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Liminal Participants and Skilled Orienteers: a case study of learner participation in a MOOC for new lecturers.

Authors.

Abstract

This case study suggests active participation in a massive open online course (MOOC) is a threshold concept, which can result in transformative learning.

#FSLT12 was a short MOOC offered by a UK University in June 2012 introducing learning and teaching in higher education. Both new and experienced MOOC learners joined the course. The study used focus groups, individual interviews, and a survey. Statistics of tweets, forum and blog posts were collected. Text analysis of aggregated blog posts was undertaken. Social constructivism, connectivism and community of practice theories illuminated understanding.

Three main themes emerged:

1) Navigation: new participants felt overwhelmed by technical issues, multiple channels and a perceived need to multi-task.

Experienced learners were judicious about planning their route.

2) Transformative reflective practice: ultimately learners experienced a transformative shift but it required reflection on practice,

community support and self-organization

3) Making sense of community: new learners needed time to determine their audience and core community, and to realize reciprocal

relationships.

Learners in a MOOC inhabit a liminal space. Active MOOC participants are skilled orienteers. Leveraging local expertise of

experienced MOOC learners and developing participatory skills in new learners is a key strategy for those who organize and facilitate

MOOCs.

Key words. cMOOC, Threshold Concepts, Navigation, Liminality, Reflection, Transformation, Participation, "Vet", "Newbie"

Introduction

This case study explores the learner experience of participation in *First Steps in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (#FSLT12), which was offered by Oxford Brookes University over a five-week period during May-June 2012 for new lecturers in Higher Education. #FSLT12 was funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee and Higher Education Academy (JISC/HEA) *Open Educational Resources Programme* and was one of the first massive open online courses (MOOCs) to be run in the UK; it __was modest in MOOC terms in that it attracted 206 participants. Nevertheless this case study demonstrates some important issues about the experience of MOOC participation from the perspective of the learner, which may determine active participation.

Cormier, 2010a & 2010b; McAuley et al., 2010; Weller 2011 and Chamberlain & Parish, 2011 have identified potential advantages of MOOC participation, for example opportunities to build personal networks and make connections beyond the content of a course. In spite of these espoused benefits it has been acknowledged that participation in a MOOC may be challenging and troublesome:

> *"Participation in a MOOC is emergent, fragmented, diffuse, and diverse. It can be frustrating. It's not unlike life."* (Stewart in McAuley et al., 2010)

Evaluation of #FSLT12

An evaluation strategy for #FSLT12 was integrated with course design. An identified goal was to gain more knowledge about the participatory experiences of a diverse group of participants: their interaction with content and with each other during #FSLT12. The research and evaluation approach was initially identified as a general topic to understand more about differential participation within #FSLT12. Refinement of specific research questions followed feedback from the project critical friend, assigned by the JISC/HEA, and were as follows:

- What was the learner experience of participation in #FSLT12?

- How did learners interact with content in #FSLT12?

- How did learners interact with each other in #FSLT12?

Stewart (in McAuley et al., 2010) identified a range of inhibiting factors for participation within a MOOC. These include: not appealing to those most comfortable in a formal educational environment, lack of accreditation, lack of familiarity with the digital skills required, lack of access to the tools required for participation, lack of scaffolding and support, language barriers, lack of netiquette, technology ownership and bandwidth, time zones, volume of information, mastering content and reading blog and discussion posts.

Siemens in McAuley et al. (2010) suggests that knowledge of how participants engage or interact with content and each other is a little known territory. The nature of an open learning platform, which relies on connections between learners in order to autonomously

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aggregate, remix, repurpose and feed forward, poses many questions about the fostering of active participation (Kop, Fournier & Mak, 2011). There is a need for more evidence to guide the implementation of MOOCs and more evaluations of the educational benefits (Bujack, Paul & Demillo, 2012). This study aims to add to a growing body of knowledge in this domain. The intended audience is Higher Education, lecturers, educational developers and related support staff in addition to the international community who have a pedagogical and research interest in MOOCs.

MOOC Principles and FSLT12 Design

A MOOC differs from a formal online course in that it is open and distributed within Internet social spaces. The term MOOC was made in 2008 by Dave Cormier as a description of the phenomenon of George Siemens and Stephen Downes' open online course at Athabasca University, called *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* (CCK08*),* which attracted over 2,300 participants (Wikipedia, 2012).

The underlying philosophy was a notion of connectivism, which is underpinned by creating and maintaining a personal network of connections and interacting with and creating content. Importantly individuals choose at what level they might participate. There are four underlying principles, which are autonomy, diversity, openness and interactivity (Downes, 2009). The design of #FLST12 attempted to reflect these principles. The course design team consisted of a senior educational developer who leads a postgraduate certificate of teaching and learning in Higher Education, an experienced lecturer in nursing who was seconded to the team, a learning

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technologist and an independent education consultant who is an experienced MOOC participant and facilitator. A common thread which was shared within the team was considerable prior experience as distance learning online tutors who were motivated to learn about how a connectivist approach to course design might inform their ongoing online teaching practices.

The #FSLT12 curriculum was based on a short non-accredited 3-day on-campus course which is offered by Oxford Brookes University as an introduction to teaching and learning in Higher Education and is underpinned by the *United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education* (UKPSF) (HEA, 2011). #FSLT12 ran for a period of 6 weeks and each week featured a specific theme from the '*First Steps'* curriculum: supporting learning, reflective practice, teaching groups, feedback, lecturing and evaluation.

