

Title

Learner experience of participation in #FSLT12, a case study of a MOOC for new lecturers in higher education.

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Abstract

Some of the espoused benefits of participation in a massive open online course (MOOC) are opportunities to build personal networks and make connections beyond the content of a course. There is acknowledgement that participation in a MOOC may be challenging and troublesome.

The purpose of this case study was to determine the breadth and depth of participation in a short MOOC, which was offered by a UK University during May and June 2012. Given the increasing prevalence of MOOCs this is an important area of inquiry. The results add to evidence in favour of legitimate peripheral participation within online communities and suggest that active participation within a MOOC may be viewed as a threshold concept, which results in transformative learning for some

#FSLT12 was a MOOC introducing learning and teaching in higher education. A diverse range of learners was motivated to join by the subject matter. This included both new and experienced MOOC learners.

Ethical approval was obtained to undertake a mixed methods study. This included focus group interviews, individual interviews of a sample of the target audience, and a survey questionnaire, which was e-mailed to all #FSLT12 registrants. Statistics of tweets, forum and blog postings were also collected. Text

analysis of aggregated blog posts was undertaken. Qualitative data was thematically analysed, peer reviewed and returned to research participants for member checking.

The research questions posed were how learners interacted with course content, other participants and the overall experience of participation? This was to gain knowledge of participatory skills and behaviours, learner experience of social interactions and the factors which foster active participation. Three main themes emerged from analysis of the data. These were; 1) Navigation, less experienced learners felt initially overwhelmed by technical issues, multi-channels and a perceived need to be able to multi-task. More experienced learners were judicious about planning their route. Ultimately new learners experienced a transformative shift on realization that it is not necessary to join everything but this did require reflection, time and self-organization to reach this point; 2) Reflective practice, the most frequent interaction with content was activities, which focused on reflective practice. This enabled open modeling and practice of reflective writing skills and a perspective that this stimulated participation at a more thoughtful level; 3) Making sense of community, new learners needed time to determine their audience. There was recognition of a core community and a realization of a potential reciprocal relationship between diverse participants in order to foster active participation.

The theoretical frameworks of constructivism, connectivism and communities of practice contain elements can contribute to reaching a better understanding of the phenomenon of participation in a MOOC. New learners within a MOOC will inhabit a liminal space in relation to participation. The active MOOC participant may be perceived as a skilled orienteer and strategies for the development of participatory skills have implications for facilitation of local expertise such as the experienced

MOOC learner. This will be of interest to those who develop, organize and facilitate MOOCs.

Key words. Peripheral participation, Transformation, Navigation, Reflection, Local Expertise.

Introduction