

The Success of this Course Depends upon Your Participation: Technology, Topoi, and Infrastructure in the Era of MOOCs

Michael Harker, Mary Hocks, and Matthew Sansbury

Abstract

In this study the authors use Critel's commonplaces about participation, specifically technology, to analyze the rhetoric of participation in massive open online courses (MOOCs), using syllabi and the user-agreement statements of three major MOOC providers. Key findings and contributions of their study are that (1) MOOC user agreements sometimes contradict and always supercede statements about participation in individual MOOC syllabi; (2) Critel's commonplaces of participation in MOOCs and there are opportunities for more strategic situated practice and new knowledge; and (3) there is another commonplace for considering participation in larger technological and cultural contexts: infrastructure. They conclude that the rhetoric of participation in MOOC environments reveals contradictory, inconsistent, and, at times, problematic attitudes about the fundamental nature and value of participation in online learning environments.

Navigation Statement

In the spirit of a visual annotated analysis, inspired by Ben McCorkle's "[Annotated Obama Poster](#)" in the journal *Harlot*, and in response to Johndan Johnson-Eilola's "[Polymorphous Perversity in Texts](#)" in *Kairos*, this chapter deliberately encourages readers to experiment and use non-linear exploration. Our navigation is intentionally designed to allow for playful wandering and non-linear engagement to represent our argument about MOOCs in a fully multimodal format.

Our chapter's landing page uses an image map of several MOOC provider titles as the visual focal point and also as a primary method of navigation. To interact with the text, you can roll over sections of the MOOC provider titles and then click the highlighted part of the title. The following letters and phrases of the MOOC provider logos are clickable and take readers to content:

- *U* and *city* in Udacity.
- *Ed* and *X* in edX
- *course* and *era* in coursera.

This launching imagemap contains icons leading outward one step to various sections of the text. Once within a specific section or frame of the chapter, another image map appears on the left of

the screen annotated with individual words within a diamond shape. Each word is clickable and, again, highlighted when you roll over it. When you click its word, that second step takes you to content of each subsection of the text. Each subsection is intended to stand alone while providing a meditation on the various themes that emerged for us when exploring MOOCs. While readers may navigate the chapter in any way they desire, we suggest they begin with the U in Udacity, which is the center and visual focal point of the launch page.

From there, you can move back to the launch page by clicking the “Home” link at the top left of the page, or you may continue to click these icon links to move laterally within the text. This kind of navigation encourages exploration by readers who want to engage with multimodality. It also reinforces and illustrates our argument about the non-linear and even “wandering” experience of navigating and identifying moments of participation within the MOOCs sites themselves.

For a more linear reading and exploration, use the links at the end of each node page to move back and forth among the nodes. Headings at the top of each page signal to the reader that the content has changed so you can maintain a sense of where you are in the chapter.

To return to the launch page at any time, you can click on the Home link in the left sidebar.

Introduction

In this study, we analyze the rhetoric of participation of three major massive open online course (MOOC) providers EdX, Coursera, and Udacity from the perspectives of Genevieve Critel’s *topoi* or commonplaces. Our analysis draws from recent reports on the effectiveness of MOOCs, syllabi, and the user-agreement statements of each provider. We assert that the rhetoric of participation in these environments reveals contradictory, inconsistent, and, at times, problematic attitudes about the fundamental nature and value of participation in online learning environments. Inspired by Critel’s project to complicate commonsensical understandings of participation, we question specifically the tendency to generalize broadly about participation, its effects, and the students that make participation in MOOCs possible.

Our inquiry aims—more than anything—to demonstrate the relevance, applicability, and general affordances of Critel’s commonplaces in ongoing debates about the value of MOOCs in higher education. Our study offers an application of these topics to several general MOOCs and not a comprehensive sampling. Our sample (i.e., selection of particular MOOCs) and findings are not meant to be representative of all MOOCs. While we do not take up frequently discussed large MOOCs offered by Duke University and other institutions, we believe our examination sheds light on the dynamics of participation in MOOCs other studies of MOOCs have not addressed. We should note, however, that the light shed on participation in the context of this study raises more questions than answers. Illuminated by our examination is persistent evidence that the relationships among students, pedagogy, and the policies governing MOOCs are fundamentally complex, engagements complicated further by the pressures imposed by the expectations surrounding technology.