#FSLT12 was free of charge for all participants; 20 free assessed places were offered on a first come first served basis. Assessment, which was non-accredited, consisted of a reflective statement, participation within an annotated collaborative bibliography activity, and preparation and showcasing of a 10-minute micro teaching activity during the final synchronous sessions. Participants who completed the assessment were awarded a certificate of attendance. The delivery of #FSLT12 was considered to be a pilot for a potential accredited postgraduate module which will continue to run in the future as a MOOC.

Openness

A unique intention of running #FSLT12 as a MOOC was to introduce the concept of open academic practice to the target audience by offering a traditional course within an open online platform.

All of the course material and interaction was openly available on the public web (with the exception of a discussion forum set up for assessed participants). The learning platform consisted of an open Wordpress site (http://openbrookes.net/firststeps12/) and an open Moodle virtual learning environment for prepared resources and discussion forums. Five synchronous audiographic sessions were offered in *Blackboard Collaborate*, featuring an introduction to the course from the facilitators, and three sessions which were led by guest speakers: Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2012), Frances Bell (2012) and Dave White (2012). Directions to the synchronous classroom were posted on the open Wordpress site, which served as an entrance portal to the course. This meant that formal enrolment was not necessary to attend those sessions, to view the recordings afterwards, to access any of the learning materials or read the discussion forums. The only form of course participation which required registration was posting on the discussion forums.

Autonomy

Openness offered participants a wide variety of ways to engage with the course and freedom to set their own patterns of participation. Casting the course as a MOOC explicitly gave participants permission to engage in the ways and quantities they wished, with no requirement to be involved in all aspects of the course. Participants were also empowered to choose their own pathways through the

available material, dipping in for particular topics or materials, skipping others, and, as the course materials all remain available, to engage with materials at the time and in the order of their choosing. This autonomy operated on several different levels and means that it is impossible to trace all of the shades of course engagement and quantify how much each was used. Different amounts of participation were possible from reading a single Tweet, up to extensive activity in all discussion forums and live sessions, and at all levels in between. The preferences and interests of each individual participant or observer mean that engagement with the course will look different for each person.

There was anticipation that many of the target audience ('new lecturers') might be MOOC neophytes, so scaffolding strategies to enable interactions with earlier adopters was an important course design consideration. A range of relevant open educational resources (OER) was therefore developed or harvested prior to the start of #FSLT12, and integrated into the Wordpress site, under the heading *Tutorials*, with the specific purpose of presenting guides to acquiring participatory skills.

Diversity

#FSLT12 was targeted at new lecturers, PhD students who teach, and people moving into Higher Education from other sectors, and the team anticipated diversity within this group. A significant proportion of the course participants did fit those categories. There were people who were completely new to Higher Education, and to learning online, but who had chosen the course because it was more convenient than

its face-to-face equivalent. Others were experienced MOOC participants, and experienced lecturers, interested in refreshing their practice, or sharing their expertise.

There were 206 official registrants for #FSLT12, which may be considered small in MOOC terms but given that #FSLT12 had a specific course topic and was delivered during a year where many other MOOCs were offered this may not be surprising. Stephen Downes (2013) has suggested that a concept of massive may not necessarily be conceived as engaging many numbers of people,

"…but in the design elements that make educating many people possible" (ref)

#FSLT12 attracted higher numbers than the face-to-face equivalent (where typical numbers average 20-30) and participants were more geographically diverse, from 24 different countries including Australia, Canada, India, South Africa, as well as many European countries and the US. Downes (2013) makes the point that when a course is massive in its design elements, it should not create bottlenecks. This means that it should not rely on the teacher to give feedback to the learner but enable many one-to-one interactions so that feedback may come from a range of sources. The introduction of monstrously massive MOOCs or xMOOCs (Sloep, 2012) such as those offered by Stanford, MIT and Coursera, which at their largest attract participant numbers in excess of 150,000, has further complicated understanding of MOOCs. These xMOOCs differ from connectivism MOOCs – or cMOOCs (Sloep, 2012) – in their pedagogy. Rather than offering peer-assisted interactive learning across distributed platforms, they offer learners a programme of self-

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directed and largely individual learning on a single platform. They are instructivist rather than connectivist (Rodriguez, 2012) and tend to be more formalized in the definition of learning outcomes. The learning outcomes for #FSLT12 were not explicitly stated but were replaced with aims and objectives to take into account a connectivist style of emergent learning.

Interactivity/connectedness

Participants were encouraged to blog about their experience of the course, and to register their blogs so that posts tagged '#fslt12' would be aggregated to the course site to provide a simple place for others to find relevant posts. Course participants and tutors also made extensive use of the #fslt12 hashtag on Twitter, allowing users to easily follow conversations about the course and to connect to others who were tweeting about the same issues, even without otherwise engaging with the course.

Reflecting on a review of the literature

A review of the current literature has highlighted that there is a very small degree of emergent evidence on how participants interact with content and each other within a MOOC. Apparent themes are: multi-tasking, benefits and risks of openness, digital identity and communities of practice.

Multi-tasking is a required skill for active participation. Levy's (2010) account of personal experience as a new MOOC learner in Personal Learning Environments and Knowledge 2010 (#PLENK2010*)* suggested that it was very complex to organize a personal

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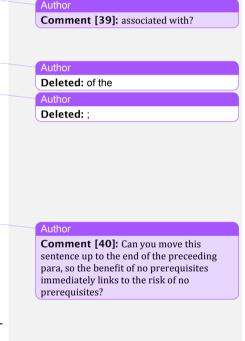
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learning network, and considered that time management skills were a key factor to overcome this; in addition a significant level of personal motivation was required in order to sustain participation. A lot of the learning happened in back channels, but it required multi-tasking to in order to achieve this. MOOC organizers can facilitate some of this by providing daily newsletters or summaries of participant activity.

