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# Realising the potential of peer-to-peer learning: taming a MOOC with social media

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# Realising the potential of peer-to-peer learning: taming a MOOC with social media

## **Abstract**

ELearning and Digital Cultures, from the University of Edinburgh, was offered on the Coursera platform in January 2013. Over 40,000 enrolled, from every continent. The course was aimed mainly at educators wanting to “deepen their understanding of what it means to teach and learn in the digital age”. As participants, we experienced deep and significant learning, very much through social media. The peer-to-peer learning we engaged in and benefitted from was not traditionally organised ‘group work’ or micro-managed interaction, but something more fluid, open, student-initiated and led, that seems to have gone to the very core of what online learner agency, and digital culture, is all about.

## **Keywords**

potential, taming, mooc, social, media, peer, realising, learning

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## Realising the Potential of Peer-to-Peer Learning: Taming a MOOC with Social Media

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### Tags

academic literacy,  
connectivism, digital culture,  
open education, peeragogy

We report on peer-to-peer learning online, describing the role of cooperative, student managed groupings in successful learn-by-MOOC experiences. We found that to expand learners' potential in digital culture, it helps to by-pass traditional notions and tools of online learning support, and embrace networked social media.

### 1. Introduction

*eLearning and Digital Cultures*, from the University of Edinburgh, was offered on the Coursera platform in January 2013. Over 40,000 enrolled, from every continent. The course was aimed mainly at educators wanting to “deepen their understanding of what it means to teach and learn in the digital age”. As participants, we experienced deep and significant learning, very much through social media. The peer-to-peer learning we engaged in and benefitted from was not traditionally organised ‘group work’ or micro-managed interaction, but something more fluid, open, student-initiated and led, that seems to have gone to the very core of what online learner agency, and digital culture, is all about.

### 2. Learning goals

The course had weekly readings and short films, but no pre-packaged video lectures, no quizzes, and only one assessed task - to produce a digital, multi-modal ‘artefact’, and evaluate the final work of at least three peers. Instructors invited experimentation, and required only that artefacts represent understanding of at least one theme presented in the course, involve more than one mode (image/text/sound/video), and be published ‘in the open’ (online, and public).

This challenged us to question the dominance of academic prose in evidencing conceptual understanding, and to rapidly develop greater literacy in new digital media. Most participants were not seasoned public bloggers, and few were already in the habit of creating and publishing multimedia texts. So we began, expecting to play around with some new software, and to move from mere consumption of digital material into more proficient production. We also expected to come away with better understanding of social media, and mass educational phenomena, and how discussion and peer evaluation work in an open online environment, so we could improve our own practices in online education.

### 3. Learning process and outcomes

Before the course began, instructors sent encouraging emails, suggesting we might start connecting with one another via Twitter hashtag #edcmooc, Google Plus and personal blogs. From there, students created further groups in more social media, and communications ‘went viral’ - we had read the course and task description, and thousands of us felt strong cause to interact. The course website, when it opened, provided guidance, interesting resources

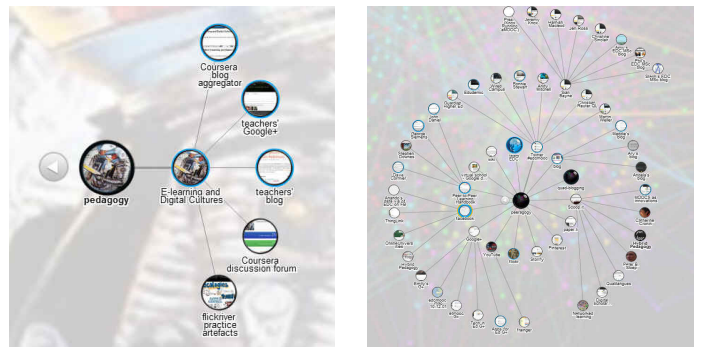
and a standard Coursera discussion forum, but by then, the key learning spaces for us were already established as Facebook, Twitter, G+, blogs and other media.

We 'knew' social media, but new here was using it for academic learning and professional development. We entered a world more expansive than most of us could conceive at the start – and more significant than participant numbers was that our conception of digital culture was being broadened in the process of becoming openly 'connectivist' (Siemens 2004, Downes 2012) and actually living 'peeragogy' (Rheingold et al 2012). Some found it confusing and overwhelming to spread our 'selves' across multiple media at once, but many found the experience of going above and beyond what was usual practice in formal education exciting - and liberating.