In her research, Critel addresses these relationships and expectations, noting how “cycles of technology hope and criticism” (195) loom over discussions about participation in our current moment. During times of hope, technology is understood to “mitigate the reluctance of some students to enact certain participatory acts in the classroom” (183). Technology critics, on the other hand, contend that technology hinders learning, degrades writing and curbs participation. Critel understands how both positions construct imprecise understandings about how technology impacts student participation. Instead of searching for consistent and verifiable consequences of participation, she offers the commonplace of technology as an ambivalent, liminal, and generative perspective from which to uncover the fundamental nature of participation in technological environments.

One aim of our study is to investigate MOOCs with the critical awareness and ambivalence present throughout Critel’s research. While Critel acknowledges the promise of technology to impact student interactions with participation in the composition classroom, she insists that this promise deserves critique. In this spirit, our findings have implications for scholars in composition and rhetoric because universities are increasingly considering MOOCs as a promising means for delivering content and providing instruction. As Critel’s work forecasts, regardless of the setting, the idea of participation remains ambiguous, persistent, poorly defined, and difficult to assess. Key takeaways for our chapter are that (1) MOOC user agreements, to our surprise, sometimes contradict and always supercede statements about participation in individual MOOC syllabi; (2) Critel’s commonplaces of participation are present in MOOCs and there are opportunities for more strategic situated practice and new knowledge; and (3) our study identifies another commonplace for considering participation in larger technological and cultural contexts: infrastructure.

Udacity

Our meditation on the components of this logo introduces the language of user agreements within several selected major MOOC providers. We demonstrate underlying attitudes about the intended role of student participation.

To explore discussions of the student and users, go to any of these sections, “U” in user-agreement; “User” and user-experience; “Used” and user-behavior; “You” and community.

To explore meditations on infrastructure, use any of the following links, “C” and the concept of infrastructure; “I” and the invisibility of infrastructure; “T” and technology in educational reform; Y” or Why deconstruct MOOCs?

U

“U” in user-agreement

If you have ever hastily scrolled through and electronically signed a user agreement (e.g., wireless Internet access, credit-card application, or loan application), you are probably familiar with some of the soul-crushing discourse in user agreements/terms-of-service statements for major MOOC providers. And although it is common to disregard such agreements because they take too long

to read or because they seem to require a law degree to understand, we contend that language in such agreements sheds light on underlying attitudes about participation and the intended role of students in some MOOCs. It is important to note that regardless of whether the treatment of participation is diverse, refined, or progressive in individual course syllabi, the terms of service/user agreements created by MOOC providers trump, in a sense, the policies of individual courses. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine more closely the rhetoric of participation in these contexts. Doing so reveals the complex relationship between attitudes about participation and the presumed role of students in online learning environments.

“User” and user-experience

Not surprisingly, user agreements for edX, Udacity, and Coursera contain clauses detailing “termination rights,” which express, in great detail, the providers' right to terminate any users' participation on a site “for any reason or no reason, upon notice to you” (edX, “user agreement”). Along similar lines, “terms of service” policies for providers also prohibit certain “content.” This includes

Content that defames, harasses or threatens others; Content that discusses illegal activities with the intent to commit them; Content that infringes another's intellectual property, including, but not limited to, copyrights or trademarks; Profane, pornographic, obscene, indecent or unlawful content; Advertising or any form of commercial solicitation; Content related to partisan political activities; Viruses, trojan horses, worms, time bombs, corrupted files, malware, spyware or any other similar software that may damage the operation of another's computer or property; Content that contains intentionally inaccurate information or that is posted with the intent of misleading others. (edX, “terms of service”)

This laundry list of don'ts is shocking but virtually invisible to users. To put it another way, despite their relative “openness,” it seems that Udacity, Coursera, and edX have a restricted yet precise sense of what kind of participation they do not expect from participants. The nature of this more restricted notion of participation stands in stark contrast to the more ambiguously characterized idea of participation appearing in each provider's “honor code.”