There are **benefits and risks of openness;** the fact that access is enabled for a diverse range of participants means that the less experienced can benefit from expertise beyond the realms of a normal course (Kikkas, Lannpere, & Poldoja 2011). MOOCs have been described as a model of 'digital practice' as they can develop the skills individuals so that they can participate within a digital economy (McAuley et al., 2010), Weller (2011) suggests that access to participation in education may be widened by MOOCs as there are fewer prerequisites than in formal education.

The learner is provided with more global connections than a traditional course, exposure to diverse views and an abundance of resources and sharing of experiential knowledge, but is more likely to participate if there is potential for credit (Chamberlain & Parish, 2011). Risks include the need for prerequisite critical literacies such as the ability to learn autonomously and maintain a level of presence within a MOOC (Kop et al., 2011). Participation in a MOOC represents engagement in norms of digital interactions, which may present a good learning opportunity but can be challenging for those new to these expectations (McAuley et al., 2010). The size of

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a MOOC cohort can be overwhelming and it can be challenging for the learner to make sense of many voices (Chamberlain & Parish, 2011).

Participation can be either enhanced or inhibited by learner **digital identity**, for example the difference between having a confident voice within digital worlds compared to feeling that you have nothing worthwhile to contribute, and the role of participant as knowledge builder may feel alien to some learners (McAuley et al., 2010).

The work of Hratsinki (2008, 2009) suggests that there are varying perspectives on how participation within online **communities of practice** can be conceptualized. This includes levels of participation from accessing the online environment to taking part and joining in a dialogue, the perspective of learners and quantitative measures such as numbers of postings, lengths of postings and time spent reading postings. Hratsinki makes the point that online learning participation is a complex and evolving process for the learner, which involves taking part and building relations with others and involves a number of activities and feelings such as thinking, feeling, belonging, communicating; counting numbers alone is an insufficient measure of participation. Lurking is seen as a legitimate level of participation and an activity which shows potential for more active participation. This is an important consideration for exploration of participation in a MOOC and in particular the identification of triggers or processes which transform lurking to active participation

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Theoretical frameworks

Although cMOOCs are considered by some to be underpinned by connectivist principles (Cormier, 2010a & 2010b) it would appear that the development of MOOCs has been influenced by a combination of theoretical perspectives (Bujack et al., 2012; Levy, 2010; Kop, 2011) such as constructivism, connectivism and the concept of communities of practice. Hratsinki (2008) suggests that research frameworks for high-level conceptions of online learner participation include a variety of options and identifies constructivism and communities of practice as appropriate frameworks. Sfard (1998) argues that within educational research there can be a case for consideration of more than one theory for learning because each perspective can offer exclusive benefits. The rationale for this is argued within this case study, which was informed by constructivism, connectivism and communities of practice.

Constructivism

The concept of social constructivism has been influenced by Vygotsky's social learning theory (1978), which placed prominence on collaborative learning. The learner constructs and interprets knowledge actively, and practice, prior knowledge and experience are viewed as an important platform for ongoing learning. The design of the environment is constructed around authentic and experiential tasks such as those designed into the curriculum of #FSLT12. Within a study, which explores learner experience of participation in a MOOC, constructivism acknowledges the diversity of participants and aligns with the emphasis on creating and interpreting knowledge within a MOOC. In terms of interaction with content within a MOOC, constructivism embraces the purposes of learner activities within a

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MOOC such as aggregation, mixing, repurposing and feeding forward and includes social interaction with other participants in order to collaborate within learning activities. Constructivism on the other hand may not align with the role of a MOOC facilitator, who is less prominent than in a normal course as the emphasis in a MOOC is on autonomous and peer learning. The potential number of participants within a MOOC may also limit a role for a central facilitator.

Connectivism

Connectivism as a learning theory, (Siemens, 2004, Downes, 2012, Downes, 2013) is based on the premise that learning theories should reflect current social environments and in particular the influence of technology and the diverse informal settings in which modern learning takes place. Siemens (2004) critiques constructivism on the basis of the emphasis of knowledge resting with the individual; the use of technology has altered this premise as knowledge is viewed as resting within systems. Connectivism puts an emphasis on lifelong learning and also integrates chaos and complexity as important concepts, to prepare learners for working in a more unpredictable world and development of relevant skills in self-organisation and decision-making. The theory is that learners will create their own personal networks by making connections with people and ideas across a distributed digitally networked world. Learners will also be enabled to identify their own connections to support their ongoing learning. The pursuit of current and up-to-date knowledge is a desirable outcome. Bell (2010) has critiqued connectivism as an incomplete learning theory in that it may be insufficient to explain what has worked well in practice. Having said this the theory may be helpful in exploring how participants interact

with content and each other in a MOOC, especially if the topic relates to continuing professional development (CPD) such as in #FSLT12.

Communities of practice

Wenger (1998) has presented key ideas about what it means to participate within a community of practice. He suggests that it is a complex, active process of participation and mutual recognition. Within any given community of practice this will lead to personal identity building. Participation within a community of practice leads to a perspective on the knowledge which is considered to be valuable and effective for that community. Hratsinki (2008) has identified that community of practice theory conceptualises the complexity of participation and the association of participation with learning.

