

Chapter 3

The Emancipated Learner? The Tensions Facing Learners in Massive, Open Learning



Abstract MOOCs have the potential to challenge existing educational models. Paradoxically, they frequently reinforce educational conventions by requiring the learners to conform to expected norms of current educational models. Recent research has produced data on how learners engage in MOOCs. And yet, despite the extensive data, rather than freeing learners to chart their own pathways, MOOCs still require the learners to conform to expected norms. The very act of learning autonomously often causes tensions, most noticeably when learners choose to drop out, rather than complete a course as expected, or when they engage in MOOCs as mere observers, rather than active contributors. In this chapter, we explore how the emphasis on the individual as active and autonomous learner sometimes conflicts with the expectation that learners conform to accepted norms. This expectation that learners conform to accepted ‘ways of being’ in a MOOC isolates those who plan their own pathway. The chapter concludes with a typology of different learners, arguing that, rather than adhering to a ‘type’, each MOOC participant moves across these learner types, depending on their motivations, and may span different types, rather than falling into one single category.

3.1 Individual Learner, Common Challenges

MOOCs have the potential to provide as many different learning experiences as there are learners. Each learner engages differently, guided and influenced by their own motivations and goals. Chapter two explored this potential of MOOCs as a move from conventional ‘education’ to broader forms of ‘learnification’. In this chapter, these ideas are extended to explore how changes in language are shaping our understanding and conceptualisation of what it means to engage in a MOOC (or learning more generally) and how this influences the process and product of the

MOOC experience. Embedded within this new learning are assumptions about what it means to be a learner, and in particular the myth of the universal learner.¹

Biesta (2009) suggests that the move towards the learnification of education acts to emphasise the centrality of the individual learner, not only in the learning process but also within the structures that shape and mediate learning experiences. This apparent focus on the learner and learner-centred or learner-oriented design is devised to suggest an empowerment of the learner and their emancipation from traditional institutions that controlled education. This chapter will explore how these ideas are shaping the concepts of learners and learning in MOOCs, in particular picking up on Biesta's warning of the dangers in subscribing to this idea.

Rensfeldt (2012) has suggested that technology and networked learning have contributed to this 'radical shift in favour of the individual learner, where personalisation is considered to challenge the dominant view of the enclosed, mass treatment by educational institutions' (p. 407). Selwyn (2016) argues that while this focus on the learner and learner choice is typically equated with giving control back to individuals, the reality is somewhat different. It rather emphasises the role of market values and the positioning of learner as product and the packaging of education for a consumer society with 'its emphasis on self-expression and lifestyle choices through individualistic acts of consumption' (p. 79).

In this chapter, we position the learner within the discourse on MOOCs. We examine the motivations, learning dispositions and behaviours of learners and what the research demonstrates as the best ways to support individual and collective learning journeys. We start by considering distinctive ways the learner is perceived by different stakeholders.

3.2 Student, Learner, User, Participant—Multiple Names for Multiple Actors

A range of terms have been used to denote people taking a MOOC: learner; student; user; participant. Typically, they are employed uncritically and interchangeably. Rarely are the terms or how they shape our understanding of the role, agency and position of the individuals they name interrogated. Biesta (2009) suggests that what we call those who are the subject of education matters. Not because language has a particular power but because the use of a particular word leads more easily to other words, and therefore becomes connected, often unconsciously, to certain meanings and assumptions. Biesta (2009) emphasises the importance of the labels attributed to those who are the receivers of education. What we call those who are the subject of education matters. This is not only because language can be powerful, but also because these labels are open to interpretation and could lead, unconsciously, to mis-

¹Todd Rose, The Myth of the Universal Learner Available from: <https://www.vteducation.org/en/articles/collaborating-technology-and-active-learning/myth-universal-learner-todd-rose-variability>.

construed meanings and assumptions. For instance—if the MOOC learner is labelled as a ‘student’, it may conjure images of someone who has signed up to complete a course. The learner may also be considered a ‘consumer’ who would be willing to pay a fee to participate in a MOOC. These terms, ‘student’ and ‘consumer’, signify different values.

Language and the words we use determine what can (and cannot) be done and what is (and what is not) possible. What we choose to label those individuals engaging in a MOOC influences how we position these individuals in relation to each other, to the teacher, to the content and instructional design, to the technology, to the platform provider, to the outcomes that they achieve or attain.

The choice of language around individuals extends to further encapsulate the terms used to describe different components of the learning journey. Successful completion, engagement, interaction, learning, achievement, accreditation are all used to denote the desired behaviour and to shape the methods of participating in the learning space of MOOCs.

Traditionally, the subjects of any educational experience, or those belonging to any educational system are unequivocally referred to as ‘students’ As students enrolled in a programme of study at an institution (be it offline, online or in a blended setting), there is consensus as to the overarching purpose of their engagement and activity, and in many cases a relatively linear trajectory of their educational experience. The student is positioned as the subject of education, the one who is summoned to study. As a subject of education, they are situated as part of a formal, hierarchical educational system, which has rules, regulations and outcomes that are externally determined.

3.2.1 The Student, the Learner

From the new language of learning perspective, the student is less subject than object, lacking the agency to chart their own educational experiences or to shape their learning journey. They, however, operate from a position within the system and by virtue of being a member of an established institution are offered a degree of legitimacy. The extent to which an individual enrolled in a MOOC might be labelled a student is contested. MOOCs can operate within or outside of established institutions, educational frameworks and traditional structures. And this fluidity in the positioning of MOOCs and the considerable plurality in the agendas, motivations and goals of individuals enrolled in them makes it challenging to position the learning experience of enrollees within traditional educational structures, and often the institution providing the MOOC in which the student is enrolled.