“Used” and user-behavior

Perhaps more interesting than the clauses related to “termination rights” and “restricted content,” each MOOC provider includes “honor code” statements. Consider Coursera's honor code, which specifies, “All students participating in the class must agree to abide by the following code of conduct.” In this surprisingly brief agreement, students consent to register for only one account and to not cheat or help others cheat on homework or tests (this directly contradicts some individual syllabi statements about collaboration). Similarly, Udacity's honor code—they call it a “student conduct policy”—reinforces the more general “anti-harassment” policy, instructing the student not to cheat on homework or tests and to “notify the instructors immediately if he or she becomes aware of any other Student cheating or breaching these Terms of Use.” Although the honor codes possess differences, especially in terms of the amount of surveillance students carry out on one another, the honor codes share an important similarity. If

we consider what counts as evidence of honorable participation from the perspective of Critel's commonplace of assessment, even more significant questions arise:

- To what extent do these honor codes, as Critel notes, “induce students to participate when they wouldn't otherwise?”?
- What methods of assessment (apart from student-to-student surveillance) will be used to monitor participation?
- What other behaviors count as honorable participation in these contexts?

“You” and community

On the surface, [edX's Honor Code](#) differs from the other two providers' agreements in the way it frames participation. For instance, edX claims,

By enrolling in a course on edX, you are joining a special worldwide community of learners. The aspiration of edX is to provide anyone in the world who has the motivation and ability to engage coursework from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley the opportunity to attain the best MIT, Harvard and UC Berkeley-based educational experience that internet technology enables. You are part of the community who will help edX achieve this goal.

Aside from the elitist pedigree listed here, and the tone of utopian aspirations, what follows these statements are rules of conduct nearly identical to the other two providers' statements previously discussed (don't cheat; report people who do cheat). What counts as evidence, then, of a special or distinct opportunity for participation is elided by the more general commitment to sustaining the most ambiguous and commonly used of Critel's commonplaces: the appeal to or desire for creating community. As Critel shows us, ambiguous views of participation reveal unethical and distorted conceptions of the students, pedagogy, and technologies that make participatory learning environments possible. This distorted view depends, to some extent, on our willingness to rely on commonplaces of participation rather than articulating achievable learning outcomes and reliable methods of assessment to evaluate student interaction in online learning environments.

Of course, the differences between Udacity's and Coursera's user agreements, on the one hand, and edX's honor code on the other, may have a lot to do with edX's affiliation with Berkeley, MIT, and Harvard. Despite differences in the levels of contextualization, each provider's user policy presents poorly defined views of participation. In edX's case, Critel's commonplace of community frames the entire honor code, invoking the one appeal that no one, in our current technological moment, can disagree with (who isn't a fan of community?). Although some may contend that building community through student participation is a sufficient aim for MOOCs, our view, which is an extension of Critel's argument, is that the ends toward which a community is directed determine the value of the actions that make a community possible. In edX's case,

despite possessing the wholesome aim of creating what they describe as a “special” community, which specific behaviors constitute the type of participation that will create this community remain unclear. The burden of knowledge construction, communication, and collaboration—the work of edX itself—is reified by Critel’s commonplaces of participation. In user agreements and course syllabi, “special” belongs solely to the vaguely defined community—users lost in a sea of poorly defined outcomes and expectations.

CITY

“C” and the concept of infrastructure

This chapter, as it extends Critel’s four commonplaces (see introduction to this collection) to examine MOOCs, also suggests that we consider an additional overarching concept of the CITY, which we will invoke as an analogy to the technological space, the digital information architecture that we identify as informational infrastructure. Infrastructure—best defined in the book *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star —describes the social forces defined by categories embedded in, and defined by, institutions and how those institutions exert pressure, often unknowingly, upon individuals.

This concept of embedded infrastructure is expanded by Star to a wide range of communicative practices in her highly influential article “Got Infrastructure? How Standards, Categories and Other Aspects of Infrastructure Influence Communication.” Star’s scholarship in the social studies of science began when she revealed invisible technological labor from a feminist sensibility using empirical methods. Her later work then describes the concept of how “information infrastructure” makes visible what is taken for granted or unseen: the categories, classifications, taxonomies, breakages that all point to and also reveal what is left out, elided and made invisible in any system of cooperative work.

Walking through the city as a metaphor (de Certeau; Reynolds) and examining the cultural soundscapes of the city’s vertical sonic layers (*Acoustic Territories*) are powerful descriptions of sensorial mapping of a city’s cultural meanings, structures, and differences. Infrastructure, however, takes this mapping of the city’s meanings from a wider angle and on a larger scale, beyond any individual senses or capabilities, and shows how broad technological moments can impact individuals in space and time. Infrastructure also relates to the conceptual ERA of a particular moment in the history of technology, indicating what is possible, necessary, closed off, or in conflict *between* specific structures.