Wenger-Trayner et al (2011) differentiate between a community and a network and don't necessarily view participation as collaboration, because participation can include all types of relations, for example conflict and competition. The theory also takes into legitimate peripheral participation and the idea that new learners within a community of practice may be viewed as apprentices and take on more active roles as they are drawn into the community.

A community of practice (COP) is seen as a learning partnership of people who consider it purposeful to learn from one another, whereas a network is seen as a group of relations, personal influences and connections between individuals who have specific goals to connect. This is a useful lens to consider how participants have interacted with each other in a MOOC where many networks may be

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evident; what is the relationship between community and network and which ones are the most significant for which participants? It is also a useful lens to explore learner participation within a MOOC, self-evaluation of participation, and to identify strategies which may encourage active participation. Wenger never intended communities of practice to be a stand-alone theory. In this case study COP theory is used to complement the theories of constructivism and connectivism as an overall theoretical framework.

Methods

The methodology was a case study which utilized a mixed methods approach. Bryman (2012) has described trends in social research and in particular the expansion of mixed methods research as a strategy to provide a more complete picture of a phenomenon. A MOOC has potential to offer researchers useful and comprehensive data and in particular digitally archived records of participant activity and interactions. A quantitative analysis of these was used to illustrate trends in participation, which were explored in more depth with a course evaluation questionnaire, followed up with focus groups, individual interviews and a survey of participatory experience. The aim was to provide rigor within the case study by what Bryman (2012) describes as completeness in addressing the specific research questions, and to provide triangulation of the data, which helps to identify important connections to provide a detailed account of what counts as participation within a MOOC.

The Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the collection and analysis of primary research data from #FSLT12. Participants were recruited via the main Wordpress site by posting an invitation to participate in research, which included a link to a participant information sheet, consent form and course evaluation questionnaire. Participant data was anonymized and de-identified and permission was sought to use direct quotes from research data such as personal blogs, interviews and survey research data.

Sample

The focus of attention within the case study was #FSLT12 participants, so in theory anyone who registered or participated within any element of #FSLT12 could be regarded as what Bryman (2012) describes as the unit of analysis for sampling; however in a case study which uses mixed methods there will be a number of units within the case.

A quantitative analysis of numbers participating in specific areas of distributed open learning spaces of a MOOC potentially includes everyone who visits that learning space. Unless the space is tagged with a course identifier it may be impossible to fully estimate participation quantitively, In #FSLT12 it was possible to identify everyone who registered for the Moodle site and those who actively participated in identifiable distributed course spaces (Table 1).

Table 1- *Level of participant activity*

#FSLT12 Participants	Type of activity
206	Registered on Moodle
67 (30%)	Actively participated within identifiable #FSLT12 distributed spaces
52	Posted to Moodle Discussion forums
24	Aggregated blogs at course Wordpress site
21	Attended Blackboard Collaborate synchronous session 1
32	Attended Blackboard Collaborate synchronous session 2
28	Attended Blackboard Collaborate synchronous session 3
17	Attended Blackboard Collaborate synchronous session 4

Data collection and analysis

20% (n=41) of registrants completed the course evaluation questionnaire via the link from the Wordpress site. Respondents were given

the option of remaining anonymous, so it was impossible to identify the representativeness of the sample, however it was clear that

diverse participants experienced the course differently. This helped to identify a range of themes (see Appendix 1), which were used to

promote discussion during subsequent focus group interviews, which all registrants were invited to attend in Blackboard Collaborate.

Two of these were carried out, each with an attendance of eight participants who represented a relatively diverse cross-section of

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members of #FSLT12 in terms of experience of teaching in Higher Education, prior MOOC participation, international setting and undertaking an assessed or non-assessed pathway. Active participants who represented the description of the specific target audience (new lecturers in Higher Education who were undertaking the assessment pathway) were identified as a purposive sample and invited to attend individual semi-structured interviews; four of these were carried out. In order to reach a wider sweep of #FLST12 registrants (in other words to include the views of those who had not been visibly active) a survey questionnaire focused on individual participation was emailed to every course registrant. Response rates were relatively low at 13.5% (n=28) but over half of the respondents said that they had either read or commented on other participant blogs. 24 participants aggregated their blogs at the #FSLT12 Wordpress site and these were found to be a rich source of reflective commentary on course experience and were considered to be a source of relevant research data

This was a complex sampling strategy which aimed to capture data which took into account the diverse ways in which individuals chose to participate within #FSLT12 (Table 2*)*.

Table 2 *Data Collection*

Sample source	Sample size
Course evaluation questionnaire, link posted on course site	41 (20%)

Quantitative measures of individual active participation in distributed spaces and #FSLT12 discussion forums	67
Focus group interviews x 2 in synchronous audiographic platform	16
Individual interviews	4
Thematic analysis of aggregated blogs	24
Survey questionnaire on experience of participation emailed to all #FSLT12 registrants	28 (13.5%)

The analysis of quantitative data was statistically insignificant. However in mixed methods research it is recommended that sources of data are integrated to lead to triangulation of themes and findings (Bryman, 2012). Data collected from the course evaluation questionnaire, focus group interviews, individual interviews, survey and aggregated blog posts were thematically analyzed with reference (Appendix 1) to the case study research questions:

- What was the learner experience of participation in #FSLT12?

- How did learners interact with content in #FSLT12?

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- How did learners interact with each other in #FSLT12?