‘Learner’ is increasingly used in formal and informal, online and offline learning contexts. Part of its popularity is the notion that the learner is an active agent who has control over and takes responsibility for their educational journey and in determining their learning experience. Although the ability (or inability) of all learners participating in MOOCs to become active agents and determiners of their own learning journeys will be explored in Chap. 4. The ‘student-led’ nature of learning is further

emphasised through the (desired) merging of roles between teacher and learner in MOOCs. That is, MOOCs frequently position participants not only in the role of students but also as teachers who are supposed to take responsibility for supporting the learning and development of other participants. For example, in Chapter One we described how ‘cMOOCs’ are designed such that students learn by contributing and sharing knowledge within the MOOC network. Some MOOCs have peer-review mechanisms, where students are expected to provide constructive feedback on assignments, and projects. Alternately, within MOOC discussion forums, learners voluntarily take up the role of being moderators, or Teaching Assistants. This idea of social learning in a MOOC, where massive numbers of participants act as students and, at the same time, teachers of others, has been underscored in Chap. 1 as one of the most important features of MOOCs (Ferguson and Sharples 2014).

While this model of collaborative, socially constructed and collectively determined learning and the fluid movement between roles is, to many, an appealing notion, its manifestation in reality is more questionable. Studies suggests that majority of learners in MOOCs operate as isolated individuals (Hew and Cheung 2014), firmly identifying with the role of learner, rather than taking responsibility to contribute to the collective learning and knowledge building of all MOOC participants. This may seem surprising because these notions of agency and self-determination frequently are used to represent a liberation of the learner from traditional power structures in education, from the dominance of the institution and a top-down educational approach where the teacher controls and determines the nature of the experience within the tightly controlled guidelines of the accrediting institution. Perhaps the learner does not always want to be emancipated.

In traditional models of education the agenda is controlled by institutions who determine the inputs, processes and outcomes of learning. Selwyn (2016) suggests that connectivity of digital technologies has the potential to recast social arrangements in education. Online learning is positioned in opposition to this apparent ‘top-down’ traditional model. He claims:

Such descriptions are intended to convey a sense of the mismanagement of education by monolithic institutions that are profoundly undemocratic and archaic. These are lumbering organisations where ownership, control and power are concentrated unfairly in the hands of elites – be they vice chancellors and university professors, or school district superintendents, tenured teachers and their unions. Like many large administrations and bureaucracies, these institutions that are believed to be unresponsive, incompetent, untrustworthy, ungrateful, self-serving and greedy. (Selwyn 2016, p. 11)

The narrative of the broken system, and the transition of power and agency from institutions to individuals belie the common reality of a perpetration of existing models in MOOCs. Selwyn (2014) warns that the reality is a continuation of the existing hierarchy, from those that ‘do’ educational technology (traditional institutions and the new-comers technology companies) to those who have educational technology ‘done to them’.

The term ‘learner’ has particular appeal in the context of MOOCs because of the supposed potential of MOOCs to disrupt traditional tenets and structures of education. Open and flexible enrolments result in diverse demographics which, in turn,

introduces a range of learner motivations and goals. This leads to highly variable patterns of engagement both across MOOCs and often within the same MOOC. Conole (2013) suggests that participation can range from completely informal, with learners having the autonomy and flexibility to determine and chart their own learning journey, to engagement in a formal course, which operates in a similar manner to offline formal education. Furthermore, the curriculum and content of a MOOC is not always static, but incorporates (both by design and through differing modes of learner engagement) a range of learning opportunities and pathways, which individual learners are able to self-select and independently navigate. In contrast to the relatively linear, pre-established standards of traditional education, MOOCs enable individual learners to determine their engagement in relation to their self-identified goals (DeBoer et al. 2014).

However, as will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter, the agency that the term ‘learner’ endows can be problematic. Frequently, there is a disjunction between the espoused and enacted position of the learner. That is, not all learners in the MOOCs have the necessary knowledge, skills or dispositions to be an active agent in their learning journey and consequently cannot engage in the opportunities on offer in the same ways or for the same outcomes (Littlejohn et al. 2016). Equality of access does not result in equal outcomes across learners.

While the term learner (and the structure of MOOCs), in theory, but frequently not in practice, endows an individual with the agency to determine and chart their own learning journey, Biesta (2009) warns that the term learner also denotes a lack. That is, the learner is missing something that they must learn. The learner, therefore, is in a position of inequality, until they have learned whatever it is that they need to learn. In many ways, the positioning of MOOCs within the rhetoric of lifelong learning and the continuous need to upskill reinforces the learner as deficient in someway.

MOOCs increasingly are targeting this deficit in individuals and positioning themselves as the cure and solution to it. Later in this chapter, in the section on ‘A closer look at the role of self-regulated learning in MOOCs’, the implications for individual learners of this deficit thinking combined with the agency and self-directed nature of the learning experience in MOOCs will be explored in greater detail.

3.2.2 The User, the Participant

‘User’ is a term frequently used in discussions of technology. The meaning attached to the expression ‘user’ is mutable. In certain contexts, it refers to people ‘using’ content resources, which in the context of MOOCs serves to emphasise the notion of the MOOC as a product and learning as a commodity. This commoditisation of learning plays into the neoliberal position of education. In certain contexts, user may be used to convey freedom and agency to engage in the ways that best suit the individual. In this sense, it references the democratising power of technology, which can facilitate bottom-up activity by endowing individual users with the opportunity and ability to engage, lead and construct their online activity. The user, in conjunction

with the educator or course developer, plays an integral role in the development and continued innovation and evolution of a particular product or experience. However, it equally may signify a closed and mechanistic use of the resources provided.