“I” and the invisibility of infrastructure

Star directly addresses participation here in relation to her earlier studies:

Despite good user prototype feedback and participation in the system development, there were unforeseen, complex challenges to usage involving infrastructural and organizational relationships. The system was neither widely adopted, nor did it have a sustained impact on the field as the resources and communication channels it proffered became available through other (often more accessible) means. It did provide important insights and models for continuing

work on the technical side; it also provided insights for us as social scientists into the profound impact of the understanding of *infrastructure* on group interactions. (6; emphasis added)

Star explains how her own thought process about infrastructure developed along the lines of a cityscape from the wide map view to the specific operational object:

I had a commonsense notion of infrastructure when I first started studying the design of interdisciplinary computer systems—infrastructure as something that other things “run on,” things that are substrate to events and movements. Railroads, highways, plumbing, electricity, and more recently, the information superhighway. Good infrastructure is by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work. It is ready-to-hand. This image holds up well enough for most purposes—turn on the faucet for a drink of water and you use a vast infrastructure of plumbing and water regulation without usually thinking much about it. (16)

Nowhere is this idea of infrastructure as invisible, but ever present, more clear than in Star's characterization of the cityscape.

“T” and technology in educational reform

When illustrating infrastructure, Star concludes with a powerful analogy of her own: “One person’s infrastructure is another’s brick wall, or in some cases, one person’s brick wall is another’s object of demolition” (16). The uncomfortably shifting meanings of the personal and cultural cityscapes Star invokes here offer a powerful lesson: Whose city is this anyway?

Composition and rhetoric scholars who have extended this term, infrastructure, have applied Star and her collaborators’ concepts of infrastructure to both the structures and material conditions that enable or disable the possibilities for productive multimedia work “within institutional structures and networks” and at a given moment in time (DeVoss, et al.). By making informational infrastructure visible, we disrupt assumptions about learning and technology, and we activate a sorely needed perspective in ongoing discussions about the role of technology in emerging educational reforms. If Star and Critel are right about the way informational infrastructure and attitudes about participation silently underline discourse in technology studies, then revealing not only the presence of infrastructures but also the shape of these structures is paramount. Our findings suggest that the visible aspect or shape of educational informational infrastructure, in our current moment, is the MOOC itself.

“Y” or Why deconstruct MOOCs?

A critical study of technology is not only cyclic but also fundamentally materialist in nature: “The ecology of the distributed high-tech workplace, home or school is profoundly impacted by the relatively unstudied infrastructure that permeates all its functions” (Star 17). As we demonstrate,

Critel's research follows in Star's tradition and also offers groundbreaking insights about participation that have now become directly relevant to our analysis of teaching and technology in large-scale MOOCs. In this study, part of the more insidious "invisible" informational infrastructure is enacted in the user-agreement statements of each provider. The user-agreement/honor-code statements for each provider supercede individual course statements about participation because they construct an overarching institutional infrastructure. Their brick walls of protection, when exposed, become obstacles for students, and now they have become our own object of demolition.

EdX

Our annotation of this logo reflects on the emergence of MOOCs in our current cultural moment. We touch on several themes in this discussion: failure rates, scalability, and surveillance. We conclude with questions about the future and potential of MOOCs and the importance of precise definitions of participation.

To explore discussions of education and MOOCs, visit any of these links: "E": What do MOOCs offer students?; "D": What are the drawbacks of MOOCs?; "U": How should universities respond?

To examine how commonplaces and MOOCs intersect, follow either of these links: "X": Intersections of Commonplaces; "+": Commonplaces generating theory

Ed

"E": What do MOOCs offer students?