The overall thematic analysis (Appendix 1) was returned to the focus group and interview research participants for member checking and verification of participatory behaviour themes. During the process of #FSLT12 many participants expressed an interest in research and evaluation of MOOCs and the team felt it appropriate to be transparent about research procedures. Given the diversity of #FSLT12 some participants were experienced researchers, and this provided a good opportunity to review trustworthiness of the data analysis. The collected research data was also peer-reviewed by the authors who independently organised the many sources into themes and made comparisons in order to reach an overall consistent analysis.

The learner experience of participation in #FSLT12

Behaviours which respondents identified as participatory within #FSLT12 were observing others, reading, discussion forum posting, blogging and completion of assessment activities. Specific strategies to maintain individual participation were keeping the MOOC browser open all the time and making a determined and deliberate attempt to participate as much as possible in order to learn more about MOOCs.

During the focus group interviews diverse identities emerged as participants spontaneously referred to themselves as 'Vets' or 'Newbies' in relation to MOOC participation. These roles appeared to be mutually recognized.

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"Fresh and green vs. lots of MOOC experience.... such a range" (Focus group.)

In evaluating the learner experience of participation this dichotomy was used as a reference point to compare and contrast participatory experiences between novices and those who are experienced. Three main themes emerged, which are discussed in turn below.

Navigation. Different routes and approaches were taken; novices felt initially overwhelmed by technical issues, multi-channels and a need to be able to multi-task, which required too many initial participatory skills incorporating:

"Listening, reading and discussions all at the same time". (Course evaluation questionnaire)

The Moodle site was seen as:

"*Delivering too much content all at once".* (Course evaluation questionnaire)

The number of discussion forum posts in Moodle was highest during the opening week. This was commented upon by an experienced participant in a blog post as *"mooc syndrome"*: typical of enthusiastic starts within MOOCs, which quickly tail off. Some participants felt that #FSLT12 was trying to do too much at once for a short course. Appearance of a "Welcome" discussion topic and a "Week 0" in advance of the advertised start date meant that people who had been following the developments more closely were already active

and engaged in discussion by the time the advertised start date had arrived. This meant that some participants had the sense of arriving in the midst of ongoing activity. Conversely some experienced participants felt very able to navigate the multi-channels:

"Appreciated more structure than other MOOCs I have participated in." (Course evaluation questionnaire)

Experienced participants also appeared to be more judicious about planning their route and their level of participation.

"This is my sixth MOOC and I chose my level of participation". (Course evaluation questionnaire)

The fact that novices encountered navigation difficulties in an online environment is not unexpected and corresponds with the findings of other authors (Fini, 2009; Kop, 2011).

Transformational shift. Although novices initially felt overwhelmed, some, especially those who were undertaking the assessment route, remained active throughout the MOOC. A transformative shift was evident on realization that it is not necessary to join everything:

"Initial feeling of great pressure to participate...realized eventually that there was choice about this." (Interview 1)

This did require time and reflection to reach this point:

"Getting over that initial concern...I realized that it was OK to observe, but that required effort, I spent a whole evening opening all of the different folders and channels, needed to immerse myself" (Interview 2)

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"A core moment in online participating is that when you begin to contribute after only following, observing or consuming."

(Experienced participant blog)

A core moment for transformative shifts was the synchronous sessions:

"The first synchronous session was an important milestone in getting to the point where I realized I didn't have to respond to everything. When I was hearing voices and when there was time to have a conversation with others involved in similar activities."

(Focus group 1)

Some novices viewed assessment as a lever to promote a transformational shift in identity.

" My identity as a teacher has shifted contextually, my curiosity has been stimulated about digital literacies and developing them amongst learners and which ones are required for effective teaching." (Interview 1)

This contrasted with experiences of some participants:

"Not being assessed made it less meaningful to participate." (Survey)

Connectivist-influenced MOOCs are designed for uncertainty and this can have an impact on participant learning experiences and sense of personal identity:

"A MOOC allows me to play with uncertainty and depending on how my day is going this can be scary or liberating." (Discussion forum)

Some participants recognized the effect on their identity and how this might change over time in unexpected ways:

"It changed my learner identities from confidence and experienced to not having a clue a feeling like a novice" (Focus group)

Scaffolding by 'experienced participants'. Some registrants of #FSLT12 who did not actively participate cited personal circumstances which impacted on time and commitment but others said:

"I didn't know how to participate." (Survey)

"I did try but I was intimidated by the depth of the posts and my newness to higher education." (Survey)

Experienced participants recognized that it is challenging to engage MOOC newcomers and an important skill is to support novices to cope with multi-channel working.

"Those that are lost are missing out on an important new literacy." (Focus group)

Assessed participants, especially novices, felt supported by the #FSLT12 infrastructure and experienced participant expertise. There was more potential for peer facilitation and support for novices. This became evident in responses gathered during the focus group interviews. It was suggested that a core group of experienced volunteers could take responsibility for supporting individual groups

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Comment [62]: This wants either changing to 'confident' or a '[sic]' afterwards

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within a cohort of novices, moderate back channels and build community at a micro level. Some of the novices reflected that they could have taken more opportunities to seek feedback and ask questions of experts.

"This was a good opportunity to participate with teachers who have been teaching for longer... I should have realized that it was OK to ask them for help." (Interview 1)

There is a clear opportunity to establish informal networks for mentoring and potential for experienced participants to serve as support volunteers for future practice.

Learner interaction with content in #FSLT12

Motivation to join #FSLT12 was prompted by the subject matter. This was indicated on registrant sign-up records and applied to novices and experienced participants alike. The content of #FSLT12 was identified as a clear framework for continuing professional development (CPD) and reflection.

Weekly themed discussion forums demonstrated highest rates of interaction with content during #FSLT12 (Table 3).