The term ‘participant’ serves to position the individual in an active role, and makes implicit reference to the centrality of technology to the experience. As such, they align with Siemens (2013) conception of the MOOC as a platform (rather than a course), on which individual learners (or users or participants) define and construct their own learning. Siemens’s vision elevates a constructivist model of learning and knowledge over the transmission model in MOOCs. Thus, on a MOOC platform, users can be defined as—People who are offered rights to create, add, modify and disseminate content and knowledge through their interaction with other users and technology.

However, while the terms ‘user’ and ‘participant’ indicate a shared approach to learning where power and agency is distributed amongst all people involved in a MOOC, regardless of their position as convener or creator and learner, the reality of engagement in ‘connectivist’ learning environment (often referred to as cMOOCs, see Chap. 1) is more complex. While the terms ‘user’ and ‘participant’ (on the surface at least) afford agency to the individual actively to chart and determine the nature of their engagement, providing an illusion of user-control, the reality is somewhat different. Chapter 2 illustrated that cMOOCs, far from opening up education and the nature of engagement, require people to behave in specific ways. They are founded on everyone actively sharing and building knowledge, with each user or participant responsible for the continual evolution of the MOOC (Knox 2016). As such, they do not allow individuals to determine their own level of engagement. Passivity in a cMOOC is equated with non-engagement and nonconformity to the ‘norms’ of behaviour and learning (Milligan et al. 2013).

Yet the shifting language—student to learner, user to participant—suggests a reorienting of power in education and learning, with individual learners or participants responsible for identifying their learning needs and the learning opportunities that will be serve these. These individuals then moderate their behaviour and actions in order to reach their self-determined goals and outcomes. This shift in power is matched by a shifting of the role of learners. Ideally in a MOOC, every learner should simultaneously exist as a teacher by contributing their unique skills and knowledge back into the MOOC. However, many MOOC learners choose to learn individually and in isolation and few take responsibility for teaching others (Hew and Cheung 2014; Milligan et al. 2013), which means that the reality is somewhat different to the scenario suggested by the shift in terminology.

Feinberg (2001, p. 403) warns about this shift in power and emphasis on individual learners determining their learning needs. According to Feinberg, the expert knows best and the novice cannot make the decision about the pathway:

In market models consumers are supposed to know what they need, and producers bid in price and quality to satisfy them. In professional models the producer not only services a need, but also defines it /.../ Sam goes to his physician complaining of a headache. Is it an aspirin or brain surgery that he needs? Only the doctor knows.

Social learning is an important characteristic of MOOCs. However, the plurality of the terminologies used to denote those who participate in MOOCs is symbolic of a shift away from ‘the social’ towards the ‘individual’. Students are now termed learners and users are viewed as participants, symbolising the shift from what we perceive as ‘education’ to what we understand as ‘learning’. This shift elevates and emphasises the position of the individual and individual pursuits. Whereas education is part of a broader programme, the aims and purposes of which we may or may not support. Through this agenda, students are members of an institutional structure and their socialisation within this structure becomes a pivotal part of their learning experience. Yet, the MOOC often becomes a decontextualised space, where the individual and the individual experience is emphasised.

3.3 Why a MOOC? Motivations and Incentives Among MOOC Learners

The democratising rhetoric surrounding MOOCs is acknowledged by Biesta (2009), who suggests that ‘[t]here are even emancipatory possibilities in the new language of learning to the extent to which it can empower individuals to take control of their own educational agendas’ (p. 38). While the language empowers, the reality is that many learners do not have the cognitive, behavioural or affective characteristics necessary to be active agents and determiners of their own learning pathways. Early critiques of MOOCs suggested that they were not achieving their emancipatory aims but rather were reinforcing existing trends and inequalities in participation in education and learning. While this concern remains, there is growing evidence to suggest that MOOCs are attracting a broader demography of learners, and that learners have a broad range of motivations for engaging in a MOOC.

The open, flexible nature of MOOCs in theory—though not always in practice—enables individuals to determine with what, how and when they will engage. As a result, learners in MOOCs typically have a wider range of motivations and needs for learning than is normally observed in a conventional course or traditional educational experience. The flexible structure of MOOCs, in which there are few barriers and minimal formal consequences to learners ‘dropping in’ and ‘dropping out’ of a MOOC, leads to fluidity in learners’ behaviours and actions (Yang et al. 2013).

The structure of learning in MOOCs, which typically involves minimal direct interaction between the instructor and learners, places the onus on each individual learner to determine and direct his or her own learning and to become teachers for other learners. Learners are not only required to self-regulate their learning, and to determine when, how and with what content and activities they engage, but they further have autonomy over determining the outcomes of their learning. The ‘product’ of a MOOC is not standardised across all learners. Learners can set some of their own terms of participation in MOOCs and therefore have a very different relationship to