By the end of the course, we had learned an astonishing range of (free) software for digital, multi-modal text production, publishing and commenting - simply by sharing, playing with, and discussing various technologies of online learning (sample of final artefacts collected on Padlet/Wallwisher here). Perhaps the least expected, and greatest, outcome is the post-course reality we are now living, as an open, evolving community of professionals whose learning networks are still growing, and whose practices are changing, as a result of more, and more open, online activity, engendered by this MOOC.

### 4. Resources and technologies

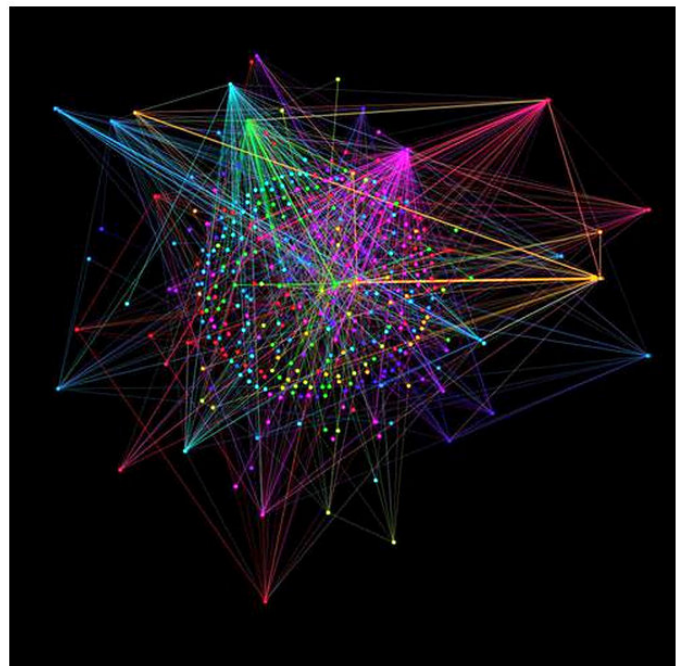
New and emerging technologies were central to the experience of openness and creativity, and to the 'how and why' this learning experience was so exciting and transformative for so many. They enabled rapid sharing and discussion of a phenomenal range and amount of further readings, filmclips, work-in-progress and software. They enabled extended conversation and sharing, synchronous and asynchronous (eg through inter-linked blogs, chat, video conferencing, voice recording), and a huge amount of interaction (eg on Twitter, via hashtags #edcmooc and #edcmchat). They also provide an archive of our collective learning experience, and the basis of our ongoing dialogue and professional and research cooperation. This [Pearltrees](#) site is just one of one participant's archives of our collective social media experience.



Comparative screenshots from PearlTrees, representing technologies, representing range of technologies used by the teaching team and by participants in EDC mooc.

Source: Emily Purser at [http://www.pearltrees.com/#/N-u=1\\_1046878&N-p=74783533&N-s=1\\_7829435&N-f=1\\_7829435&N-fa=7243790](http://www.pearltrees.com/#/N-u=1_1046878&N-p=74783533&N-s=1_7829435&N-f=1_7829435&N-fa=7243790) visit & explore the site to see the social media archive of our collective experience.

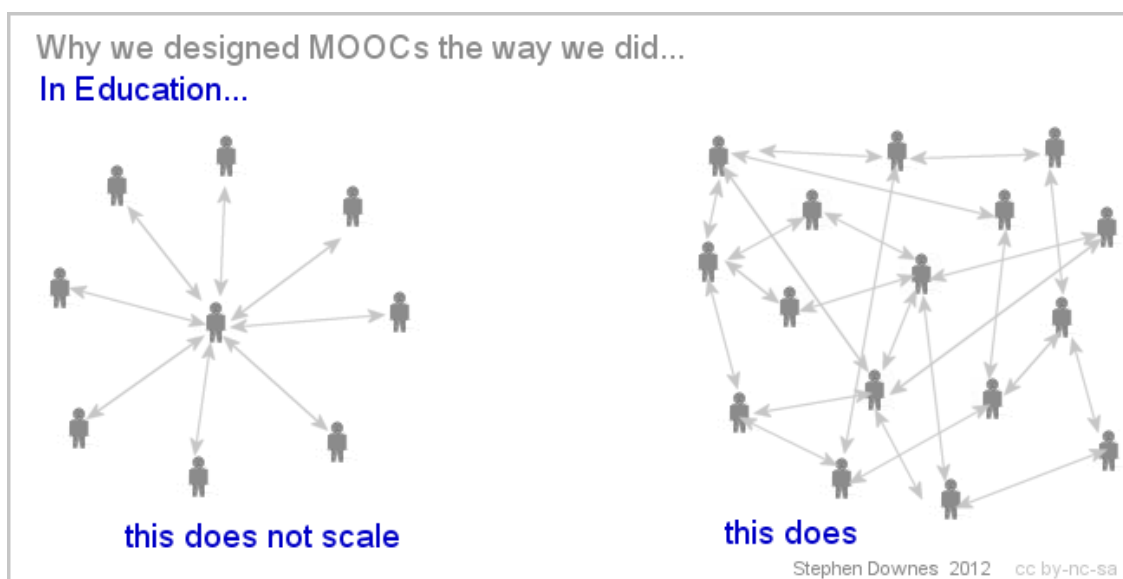
Some of the networked, excited, frenzied conversational activity that was going on was visualised in artefacts, such as this image, representing a Network Analysis of some activity on the #edcmooc Facebook group. It was, like many such images produced in the course, then re-blogged, re-tweeted and re-scoped.