Table 3 *Discussion forum analysis*

Discussion forums	Arrivals	Week 0	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Discussion		Supporting	Reflective	Teaching	Feedback	Learning	Evaluation

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Comment [65]: I don't understand the point you are trying to make here.

topics		learning	practice	groups			
Frequency of postings	221	201	120	121	105	73	9
Number of facilitator posts	61	38	31	13	9	22	2
Number of participant posts	160	163	89	108	96	51	7

These were initiated by the course facilitators and supplemented with related learning resources. Forum posts which had been well subscribed and reflected the diversity of the participant decreased in frequency over the duration of #FSLT12 .

Reflective practice was a key theme, and content which focused on reflective practice appeared to prompt this. This included learning activities and assessment tasks.

This was typical of all active participants and particular evidence of this was found within participant blogs:

"My goal for my work in the FSLT MOOC is to understand and practice critical reflection more effectively and to learn how to create a space where my students can develop their own. I am grateful for the opportunity to join the FSLT community." (Experienced participant blog)

"The content has encouraged my participation at a more thoughtful level and I have modelled reflection by using a blog' (Novice participant blog)

Reflective content of #FSLT12 was viewed as a facilitative tool to stimulate personal reflections on teaching and learning and to develop personal reflective skills.

"In the previous post I described briefly what some of the experience was like as a teacher of Media Studies. I am aware that I have not provide a 'critical analysis' from a 'number of perspectives'-such as my own, the learners involved, my colleagues and indeed, the literature." (Novice participant blog)

Learner interaction with each other

Survey responses suggested that active participants used the following channels to interact with each other: posting to discussion forums, responding to blog posts, attending synchronous sessions and a face-to-face meeting entitled "MOOC-up", which had been arranged via Twitter.

Two main themes emerged from the thematic analysis of all of the data, which are discussed in turn below.

Making sense of community for novices and experts, this category was seen as a skill that was required to:

> *"Sort out who these experts and the audience are."* (Interview 1)

Becoming part of the community was viewed as an important confidence-builder and an opportunity to observe participatory behaviours. All interview participants were new to online teaching and they expressed the usefulness of observing how forums, blogs and social media could be used for digital interaction and to see their use in teaching and learning practice.

> *"This opened my eyes as a teacher."* (Interview 2)

The synchronous sessions and individual blogs were important participatory areas for #FSLT12, but the main thrust of observed participant interaction in #FSLT12 occurred in the discussion forums (see Table 3); of the 67 active participants 52 regularly posted on the forums.

> *"In the MOOC forums there is quite a lively discussion this week (as there was last week), which got me thinking. One of the things that I've been pondering is the mode of participation."* (Experienced participant blog)

Reciprocal relationships, the potential for reciprocity between diverse participants as a catalyst for active engagement became gradually apparent. Novice participants developed a sense of the establishment of a core #FSLT12 participatory after a few weeks.

"Interacting with experts has demonstrated different styles for pedagogy for online learning and different approaches for using technology in teaching." (Interview 3)

The fact that the MOOC was an open online environment did not occur to everyone as a significant issue. For example one interview participant had not registered awareness that presentation of the microteaching assessment was open access. However, the possibility of potential for interactions in many spaces was regarded as an advantage for gaining rich feedback from many sources.

"The interactions between my peers and the facilitators were great, there was a lot of sharing of best practices and lived experiences, and I took a lot of things away; both things that I can immediately put into practice, and things that I need to read up on :-)." (Experienced participant blog)

Focus group interviewees identified the diversity of other participants as an important aspect of learning. The international context and the professional experiences of individuals provided a positive challenge as peer observers. This was an evident outcome of the

microteaching assessment. The experienced were impressed with the novices, and vice verse, which prompted rich and dialogic reciprocal feedback.:

> *"There is just nothing else quite like social, networked learning to get your brain jazzed up about something. It's about risk, exploration, learning from others who are as wildly different and deeply the same as you are, to try and fail and try some more in a safe and welcoming environment."* (Experienced participant blog)

Experienced participants' blog posts demonstrated reflection on a variety of personal MOOC experiences and the strategies which they employed to locate themselves within the main mode of interaction in an individual MOOC:

The digital skills of experienced participants enabled them to evaluate the impact of their own contribution and how individuals are interacting with their artifacts.

> *"Google Analytics gives me information about visits to my blog during the last month."* (Experienced participant blog) *"It seems to me, that my own personal strategy is 'biggest bang for the buck' - so wherever there are more people, that's where I participate."* (Experienced participant blog)

Discussion

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Threshold concepts have been described as akin to the opening up of a portal of understanding of previously unknown knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003). They are a useful lens to explore why active participation led to learning for some in #FSLT12.

Some of the important features of a threshold concept are transformation, which means that once knowledge is understood an aspect of a practice or discipline will be transformed, irreversibly, and the learner will have crossed conceptual boundaries and have a changed discourse or identity. This is preceded by troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2006) for the learner, where knowledge can be counter-intuitive, incoherent or alien. Another feature of a threshold concept is liminality; Meyer & Land (2003) describe this as

> *"A suspended state of partial understanding or stuck place"*

The theory is that as learners transcend steps in their understanding or attempt to gain mastery in their discipline or practice they will oscillate between new and old understandings. Meyer & Land provide the example of the adolescent who will swing back and forth between child- and adult-like behaviours. Once a learner enters a liminal space they are engaged within a context for mastery. The liminal space may provide a sense of self-achievement, but may also be troublesome as personal identity shifts in an attempt to reach new understanding as old ways of doing and thinking about things are discarded, representing an ontological shift.