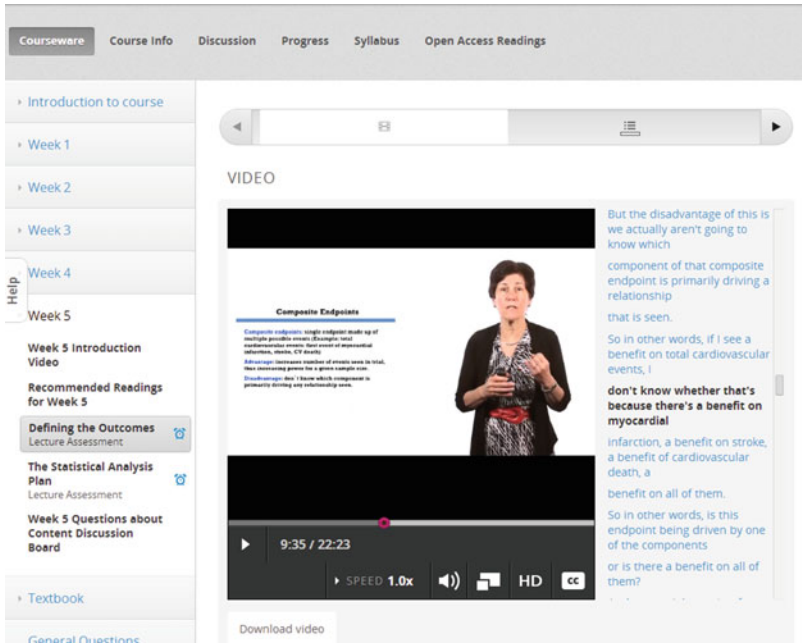


Fig. 3.1 A video-based lecture in the Fundamentals of Clinical Trials MOOC

course requirements, learning processes, and often the institution offering the MOOC compared with what occurs in traditional forms of higher education.

Research suggests that there is considerable variety in learners' motivations for enrolling in a MOOC (Littlejohn et al. 2016). Our own research on self-regulation in MOOCs suggests that learners displaying higher levels of self-regulation were more likely to conceptualise MOOCs as non-formal learning opportunities and to independently structure their learning and engagement to best serve their self-defined and self-identified needs (ibid.).

The Fundamentals of Clinical Trials MOOC (<https://www.edX.org/course/harvard-university/hsph-hms214x/fundamentals-clinical-trials/941>) was run by the Harvard University over 12 weeks in 2013 using the edX platform. The course attracted 22,000 learners from 168 countries. The course was designed around a weekly rostrum, with regular, video-based lectures, as illustrated in Fig. 3.1.

Aside the video lectures, learners had access to other forms of course content including e-texts (Fig. 3.2).

Learners could interact through an online forum on the edX platform (Fig. 3.3) and assessments were computer marked (Fig. 3.4).

A study of the ways learners self-regulate their learning in this MOOC has previously been published (Milligan and Littlejohn 2016) and was compared with approaches to learning in the Introduction to DataScience MOOC, described in Chap. 4.

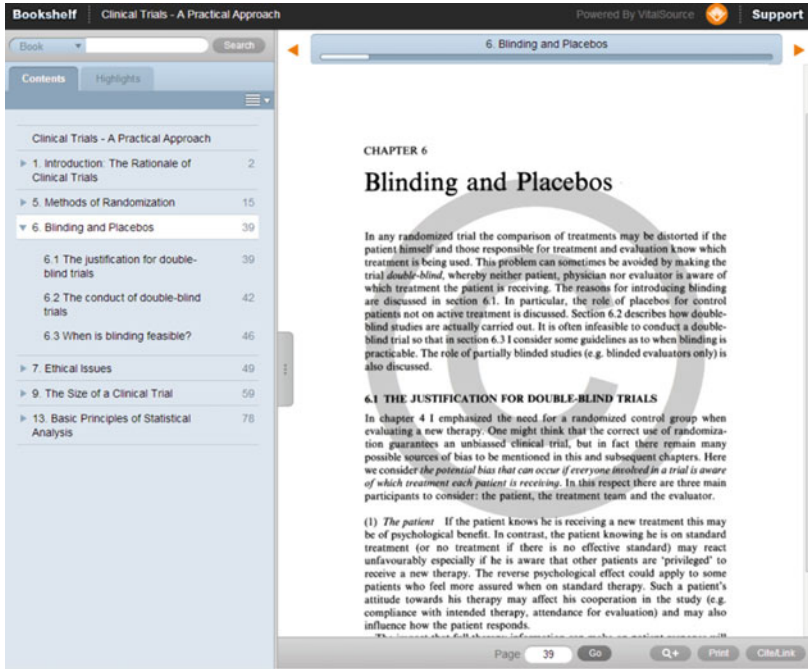


Fig. 3.2 An e-text from the Fundamentals of Clinical Trials MOOC

A study of the ways learners self-regulate their learning in this Fundamentals of Clinical Trials MOOC was compared with approaches to learning in the Introduction to Darascience MOOC described in Chap. 4. Self-regulation is a fluid characteristic that changes for each learner, depending on the context. Learners may be highly self-regulated in one context and less self-regulated in another. Thirty five learners, who perceived themselves as either a low or a high self-regulator, were interviewed.

Most learners who perceived themselves as poor self-regulators aimed to complete the MOOC and be awarded the course certificate:

This class motivated me to do whatever was required to get the certificate ... When I first took the course I thought I would use the course certificate ... to add to my LinkedIn profile. I did do that. (LSRL, 783)

By contrast, learners who perceived themselves as highly self-regulated learners reported they were interested in the MOOC because it could improve their work performance:

The most important factor... is not even how much I learn, but how big the impact of my work can be to the outside world. (HSRL, 119)

These motivations appeared to influence the learner's actions, in particular how they self-evaluated their learning and how satisfied they were with their progress. The high