Higher Ed and MOOCs

In our current pedagogical moment, when it comes to the topic of MOOCs in higher education, most of us in the field of rhetoric and composition concede that emerging findings related to the effectiveness of MOOCs are not surprising. Although promising on the levels of scope and scalability, MOOCs are not "lifting people out of poverty" (Friedman). In fact, evidence seems to suggest that MOOCs actually help advantaged students more than disadvantaged students (Schuman). Completion rates for many MOOCs are particularly low—around 10% for Udacity (Kolowich) and averaging 4% for Coursera (Perna et al.). Along similar lines, failed experiments like the one at San Jose State University point to even more shortcomings, especially with respect to the role of mentoring in MOOCs. Perhaps more disturbing than recent reports about the ostensible shortcomings of MOOCs are the ways in which some providers are shifting to respond to criticisms and capitalize on general interest. Judging by the rhetoric of some MOOC developers—Udacity in particular—it seems the future of MOOCs will focus less on meeting the needs of diverse student populations and more on representing corporate interests (Chafkin).

Despite the emergence of interest of MOOCs and critical receptions in several academic books, MOOCs remain understudied in our field. This chapter does not address emergent distinctions among connectivist MOOCs or the feminism and technology distributed open collaborative course (DOCC), which are all specifically designed to be highly participatory. We also do not focus on MOOCs that have received significant attention or acclaim in the press or within

rhetoric and composition professional discussion lists. Instead, we deliberately sampled courses in different disciplinary areas and chose several types to examine for overt statements and assumptions about participation.

“D”: What are the drawbacks of MOOCs?

We are not surprised that rates of completion for MOOCs, including Udacity and Coursera, are especially low (Kolowich; Perna et al.) or that MOOCs support advantaged students more so than their disadvantaged counterparts (Schuman). The failure of MOOC initiatives (e.g., San Jose State University) raises disturbing questions about the lack of mentoring in these online environments, and even more telling than these inadequacies is the shift in the MOOC providers’ rhetoric, which seems to prioritize corporate interests above the diverse needs of their participants (Chafkin).

It is precisely because these findings are unsurprising that we contend such reports are not as useful as *Wired*, *Fast Company*, and *The New York Times* would like us to believe. To put it bluntly, reports about the failure of MOOCs or other technologically mediated educational innovations are not remarkable. The history of higher education teaches us that rhetorics of crisis and decline grow out of unreasonable expectations of both schools and students, rarely lead to meaningful and lasting educational reform, and fail to account for the complex social, cultural, and economic pressures that inform educational contexts (Cuban; Graff; Rose). Thus, it is important for us to look past any consensus shaped by crisis and consider the varied, uneven, dissimilar conceptions of learning that silently inform our understandings of MOOCs and online learning more generally. This lack of consensus is not visible, however, until we look directly at participation, as Critel teaches us.

“U”: How should universities respond?

Maybe we lack consensus about participation in MOOCs because if we understand participation in an ambiguous fashion, as engagement broadly defined, we know MOOCs effectively “engage” people all over the world, creating ostensibly massive communities of learners and doing so in an overwhelming fashion. (After all, Sebastian Thrun’s Udacity has attracted 1.6 million students to date.) However, if we characterize participation more precisely, as a verifiable and quantifiable pedagogical element, we must recognize the curious potential of MOOCs to make visible the complex behaviors and practices that constitute the behaviors we have come to associate with “participation.” If, instead, we envision participation as an outgrowth of technological innovation, then the diversity, complexity, and scale of various types of participation associated with MOOCs is potentially symptomatic of technology finally living up to our pedagogical aspirations. Regardless of how we define participation, all these questions remain about the way characterizations of participation inform the development, growth, and effectiveness of MOOCs—and the students who make them possible.

Questions remain.

- To what extent do our hopes for creating online communities of learners lead us to develop participation policies that obfuscate notions of difference?

- In what ways do learning outcomes and methods of assessment for evaluating participation in MOOCs lag behind in our current cultural and technological moment?
- How might more precise definitions of participation allow us to avoid commonsensical (and potentially normative) conceptions of knowledge, embodiment, and intellectual work in MOOCs?

X

“X”: Intersections of Commonplaces

In her groundbreaking dissertation, “The Rhetoric of Participation: Interrogating Commonplaces in and Beyond the Classroom,” Genevieve Critel provides us with the language to investigate the idea of participation in educational contexts. As the CFP for this collection states, “Four commonplaces emerged from her research: Genevieve found that discussions and instantiations of participation often reflected upon the *topoi*, or commonplaces, of community, assessment, embodiment, and technology. Gen’s research on participation in the composition classroom serves as a seminal first step in examining an often taken-for-granted aspect of composition pedagogy.” By identifying patterns in how the idea of participation functions in scholarship, syllabi, and archives, Critel demonstrates how a systematic examination of participation in various contexts reveals underlying (and often problematic) attitudes about teachers, students, technology, and the purposes of writing instruction altogether.

