented challenge of so many participants and a platform with major forum limitations. It was humanly impossible to monitor, moderate, and facilitate everything everywhere. The central question was: how to rapidly train and safeguard well-being among moderators while also ensuring a quality learning experience for participants? Moderators were volunteers who already had numerous other commitments such as study, work, and family duties. In practice, it would have been impossible for one person to do everything, so creating a sense of community within the moderation team also proved a way of fostering genuine cooperation and collaboration as well as providing mutual support. Community also proved an antidote to self blame and pluralistic ignorance among moderators – frank communication meant that team mood was easy to assess and members could easily see that challenges were faced by everyone, not just themselves. The core focus for moderators was to be active, be engaged, model behaviour and prioritise self care and community among both the team and MOOC participants. This was especially important because the emotional nature of course topics meant that extra support was sometimes required, including, for example, referral to counselling, and in a couple of instances, suicide prevention services. We need to acknowledge that the 'frank communication' approach, and the compressed timelines, sometimes created conflict. There was a need to have difficult, sometimes emotionally charged, conversations between team members, which we had not necessarily anticipated. There is limited space to enter into a discussion of the implications of this, but it is discussed further in Freund *et al* (2016).

This community focused and learner-centric design resulted in participants being scaffolded to see themselves in combination as part of the broader MOOC community and smaller spin-off communities, which they themselves would create. In turn, these smaller communities would self motivate, 'self police', and help alert the core moderation team if additional support was needed. The moderation team kept in close and active contact via social media through weekly interactive live-chats via Periscope, curated overviews of these on Storify for those who could not make it, and also engaged in daily conversations via the course hashtag on Twitter. By drawing upon the strength of mutually supportive communities and networks, moderators were also freed up to focus on vital triage to identify and assist participants at risk. In practice, we found this to be a highly successful approach. Moderation and support responses were rapid, produced results, and had solid outcomes. It is worth emphasising that both the broader and smaller MOOC communities would not have formed without scaffolding and active moderation. In essence, it takes active moderation and genuine care to build a self-caring community that can self-support and self-perpetuate - a strategy that we would argue is extremely uncommon on xMOOC platforms because of the level of work involved.

Community Engagement

In agreement with Kop *et al* (2011) and Wasson (2013), we saw community development as essential to best practice MOOC design. We hoped for sustainable communities that would continue after the course's conclusion so that participants could achieve connection that would support them into the future. To this end, our design encouraged participants to create social media spaces for course discussion, using tools like Twitter, Facebook, blogs, Instagram, and others. Course activities were designed to take place both inside and outside the MOOC on social media. For example, Module 5 tackled the issue of loneliness in PhD study. Participants were encouraged to meet other students, attend seminars at their campus, or make contact with friends to help reduce loneliness. They were also asked to share photos of their socialising on social media. In a mid-course survey, 27% of respondents meet up specifically to talk about, or as a result of, the course. Of those who met face-to-face, 41% of respondents indicated that this was a new group created as a result of the course.

We observed that hosting the MOOC in a central site brought everyone altogether for the purposes of the course, but social media kept the community alive after the course was over, and built personal relationships and support networks. To help prompt engagement on both, badges were awarded to participants each week for outstanding and thoughtful contributions to the discussion forums and social media spaces. During the live Periscope broadcast on loneliness, the moderation team actively encouraged participants for their own ideas on how to best involve them in sustaining a long-lasting community beyond the course. Ideas shared included continuing the Twitter hashtag and forming LinkedIn and Facebook groups. A very successful example of one such group established by a participant is the Facebook community *PhD OWLs* for mature-age PhD students, which immediately gathered hundreds of members and continues to be active at the time of writing. This participant received an award badge for such a significant contribution. Twitter was also a particularly active and passionate space during, and after, the course. In a mid-course survey, 37% of respondents indicated they joined or started using Twitter specifically for our MOOC. Moderators received much positive feedback on the benefits of building community on Twitter as evidenced by the following de-identified response from the mid-course survey:

I've always used Twitter and have found a great [#survivePhD15] community who are v[ery] supportive and engaging. I've got a lot out of using Twitter in this way and connected with some interesting people around the world doing a wide range of research topics.

It is worth noting that the response about Twitter was not universally positive, as some participants did struggle with the technology and did not continue to use it after the course finished.

As expected, there were unfortunately significant issues in using the edX forums because of the volume of posts, fixed design, and limited functionality of the platform. Despite these issues, however, students persevered in using the forums, with 73% of respondents viewing them at least once a week, and 24% every second day or so. Despite the use, frustrations were evident. One such participant wrote to the course team at the MOOC's conclusion to share their concerns about the site platform:

Over time I became more and more frustrated by my inability to hold a conversation [...] in the end I simply gave up [...] In my view, edX's discussion format needs significant humanising, with the ability to accurately bookmark and curate our own conversations and watch the posts of others so it can create virtual learning communities [...] My overwhelming sense is that of a missed opportunity with the 'How to Survive Your PhD' MOOC.

Even with the barriers of functionality and large volume of posts due to the MOOC's scale, participants spoke warmly and overtly about their overall experiences of community as part of the course. The most positive feedback, exemplified in the deidentified quotes below from student video submissions, related directly to the problem of pluralistic ignorance and the feeling of collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1976):

It takes a village to complete a PhD...I seriously mean it. The sense of community in this course has been humongous, and I think it's very helpful to know that you are not alone in the world.

I think the one thing about the MOOC and the associated Facebook groups are just the sheer amount of community and friendly feeling that you get from everybody else who is travelling along the same journey as you are, with all its highs and lows.

A strong positive outcome is that the original community continues to develop and grow, with many of the Facebook communities (including the PhD OWLs) remaining active. The course hashtag on Twitter, #survivePhD15, has been made into the ongoing discussion #survivePhD, and tweets and live chats are held regularly, run entirely by course participants themselves.

Emotion and Community

The academic and emotional are deeply intertwined, and it is the same for moderators as it is for participants. We set out to combat pluralistic ignorance in research education through opening up discussion on emotions in HDR student experiences of research on both a global and local scale. Active and supportive communities along with frank discussion can push back on the toxic silence that plagues higher education. Best practice requires engaged learning communities and this needs to be considered more in MOOC design. We found that inclusion, community, and harnessing the power of collective effervescence are fundamental to ensuring a positive, supportive, and engaging learning experience for participants on such a massive scale. To achieve this within the constructivist limitations of an xMOOC platform, it was crucial to utilise a combination of the core site itself along with the additional capabilities of social media. In doing so, along with activating the support networks of smaller sub-group communities, we saw that the supposed dichotomy between xMOOCs and cMOOCs could be temporarily overcome and moderation practices could be made more targeted and effective. Communities do not just happen on their own - simply creating a forum will not create a community. Active and consistent moderation that models good behaviour and genuine engagement, emphasises self empowerment, connections, and that builds local capabilities within the participant cohort itself is key to scaffolding, growing, and establishing self-sustaining ongoing communities of support and education. In this process, it is essential that participants themselves are radically included and viewed as peers with agency alongside the moderation team. In the long term, if MOOCs themselves are genuinely to engage in best practice, then some fundamental structures, such as the current fixed forum format, will need to be revisited. In the meantime, it is possible to achieve an engaged, flourishing, and successful participant experience through creative use of people-centric design combinations, such as those we have used here, to ensure that MOOCs can make a positive intervention within higher education through their discussion prompting potential long into the future.

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