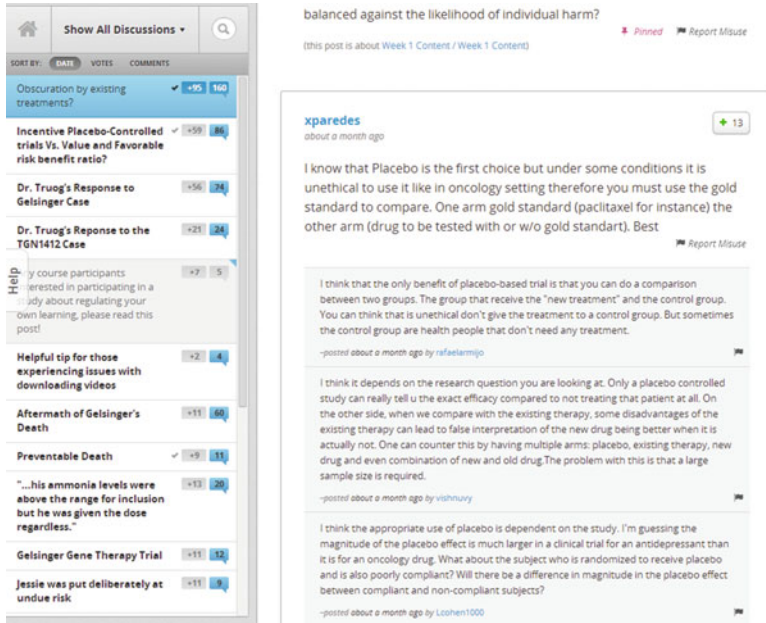


Fig. 3.3 Fundamentals of Clinical Trials MOOC online forum

self-regulators who participated in the MOOC to improve their work performance were strategic about where they focused their time and effort. When asked about whether and how they followed the course pathway, high self-regulators responded:

[I tend to] follow what interests me and not worry too much about trying to keep a complete overview of the area... I plan to complete all of the assignments[but] I won't be too worried if I don't. (HSRL, 428)

Carefully curated parts... I'm going to be picking through what nuggets are of use to me in particular contexts. (HSRL, 505)

However, learners who reported low self-regulation usually opted to follow the course pathway, spending time on the course materials:

My goal is definitely to watch all the videos and the content provided and try to solve all the assignments, although not necessarily I will try to take part in the additional optional assignments. (LSRL, 603)

These learners tended to carry out most of the MOOC activities, in contrast to the high self-regulators who were more strategic about where they focus effort. More time was spent observing course materials, leading to difficulties with time management, compared with high self-regulators.

Another advantage for high self-regulators was that, because they set their own learning goals, they evaluated themselves against their own personal aims and were more able to self-assess their progress. There was evidence that high self-regulators

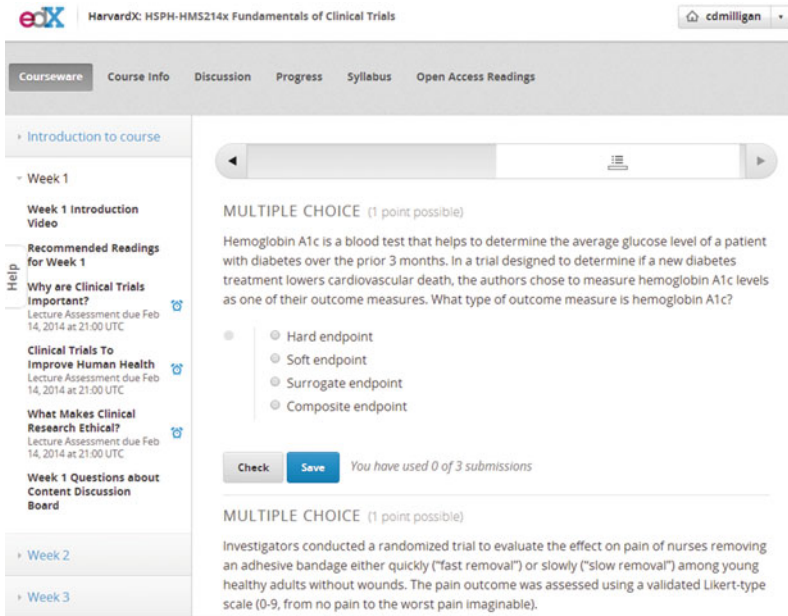


Fig. 3.4 Computer marked, multiple choice assessment in the Fundamentals of Clinical Trials MOOC

were self-satisfied with their progress, since they were readily able to identify their own learning gains. This relationship between perceived progress and affective power was explained as follows:

Now I'm feeling more powerful, I can do some things, I am confident in finding solutions for problems that are too big for me right now. (HSRL, 670)

However, learners reporting low self-regulation experienced difficulty in self-evaluating their progress. This is because these learners tended to follow the course pathway and tried to self-evaluate their progress in relation to what was expected of them by the course designers, which was difficult for them to estimate. When questioned about self-evaluation, two respondents reported:

It's hard for me to gauge how much I've understood something... sometimes we have a blindness about it ourselves. (LSRL, 236)

Yeah that's a difficult question because I don't perceive my own learning. (LSRL, 396)

The second MOOC was Fundamentals of Clinical Trials, one of the first Harvard University MOOCs. The course was developed by the Harvard Medical School, Harvard School of Public Health and Harvard Catalyst and ran on the edX platform from November 2013 until April 2014 with 24,000 registered learners from around the world. The research design used the same method and instruments as used in the Introduction to Data Science study and has been previously reported (Milligan and

Littlejohn 2016). Thirty learners located in various countries around the world were interviewed.

Learners who reported high and low self-regulation described the same motivation for participating in the MOOC: to gain a Harvard certificate. This finding is different to the Data Science MOOC, where high and low self-regulators had different reasons for joining the MOOC. The reason why there is a difference in this MOOC is not clear, though gaining certification for professional development is more prevalent in the health sciences than in data science. Another reason could be because of the perceived value of a Harvard certificate.