Learning in a cMOOC takes place over distributed platforms and in an abundance of information that many learners find overwhelming. Learners therefore need to develop skills of finding relevant information and become adept at filtering, picking and choosing

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Comment [73]: This is a short quote so it can run on in the main text, but it does need a page number as Liz says.

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Comment [74]: Contest for mastery?

information relevant to personal learning. High levels of critical capability (Kop & Bouchard, 2011) are required in addition to appropriate technical skills. This represents troublesome knowledge in a cMOOC.

Liminality was observed in #FSLT12 in novice attempts to make sense of MOOC participation and observe and practise skills and behaviours associated with active participation. Reflection and time appeared to be important factors to facilitate this.The moments in #FSLT12 when learners recognized the skills which were required for active participation by interacting with content and other learners was when personal learning became transformed. This could be viewed as a threshold concept and appeared significant when learners described identity shifts.

The liminal space is contrasted with the pre-liminal space where the learner remains completely static within their understanding (reference?). This could be said to correspond with those registrants for #FSLT12 who stated in the survey questionnaire that they did not know how to participate; this is a significant issue for facilitators and providers of MOOCs to address. In addition the threshold concept theory suggests that once a threshold of understanding is crossed, it is hard for the learner to truly recall lack of understanding from a former pre-liminal or liminal phase. Although this case study demonstrated reciprocity between novice and experienced participants to some extent, it might be challenging for the experienced to realize how difficult MOOC participation may be to those new to learning within distributed open environments.

Stephen Downes asserts (2013) that connectivist MOOCs can enable learners to genuinely participate in the culture of a discipline by fostering the ability to transverse networks, so requiring learners to do something quite different from a traditional course. Downes provides an example of the difference between learning about physics and joining a community of physicists. This demonstrates a link between connectivism and communities of practice and also the work of Cousin (date) on threshold concepts where the description of mastery of a discipline is exemplified in the difference between learning about economics and thinking like an economist. #FSLT12 provided opportunities for novices to participate in the culture of teaching and learning in Higher Education.

Implications for practice and further research

As a small group of online teachers the team were interested in the outcomes of this case study in order to influence ongoing teaching practice. Anderson and Dron (2011) argue that high quality online learning exploits a range of pedagogies. Social constructivism was evident in #FSLT12 where the facilitators developed content to stimulate discussion and placed high emphasis on dialogue in forums. As Anderson and Dron point out the social constructivist approach is not conducive to scaling to high numbers. They suggest that a good starting point for connectivism is to expose learners to networks and provide opportunities to gain self-determination in cognitive skills for learning and making connections of their own by creating opportunities for interaction. In this case study liminality was seen to be an issue, which can impact on this. Experienced participants to some extent provided good role models and facilitated connections

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Comment [77]: Don't think 'transverse' can function as a verb. What about 'ability to operate across transverse networks'?

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Comment [79]: Is this the ref - Cousin, G (2006) An Introduction to Threshold Concepts. Planet No.17

Author
Comment [80]: Consider adding something like 'allowing participants the chance to move from learning about teaching to thinking like a teacher' to link the whole para together. Or is that too much repetition? I think it would be a neat finish, but you might disagree ;-)

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Comment [81]: From this point on, this para feels like a collection of short sentences which don't always clearly link to each other – can you merge some of them into longer sentences which make the links clearer?

with novices. This suggests that there are benefits to opening up online courses to enable learning to go beyond the faculty or the institution in order to encourage diversity. There is however more knowledge needed to develop models for active participation within MOOCs and in particular making the most of experienced and novice interactions. It is interesting to note that Anderson and Dron describe the scalability of connectivism as low to medium. It could be arguable whether #FSLT12 was numerically massive given that only 206 people registered. Conole (2013) has suggested that with the proliferation of MOOCs, components of specific learning design will determine the degree of scalability of a MOOC.

Rodriguez's review of MOOCs (2012) estimated active participation at less than 10% in four cMOOCs of varying registrant size (556-2,700). Comparatively an active participation rate of 32% in #FSLT12 (see Table 1) may be significant but would be hard to generalize beyond this case study. Watters (2012) notes the high dropout rates of MOOCs and high numbers of readers/observers/lurkers, while Rodriguez asserts that a cMOOC offers the potential participant choice about how and when to participate. This presents challenges in estimating those participants who do not visibly interact but may be actively lurking. The usefulness of counting numbers is questionable. Emerging research methodologies in technology enabled learning such as learning analytics (Siemens, 2011) present alternative approaches for analyzing multiple and diverse interactions within a MOOC.

The authors observe that MOOC offerings are evolving rapidly with the hybridization of many cMOOC and xMOOC philosophies (is this the right ref?Roberts et al., 2013). Hybridization may lead to further knowledge about MOOC participation. Based on the authors'

experiences of conducting this case study there was clear evidence of multi-MOOC participation. Some experienced participants were engaged concurrently in other MOOCs and openly compared their experiences and participatory behaviours between MOOCs and exposure to differing pedagogical philosophies. The fact that there appears to be a MOOC community who will deliberately expose themselves to many MOOC experiences makes them an interesting group for more longitudinal research to provide further insight into MOOC participation than can be provided by a single case study.