“+”: Commonplaces generating theory

Feenberg identifies patterns (what Critel would call *topoi* or *commonplaces*) in philosophies of technology in his work *Critical Theory of Technology*. His concept of “instrumentalism,” which defines a double logic of decontextualizing and then recontextualizing technologies within a set of ideological social structures, is materialist in nature since those cycles are always defined by unequal power relations and the dominant social arrangements of the time. As Critel rightly pointed out, all pedagogical practices have a direct connection to classroom communities, another of her *topoi*. Community creation is indeed performative—and oddly self-referential, going back to Stanley Fish’s notion of “interpretive communities” and the waving of hands at one’s other community members in a self-affirming gesture. Critel’s research demonstrates how, more than ever, “community” formation and enculturation is self-defining at best; it is indoctrination and colonialist/nationalist at its worst. There is more promise in other conceptions of communities because they are, by nature, performances based in theories like communities of practice (COP), and cultural-historical-activity-theory (CHAT), in which communities are defined by what they do. Michel deCerteau’s formulation of how of the institutional unifying strategies are always in tension with individual tactics, the “play in the machine,” influenced Feenberg and helped to define the social studies of technology in deCerteau’s *Practice of Everyday Life*.

Our argument here is that Critel’s commonplaces, unlike Feenberg’s patterns, presuppose epistemological assumptions indebted to classical rhetorical theory, and as *topoi*, they function

dialectically within that rhetorical space—in a sense, doing the double work of what Feenberg’s instrumentalism theory aspires to do. More specifically, Critel’s and Feenberg’s theoretical suppositions both work to complicate Heidegger’s modernist conception of technological systems but also extend Marcuse’s emphasis on class struggle (Feenberg). However, Critel’s commonplaces, in particular, allow us to observe at once the modernistic and posthumanistic impulses of participation in the contexts of MOOCs from a more precise, materially situated, and philosophically complicated perspective—one that takes us beyond the now clichéd move of indicting technological systems for what Feenberg calls their “deworlding” properties.

Coursera

Our investigation of this logo incorporates all of Critel’s commonplaces: embodiment, community, technology, and assessment. We employ her commonplaces to analyze several courses from different providers.

To engage our discussions of Critel’s commonplaces, use any of the following links: Embodiment; Community; Technology; Assessment.

To explore our investigation of technology and innovation in education, visit any of these links: “E”: Evidence of technological innovation ; “R”: and the Relevance of technological change; “A”: or Approaching technology via Critel

Course

This section is organized according to Critel’s *topoi*: technology, assessment, embodiment, community (see introduction). Our analysis of these sample courses is driven by complex intersections among these four *topoi* that, in turn, have generated the following questions:

- To what extent do our hopes for creating online communities of learners lead us to develop participation policies that obfuscate notions of difference?
- In what ways do learning outcomes and methods of assessment for evaluating participation in MOOCs lag behind in our current cultural and technological moment?
- How might more precise definitions of participation allow us to avoid commonsensical (and potentially normative) conceptions of knowledge, embodiment, and intellectual work in MOOCs?

Embodiment

Critel writes that “instructors should be interrogating their expectations about student bodies and what a ‘normal’ student is, beyond simply adjusting for students who are visibly physically disabled” (192). A commonsensical and uncritical notion of technology suggests that, by definition, online courses mediated by information and communication technologies would automatically be more accessible. Taken together, technology studies scholars like Andrew

Feenberg and Stuart A. Selber demonstrate technologies themselves are embedded in wider ideological and rhetorical constructs that must themselves be consistently identified, made visible, defined, and interrogated. And as current disability scholars articulate coherently in the *Kairos* journal's special issue, "Multimodality in Motion," technologically mediated accessibility, like all types of accessibility, cannot ever be assumed or taken for granted but must be constructed rhetorically and then made visible and available to all.