However, even though high and low self-regulators had the same motivation for participating in the MOOC, their approach to goal-setting and learning strategies was different. Low self-regulators tended to follow the course ‘pathway’ set out by the instructional designers:

I do download the study material which is provided by the course website, but while I watch the video I do not have a habit of making notes and I am a person who is organised in a mess. So even if I make a note I don’t recollect and read those notes. (LSRL, 295)

I’ve tried to go through the questions first and then go back and review the text to see... and that forces me to kind of focus on the topics a little bit more as opposed to if I go to the lecture and then try to do the questions I find myself zoning out during it. (LSRL, 360)

This behaviour is similar to the conduct of low self-regulators in the Introduction to Data Science MOOC.

Learners who reported high self-regulation also reported behaviours comparable with high self-regulators in the Data Science MOOC. These learners were strategic about their learning task strategies and time management:

I don’t put too much effort into what I’m learning, but this course – looking at the videos I get to take my time to understand. Sometimes I watch the video twice, which has really helped me to have a better understanding when I’m learning. (HSRL, 284)

These data illustrate that high self-regulators strategically manage their time and tasks. They select and engage in sections of a MOOC that support them meet their own goals, whether to attain a course certificate or to learn specific concepts or skills that they perceive as important. These learners may not appear to be engaged to learning, yet they intentionally are being selective about what they learn.

Common factors that motivated students to learn include: interest in the topic, access to free learning opportunities, the desire to update knowledge or to advance professionally, the opportunity to engage with world-class university content and the wish to gain accreditation and new credentials (Davis et al. 2014; Wintrup et al. 2015). Christensen et al. (2013) found that nearly half of MOOC students reported their primary reason for enrolling in a course was ‘curiosity, just for fun’, while 43.9% cited the opportunity to ‘gain skills to do my job better’. While early engagers with MOOCs were more likely to be interest-driven, and so-called ‘lifelong learners’ whose incentives tended to be more heavily weighted towards intrinsic or internal factors, there is evidence that MOOCs increasingly are targeting the lucrative professional development market (Grossman 2013). They are learning for different reasons,

compared with undergraduates or ‘leisure learners’, and will be attracted by differed sorts of incentives, such as learning specific knowledge to improve performance at work or gaining a qualification.

MOOC platform providers and universities are introducing new incentive structures which mimic those commonly found in traditional education. For example, credentialing is increasingly common among MOOC providers and courses that provide some form of credential or institutional accreditation are the highest growth areas (Shah 2016). In Chap. 1, we outlined how Coursera and Udacity have launched their own credentials, offering what Forbes Magazine has termed a ‘badged-future’, where accreditation is much more dynamic than in conventional education (see <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryancraig/2015/09/30/coursera-udacity-and-the-future-of-credentials/#300a92202b31>).

There are other dramatic changes to education triggered by MOOCs. In a move, which Shah (2016) has termed MOOCs as a ‘Netflix-like experience’, a number of providers have responded to a demand from learners to have greater flexibility in when and how they engage in a MOOC by moving from courses being offered at set times during a year, to becoming self-paced and available continuously. This frees the learner from having to start a course on a date determined by an institution to beginning learning at a time that is convenient for them.

Mak et al. (2010, p. 280) suggestion that understanding learning in MOOCs requires a ‘nuanced, strategic, dynamic and contextual’ understanding of individual learners and individual MOOCs is remarkably apt. While there are lots of new benefits on offer, it is not always clear how these help [all of] the learners.

3.4 But Who Benefits?

In a MOOC, learners are able to set their own terms of participation, which is different from much of education where course objectives and learning designs are set. MOOC learners have a very different relationship to course requirements, learning processes even the institution offering the MOOC, compared with what occurs in traditional forms of higher education. Biesta (2009) explains this in relation to the new language of learning:

The absence of explicit attention for the aims and ends of education is the effect of often implicit reliance on a particular ‘common sense’ view of what education is for. We have to bear in mind, however, that what appears as ‘common sense’ often serves the interests of some groups (much) better than those of others. (p. 37)

Indeed, we are witnessing that the design of MOOCs, the focus on the individual as the primary unit, and the emphasis on the individual as active agent in their learning journey, is privileging those who can learn. Self-regulation, therefore, emerges as a key lens for understanding nature of who is able to benefit from the learning opportunities offered in a MOOC. The wider context of a learner (rather than the often-superficial dimensions of prior educational attainment, geographic region,

job) influences what they will get out of their learning journey. Selwyn labels this ‘inequalities of participation’ (2016, p. 31). That is, the experiences and outcomes of a particular learning experience will differ considerably, depending on who the person is.

Selwyn (2016) goes on to explain how a focus on equality of access without corresponding understanding of the need to ensure equality of participation has led to:

The assumption that all individuals can navigate their own pathways through digital education opportunities implies a corresponding withdrawal of expert direction, guidance and support. While offering an alternative to the perceived paternalism of organised education provision, this approach does bump up against the widely held belief in education that learning is a social endeavour that is best supported by more knowledgeable others. (p. 74)

Cottom (2014) argues that online systems get designed and configured to ‘the norm’ of a self-motivated, highly able individual who is ‘disembodied from place, culture, history, markets and inequality regimes’. That is, MOOCs tend to cater for those who have the social and educational capital to engage with the learning opportunities presented and furthermore, as briefly discussed in Chap. 1, MOOCs typically disregard the offline context of the learner and how this might influence and shape both the nature of their engagement and the outcomes they desire from their participation.