A recent hybrid MOOC, which was offered in the United Kingdom (UK), is *ELearning and Digital Cultures (*EdCmooc*).* One of the facilitators has noted (reference?) that this MOOC is '*stimulating a liminal state for many students'* suggesting that the MOOC itself is a liminal space and a site where threshold concepts might be encountered; this corresponds with the assertions which are being made in this paper that participation within a MOOC is a threshold concept within itse

Conclusion

This case study uncovered themes (Appendix 1), which were common to some active participants and derived from more than one source of data. Themes which occurred most frequently were transformation of identity, reciprocal relationships and reflective practice. Novice participants expressed initial uncertainties and experienced participants observed the difficulties they were experiencing.

Reflective practice was important for active participants as an aspect of learning and a tool for self-expression.

The research adds to the findings of earlier research on learner participation within MOOCs, which was discussed in the literature review especially in relation to navigation across multi-channels. Importantly it adds a new lens of **liminality**, and a space for reflective practice, which relates to course design and **transformative learning and threshold concepts,** especially MOOC content, which puts participants in the area of troublesome knowledge. Active participation is the vehicle through which these two concepts can be experienced. Navigation is an underpinning requirement but of particular consequence in this case study was that the experienced participant presence highlighted some of the difficulties which the novices were experiencing, and also provided a reciprocal zone of proximal development and triggers for active participation. More could have been made of experienced expertise to support and orientate registrants who are new to the MOOC experience.

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Comment [84]: This is the first time you've used this phrase, so it might benefit from a bit of unpacking?

References I have deleted the refs that I could not find in the text

Authors et al (2013) Is this George's paper and if so it needs to be removed from here and inserted with all names in list below – see page 34 – has it been accepted for publication?

Anderson & Dron (2011) ref to be inserted

Bell, F. (2012) *Open Academic Practice.* Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noJdj2xhqR8&list=PLDC351FFEA4925B5D&index=2

Bujack, K., Paul, M. & Demillo, R. (2012, February). *The Evolving University: Disruptive Change and Institutional Innovation.* Conference proceedings C21U, Georgia Tech, Georgia, USA.

Bryman (2012) to be inserted

Chamberlain, L. & Parish, T. (2011). MOOCs: massive open online courses or massive and obtuse courses? *eLearn Magazine, 8,* 1.

Author
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Author
Comment [85]: Are you sure this is the ref you want for p. 14 or is it her IRRODL 2010 paper? http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/902/1664

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> **Author**
> **Comment [86]:** Should it be 2012 or 2013 – see p 34

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massive open online courses. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 12 (7),* 74-93.

Levy, D. (2010, October). *Lessons learned from participating in a massive open online course.* Proceedings from The Chais

Conference on Institutional Technologies Research. Raanana: The Open University of Israel. Israel.

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Stewart (to be inserted – ref from page3?)

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Watters 2012 to insert

Comment [87]: To insert in text??

Weller, M. (2011). *The Digital Scholar: How Technology is Transforming Scholarly Practice.* London. Bloomsbury Academic.

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Page 3: [1] Comment [8]	Author

Stephen Downes has suggested that Dunbar's number of 150 should be the minimum number of active participants to qualify as a 'massive' course - http://halfanhour.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/what-makes-mooc-massive.html. FSLT12 was therefore massive for Week 0 only – according to the figures in the Table - but more important is that FSLT12 was prepared for massiveness and was designed according to cMOOC principles as outlined in the original MOOC CCK08

Page 3: [2] Comment [9]	Author

This list of semi-colon separated refs feels like an awkward way to start a sentence. Can you make it 'Other researchers (list goes here) have identified…'?

Page 3: [3] Comment [10]	Author

Is the usual rule to use et al for anything over 3 authors

Page 3: [4] Comment [11]	Author

Who has it been acknowledged by? 'they have acknowledged'?

Page 3: [5] Comment [13]	Author

Does house style demand the full stop after 'al'? looks odd unless it's required

Page 5: [6] Comment [20]	Author

I think 'internet' is established enough to no longer need its initial cap

Page 5: [7] Comment [22]	Author

I agree with list – coined is better

Page 5: [8] Comment [24]	Author

Not sure if caps are normal for this?

Page 15: [9] Comment [45]	Author

I think you need another 'and' in here somewhere, but I'm not sure where it goes, because I'm having difficulty working out the phrase boundaries of the sentence (if that makes sense!)

Page 15: [10] Comment [46]	Author

I have suggested changes which might help it read more easily

Page 15: [11] Comment [47]	Author

Add a full stop after 'al' if that's house style

Page 15: [12] Comment [48]	Author

Missing 'account'? (ie 'takes into account…')

Page 15: [13] Comment [49]	Author

This is an odd phrase, and I'm not quite sure what it means. For example, is this 'purposeful' as in 'deliberate' or 'purposeful' as in 'full of purpose', ie 'useful'? Can you rephrase?

Page 15: [14] Comment [50]	Author

It may be easier to simply quote Wenger et al - 'a learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain' (2011)

Page 15: [15] Comment [51]   **Author**

'specific goals to connecting with each other'? 'specific goals for connecting'?

Page 31: [16] Deleted   **Author**

"It seems to me, that my own personal strategy is "biggest bang for the

buck" - so wherever there are more people, that's where I participate."

(Experienced participant blog)

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Author et al (2010a)

Author et al (2010b)

Author et al (2011a)

Author et al (2011b)

Page 40: [18] Deleted   **Author**

Kop, R., & Carroll, F. (2011) Cloud Computing and Creativity: Learning on a

Massive Open Online Course. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-*

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Page 40: [19] Deleted   **Author**

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Page 43: [20] Deleted   **Author**

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Retrieved from

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUn6Ckj18SY&list=PL0F26F5AC75AAA5BE&index=2