Visualisation of social networking.

Source: Anando Purutama at <http://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/how-does-collaborative-learning-work-in-closed-online-courses-vs-moocs/>

It echoes the distinction made in Stephen Downes' 2011 presentation, comparing diagrams of the traditional model of instruction, in classrooms and online, and the sort of socially networked 'peeragogy' model of open online education he advocates.



Downes' comparative diagrams of interaction in traditional and networked online education  
Source: Steven Downes in discussion on G+ Sept 19, 2012 <https://plus.google.com/109526159908242471749/posts/4P7DvuNXdcz>  
and slide 6 in slideshare from Potsdam talk Oct 8 2012 at <http://www.slideshare.net/Downes/the-connectivist-learning-environment>

## 5. Educational strategies

The fascinating proliferation of interaction across social media in this course was sparked by a mild suggestion from the instructors, that participants might like to create personal blogs to document their learning journey, sign up for G+, Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr accounts, and start talking to one another before the course start date. The fire that took off burned by a fuel lying latent amongst a huge number of participants, who pounced, as though having been waiting for some time for such an opportunity.

To what extent the instructors anticipated that fire is for them to say. Their lay-low stance was mistaken by some students as absence, but they are clearly very mindful of the need for teacher presence, and choose their educational strategies carefully. They know how to engage and motivate learners, as one participant, Dave Hopkins, wrote about in [this blog post](#), and have themselves blogged and presented about it quite extensively (eg [Bayne 2013](#)). Online education is their passion ([Manifesto 2011](#)).

The MOOC is actually embedded within a credit-bearing course of the same name in an online [Masters programme](#), and a course tutor's research project. The 'open' course was thus monitored and managed by a relatively large team, including senior students, who were tasked to support and interact with (and ethnographically examine, analyse and critique) the MOOC

phenomenon as part of their formal learning experience. These inter-relationships prove significant, as the teaching team reflected before ([Knox et al 2012](#)), during ([EDC teachers' blog](#)) and after the MOOC ([Knox 2013](#)).

EDC was closer in its design and delivery to the 'cMoooc' experiences conceived by early pioneers of open online learning, than the sort of 'xMoooc' model that has come to be associated with Coursera ([Daniel 2012](#), [Downes 2013](#)). Together, and alike, students and instructors were dealing with an educationally significant confrontation with 'openness'. This is evidently a concept and set of practices that has evolved, symbiotically, with technological changes, and as Weller so well articulates ([2012](#)), the particular style of MOOC represented by EDC instantiates a clear and powerful relationship between digitised, networked, open communications and exponential growth in happy, productive creativity.

## 6 Conclusion

Like the images created to represent it, learning in the MOOC was, for us, a beautiful thing. Discussion was no optional extra for us in this course about digital and learning cultures - the role of interaction, and of open social media in that interaction, was centre stage in the rich learning experiences reported here. As one participant put it, "a good MOOC is more than the sum of

its parts... the community that formed around [this one] is its Xfactor" (#edcmooc, Mitchell, quoted in Bayne 2013). Some may find the scale and range of concurrent conversations across multiple media and open groups chaotic and overwhelming, but we found social media works well as a catalyst for learner agency, and it helped us tame a potential behemoth.

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