Without additional incentives, adults will not learn something that they are not interested in or consider unimportant (Billett and Somerville 2004; Illeris 2007; Siemens 2006). The choice to seek out and engage with both formal and informal learning opportunities and the proclivity and ability to adopt and assimilate new knowledge are determined by the individual. The experiences and interactions that have occurred throughout a person’s life shape the values, beliefs, concepts and approach that they bring to their future learning (Rogoff 1990; Scribner 1985). A learner’s personal ontogeny mediates and is mediated by the contexts in which they are situated and the orientation of their needs in relation to a particular learning opportunity. Individuals actively seek out opportunities that they believe will gratify the particular needs they have. The more gratification they receive, or expect to receive, from their actions, the more they will continue to engage in the behaviour. Conversely, negative outcome expectations lead to decreased engagement (LaRose et al. 2001; LaRose and Eastin 2004). A theme that recurs in this book is that disengagement is perceived as a significant problem in MOOCs, because few learners complete courses relative to formal education. (Jordan 2015). However, the emancipatory effect of free online access to education allows learner to take what they need from MOOCs to meet their own learning goals without formally completing courses, therefore completion rates can be misleading (LeBar 2014; Littlejohn and Milligan 2015).

In Chap. 1, we explored the spectrum of instructional designs applied to MOOCs. MOOC designs range from well-packaged content to open, networked designs. A problem with almost all MOOCs, no matter how they are designed, is that they tend not provide expert human feedback to learners, which means that the learners have to pursue advice and criticism themselves (Margaryan et al. 2015). This focus on the

individual taking responsibility for their own feedback and learning journey means that those who benefit from MOOCs are the people who are best able to regulate their own learning. As McCathy (2011) explains:

These discourses position the individuals as the locus of success or failure: based on their self-discipline, hard-work, ambition, personality and efforts, they will either fail or succeed procuring for their well-being Missing in these discourses is any consideration of the differential and inequitable positions of subjects in terms of economic, social and cultural capital, age, gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. These discourses are based in the assumption that all subjects are equally positioned to identify, mobilize, and create productive and successful choices. (p. 303)

The next section examines how MOOC learners self-regulate their learning in MOOCs.

3.5 A Closer Look at the Role of Self-regulated Learning in MOOCs

Self-regulated learning provides a theoretical means for accommodating the diversity in motivations and incentives among learners and the mutable, learner-driven nature of the learning experience in MOOCs. Self-regulated learning refers to ‘self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals’ (Zimmerman 2000, p. 14). In studies of formal, offline learning contexts, Zimmerman (1990) suggests that motivation and learning are interdependent processes and that individuals exhibiting higher self-regulation are more proactive in their approach to learning.

Similar findings have been observed in studies of MOOC learners. Those learners identified as exhibiting highly self-regulating behaviour were less concerned about outward measures of performance in MOOCs, preferring to concentrate on developing knowledge and expertise that was relevant to their professional needs (Littlejohn et al. 2016). That is, high self-regulators were more inclined to determine their own outcome measures rather than to rely on externally determined goals or incentive structures to shape their engagement. This contrasted to learners who exhibited lower self-regulated learning behaviours whose goals were more likely to be tied to concrete, traditional and extrinsic measures of performance, for example, completing all the assignments and earning a certificate of completion.

These findings align with research focused on offline learning which determined that learners displaying high self-regulative behaviour are more likely to adopt ‘mastery goal orientation’, structuring their learning around the development of content knowledge and expertise (Zimmerman 1990). Pintrich and de Groot (1990) similarly found that learners who considered their learning to be interesting and important are more cognitively engaged than those learners who are motivated primarily by grades. In research on MOOCs, those learners displaying higher levels of self-regulation were more likely to conceptualise MOOCs as non-formal learning opportunities and to independently structure their learning and engagement to best serve their self-defined

and self-identified needs. The motivations a learner brings to a particular MOOC, together with the incentives structuring their engagement influences how they interpret the role and purpose of the MOOC and the outcomes they seek, which in turn shapes their behaviour and actions in the MOOC. As Illeris (2007) suggests, incentives influence the ways in which learners engage with or acquire content. As the following section will explore, this is not a monodirectional relationship. Content and the pedagogical design of a MOOC also influences the acquisition process.

3.6 Learning Behaviour: Diversity in Engagement

While MOOCs emphasise the primacy of the learner and the role individual learners' play in structuring their engagement, there has been a tendency in the literature on MOOCs to focus on design solutions that encourage desired modes of engagement and participation (see for example Guàrdia et al. 2013; Daradoumis et al. 2013). These desired learning behaviours borrow heavily on metrics derived from traditional forms of education. That is, the ideal learner is one who adopts behaviours that lead to the successful completion of a course and, where applicable, certification and accreditation. Traditional measures of learning, such as passing tests and assignments, and becoming accredited, continue to be the gold standard of successful learning in MOOCs. So much so that many researchers, when exploring the impact of different modes of engagement on a MOOC, continue to use completion as the dependent variable. There is a debate in the literature to 'reboot' research on how people learn in MOOCs by finding better indicators of learning in MOOCs (see Reich 2015).

Kizilcec et al. (2013) have developed a now widely accepted typology of four profiles of learner engagement in MOOCs: (i) auditing—learners who did not do the quizzes or assignments but engaged with other resources, such as the video lectures; (ii) completing—learners who completed all of the activities; (iii) disengaging—learners who participated at the beginning of a MOOC but whose engagement dropped off or ceased over time; and (iv) sampling—learners who engaged in resources once or twice, often in the middle of the course, but were not consistent in their engagement. While there have been some attempts in the literature to suggest that certain engagement profiles are 'better' than others, and indicative of greater learning, there is limited evidence to back this up. Ideas around 'good engagement' tend to be based on the assumption that MOOC learners intend to complete courses, akin to students in formal education courses (LeBar 2014). As we previously indicated, MOOCs allows learner to learn what they need from the course and drop out (Jordan 2015). MOOCs, therefore, have the potential to legitimise learning behaviour that in traditional contexts would be characterised as deviant, non-learning, associated with failure.