Udacity Course: *Design of Everyday Things* (UDACITY)

[The Design of Everyday Things](#) course description addresses potential students by appealing to their sense of embodied engagement within physical spaces. "When you decide what seat to take in an auditorium you're designing your experience. When you rearrange the furniture in a room or draft an email, you're designing." If we follow Critel and interrogate our expectations about student bodies, this syllabus statement imagines an able bodied person who chooses a seat and rearranges furniture. The syllabus invokes—assumptions about how we have power over spaces when, in fact, inaccessible spaces actually have power over us.

The syllabus language continues to promote the course: "It's intended to be enjoyable and informative for anyone curious about design: everyday people, technical people, designers, and non-designers alike." (*Design of Everyday Things*). These naïve notions of "everyday people" are intended to welcome both specialists and nonspecialists, but the design content uses a personalized universal-design approach rather than a critical approach. We recognize that real students' bodies are missing. Will this course, based on the instructor's popular book, ever then offer nuanced understandings of how designs often elide individual identities and reinforce dominant power structures in contemporary American culture? The pedigree and corporate affiliations of the book's author Don Norman and the other two course team members, including coteacher Kristian Simsarian and Udacity course designer Chelsey Glasson, who hopes the course will "inspire those new to design to explore user experience and design careers," all suggest the course will offer a value-neutral, ahistorical and corporate-friendly perspective rather than a critical studies perspective on the concept of design.

Community

Critel emphasizes how her research revealed the "performative nature of participation and the messiness of assessment in classrooms" (this collection). Critel's dissertation, "Investigating The Rhetoric of Student Participation: Uncovering and Historicizing Commonplaces in Composition Studies," contains a wealth of groundbreaking findings presented in a useful and synthesized way. As she explains succinctly in the "challenges" section, "An ethical statement of participation should include what counts as participation, how information will be collected, and how that assessment will be conveyed to students over the course of the quarter" (194). The requirement to provide guidelines and feedback that inform students of formative assessment methods and definitions as well as summative evaluations, should define best practices. But as Critel discovered, there is little evidence that supports those practices in actual course syllabi. These MOOC syllabi are no different; they presume an ever-expanding community that can somehow form through the wonders of technology, and still be coherent.

Udacity Course: *Applied Cryptography*

[Applied Cryptography](#), an advanced computer course on Udacity, introduces computer security, without which nothing in contemporary society can operate.

An interesting FAQ titled “What are the rules on collaboration?” appears to have been a standard statement for Udacity courses. It reads: “Collaboration is a great way to learn. You should do it! The key is to use collaboration as a way to enhance learning, not as a way of sharing answers without understanding them” (Evans, “Applied Cryptography Archive”). Even as this statement works to undo traditional conceptions of “cheating” in school, this description operates within the vague idea of participation as self-evident and communities of learners as self-defining and naturally forming. The current posted version of this course indicates the features of a “Student Support Community” and “In-Person Collaboration” but with no description.

Technology

The *Applied Cryptography* course on Udacity is described as a kind of balance between intrigue and risk management: “Explore how secrets are written and shared, as well as what can go wrong when cryptography is misused or implemented badly.” The “Watch Trailer” video link features professor David Evans describing a populist view of cryptography as “secret writing” that appeals to the “earliest human desires to keep and share secrets”, once only the province of “generals and emperors.” He ends with the description of cryptography as “making puzzles.” (Who doesn’t love that?) This seems to be a course about universal human interests and the powerful role of technology in creating institutions, whether they be corporations or games.

This statement in context, then, draws upon the overly formulaic understanding of the relationships among technologies, participation methods, and students. But what’s really implied by these course descriptions is the value-free possibility for neutral technologies. However, what is always implicitly operating, according to Critel, is the ebb and flow of our own technology hopes and fears. The course ignores completely Critel’s insight that “new technologies are speculated to improve participation” and her conclusion that “ultimately, pedagogy changes participation; technology is an element of pedagogy” (195).

Assessment

Assessment is always about what we value, which leads to passing judgment and evaluation. Assessment involves preferences, and anytime we prefer one structure over another, that assessment has ethical implications that are constrained by *kairos* (Harker).