There are a number of typologies of MOOC learners and each takes a different perspective. For example, Milligan et al. (2013) identify different learning behaviours in MOOCs; Clow (2013) defines learners according to their participation; Gillani

and Eynon (2014) define learners based on their engagement in discussion forums. None of these typologies examine learner engagement, even though taking part in MOOC is a characteristic of MOOCs and is distinct from participation in formal education. We conclude this chapter with the construction of a new framework for understanding and interpreting learning engagement. This framework, importantly, does not make any attempt to suggest that any one approach is better or worse than another. Similarly, it does not suggest that a learner will always conform to a single approach.

Visible:

A visible learner is one whose presence and activity within a MOOC makes them 'known' by other learners. This may include participation and interaction in the discussions, undertaking and where applicable completing tasks, assessments and undertaking the activities required for certification.

Invisible:

These learners tend to be largely passive in their engagement in a MOOC. That is, their presence and activity is not visible to other learners. They do not actively contribute to discussion forum; however, they may read the posts an activity commonly referred to as 'lurking'. They rarely undertake activities and generally are not attempting to complete the course in a traditional sense or to gain certification.

Formal/qualification oriented:

These are the learners who perceive MOOCs as a formal learning activity, tend to treat a MOOC more like a traditional style of learning activity or course. These learners are likely to be more concerned with accreditation and ensuring that they 'complete' the MOOC and are likely to structure their engagement to achieve this.

Informal/interest-oriented:

These learners are less likely to be concerned with 'completing' the MOOC and are more interested in acquiring the knowledge and skills in the MOOC without requiring the formal documentation that they have done so. They tend to be more independent in their approach to learning, and able to identify the types of activities that they need to complete to get the outcomes that they desire (mainly self-identified and self-defined).

These variables position MOOC engagement in four distinct ways, as illustrated in the typology in Fig. 3.5.

The four types of learners will be discussed in greater detail in Chap. 4, where we sketch out narratives of the experiences of MOOC learners. These narratives make clear the validity of a range of learning behaviours in MOOCs. As a precursor to the stories of actual learners in that chapter, the four types are briefly described below.

The 'conventional' learner is one who is motivated to complete the course and gain certification. These learners are sometimes referred to as 'ideal learners' because their behaviour fits with what MOOC designers and facilitators believe to be optimal

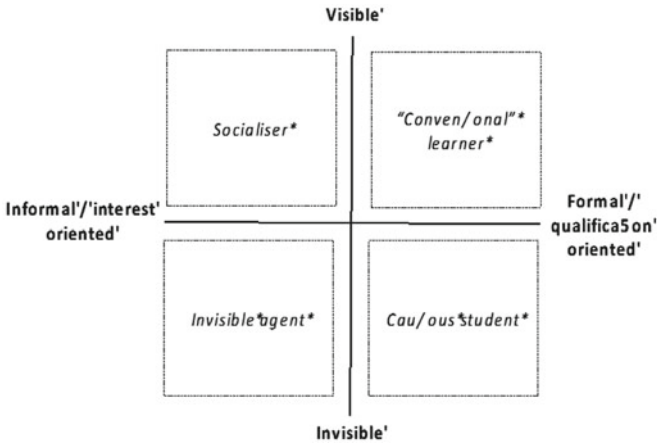


Fig. 3.5 A typology of MOOC Learners

for course completion (even though this behaviour may not fit with the learners' own objectives). They tend to follow a largely linear trajectory, engaging with the majority of the content and completing the activities and assessments. Furthermore, they are active contributors to the discussion forums, both asking and answering questions, and consider collaboration with other participants a key part of the MOOC experience.

The cautious student also has a goal to complete the course and as a result—similarly to the 'conventional' student—will engage with the majority of the course content and activities. However, they often are not as confident and at times struggle to regulate their learning and to select the best learning approaches for their needs. Furthermore, they typically are reticent to post to discussion forums, though they may read the contributions of others.

The invisible learner is motivated by a desire to learn, rather than to receive accreditation or to complete a course. They often are highly regulated and are able to carefully match their engagement to their needs and motivation. Their behaviour may perfectly fit their own learning objectives, but is not 'ideal' for the course facilitators or even for the other learners. They may be passive in their engagement and driven by a desire for content and skills. Consequently, they typically do not undertake the activities or assessments and do not contribute to the discussion forums.

The socialiser, analogous to the invisible learner, is not motivated by a desire to complete the course or the prescribed activities. They similarly are able to chart their own engagement with confidence. They may undertake some activities. However, their preliminary focus is collaborating with other participants, by contributing to the discussion forums.

MOOC participants tend to align with these learner types, depending on their motivations, and may span different types, rather than falling into one single category.

3.7 Concluding Thoughts

The rhetoric around MOOCs has stressed their democratising potential, creating a vision of the emancipated learner, who is no longer reliant on traditional institutions and the barriers—financial, geographic, admission requirements—that they can pose. While the language frequently employed suggests a reorienting of power in education and learning, and elevating the role of the individual learner, it belies the responsibility that comes with this new role. As this chapter has shown, the learners in MOOCs are incredibly heterogeneous, with diverse motivations, goals and learning needs. The four learner types discussed in this chapter will be explored in greater detail in Chap. 4, as well examine the diverse ways in which massive numbers of people learn in MOOCs.

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