Coursera Course: *Songwriting*

The [Songwriting](#) course, offered by Berklee College of Music professor and lyrics specialist Pat Pattison, is described as an efficient and compartmentalized learning experience that “will show you an efficient, effective process for tailoring songs to express your ideas and emotions...by examining the tools available to you, all revolving around the essential concept of prosody.” The message of efficiency and prosody—a traditional rhythmic scansion method derived from poetry—suggests that songwriting can be taught without art or talent (or even without playing music yourself) and that this genre of writing can be boiled down to steps that are just like

introductory computer programming. Fair enough, songwriting can be formulaic, but is it then something we value? This course suggests that both learning outcomes and methods of assessment will be formulaic, noncontextual, and perhaps elided with creative writing pedagogical processes.

The course description later mentions peer review for rough drafts that will not focus on performance and in doing so attempts to allay students' performance anxiety:

Assignments will ask you to post something for peer review—sometimes lyric lines or sections, sometimes melodies, sometimes both. None of it has to be polished. The course is about writing, not performing.

No guidelines appear here, however, for exactly how to support and critique other people's work. We acknowledge that it is unrealistic to expect all course syllabi to articulate criteria for every assignment. However, what we are calling attention to is how general expectations about learning, criteria for participation, and methods of evaluation are subsumed and blurred by the commonplace of assessment.

Era

“E”: Evidence of technological innovation

Decade after decade and generation after generation, the possibilities of new technology and for the embodied individual are proclaimed in our scholarship and eventually critiqued, complicated, and then recast in another form. We might call each cycle an *ERA of technology*, complete with all of the *era's* prophetic connotations of distinctiveness. Critel invokes this issue explicitly in her commonplaces when she states, “Technology functions in cycles of technology hope and criticism in terms of the classroom. New technologies are speculated to improve participation.” She then notes how “[d]igital media studies/computers and composition scholarship often criticizes the notion that technology can improve participation. Ultimately, pedagogy changes participation; technology is an element of pedagogy” (195). We firmly agree with this issue about technology in general, and since our orientation comes partly from that scholarly discipline, this finding about technology cycles in relation to participation, so expertly stated here by Critel, does not surprise us, but rather confirms what we've suspected about MOOCs as participating in this cyclic process to proclaim yet another new ERA.

“R”: and the Relevance of technological change

Technology itself as a commonplace is thus perhaps the most pressing and relevant for our discussion of MOOCs, simply because we recognize the continuity with previous critiques of technological ERAs. The astonishing, but even more confirming, fact is that Critel traced this topic all the way back to the beginnings of our flagship journal *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* in 1950: The “CCC archive shows that the speculations on how technology can improve participation go back to the inception of the journal in 1950” (161). This finding confirms that we might be destined to repeat ourselves in the present-day rhetoric of participation.

These insights about technology also resonate with a tradition of the earlier materialist and feminist critiques of technology in our field, including Mary Hocks's early work drawn from her own dissertation. Hocks explains how each technological discovery *always* cycles back to dominant paradigms in terms of how our theories and our praxis repeatedly attach themselves to fantasies of progress and to hopes of a literal technological enactment for the abstract body; in the early days of hypertext theory, our "technotropes of liberation" attached to liberatory ideals about hypertext itself as embodying poststructuralism and as representing the associative processes of the human mind. In Critel's dissertation, we again happily find another confirmation and a kindred spirit.

"A": or Approaching technology via Critel

Materialist critiques of technology so essential to Critel and to our study of MOOCs were, in turn, influenced by the early constructivist technologies studies and the feminist critiques of science and technology. The former developed into critical technology studies best represented by Andrew Feenburg's highly influential 1991 work *Critical Theory of Technology*, the book that launched and has since defined the field of critical technology studies. The other strand, that of feminist critiques, started with early work by scholars like Judy Wajcman and coalesced in Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway's standpoint theory derived from concepts of "feminist epistemologies" and "situated knowledge," or knowledge that is partial, yet confidently possible (Hocks). Critel's approach invokes these kinds of critical technology studies and feminist critiques, at least implicitly. But Critel contributes new insights into how these cycles have operated within our constructions of "participation" in the scholarship and practices of rhetoric and composition.

Thus, with the emergence of MOOCs, a new ERA begins in which we cannot help but participate, because in a truly materialist paradigm one can never escape social relations and structures of power. We are involuntarily enrolled in this schooling machine. However, as Critel shows us, we can still point to strategic situated practice, we can expose and critique, and we can discover new situated knowledge

Bibliography and Attribution

Our chapter design is inspired by, borrows from, and remains indebted to:

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