

The Global Institution, the Homely, and the Overwhelming: (per)forming three MOOC spaces.

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Abstract

While being a relatively recent phenomenon in higher education, the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) has attracted significant media attention for offering free participation and attracting unprecedented enrolment numbers, often in the tens of thousands. Coursera, and edX have emerged as the principle MOOC platform providers, entering into partnerships with a significant number of higher education institutions, mostly located in the US, and promoting themselves as global organisations that disrupt geographical barriers to higher education. MOOCs are often marketed in terms of accessibility and egalitarianism by providing unproblematic admittance to university education. However, the space of the MOOC is significantly under-theorised, and like much of education in general it is often 'left unexamined as simply a different context, container or backcloth for curriculum and pedagogy' (Fenwick *et al.* 2011, p220). This paper draws from spatial theory and the mobilities turn to consider what kinds of spaces are being (per)formed in the emerging domains of the MOOC. It will describe three different enactments of space: the 'global institution'; the 'homely'; and the 'overwhelming', involving from the promotion of particular MOOC platforms and the activities of two specific courses. The paper will draw upon visual, discursive and technological elements in these examples to consider how notions of space can be articulated and enacted through promotion, participation and digital intervention. 'Global-institutional' space concerns the ways that MOOC platforms advance an arrangement that maintains the traditional structure of the institution alongside claiming a global reach. 'Homely' space involves promotion of a local community building as the locus of course activity during a specific MOOC, privileging a central and authentic site of scholarly occupation. 'Overwhelming' space concerns participant responses to an unconventional MOOC utilising distributed social media spaces and encouraging student-created content. Student responses from this course will be used to enact the space of the MOOC, not as the passive scenery external to educational activity, but rather as an active and relational process which emerges within; through relations with the subjects, activities, technologies and objects of online education.

Keywords

MOOC, spatiality, mobilities, sociomaterial.

Introduction

While being a relatively recent phenomenon in higher education, the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) has attracted significant media attention for offering free participation and attracting unprecedented enrolment numbers, often in the tens of thousands. The principle MOOC platform providers have entered into partnerships with a significant number of higher education institutions, mostly located in the US, and promote themselves as global organisations that disrupt geographical barriers to higher education. MOOCs are often marketed in terms of accessibility and egalitarianism by providing unproblematic admittance to university education. However, the space of the MOOC is significantly under-theorised, and like much of education in general it is often 'left unexamined as simply a different context, container or backcloth for curriculum and pedagogy' (Fenwick *et al.* 2011, p220). This paper draws from spatial theory in education (Leander *et al.* 2010, Fenwick *et al.* 2011) and the notion of the mobilities turn (Sheller & Urry 2006, Edwards *et al.* 2011) to consider what kinds of spaces are being (per)formed in the emerging domains of the MOOC. It will describe three different perceptions of space: the 'global institution'; the 'homely'; and the 'overwhelming', deriving from the promotion of particular MOOC platforms and the activities of two specific courses. The paper will trace visual, discursive and technological elements of the MOOC in order to consider how these spaces are being articulated and enacted through promotion, participation and digital intervention. Thus the space of the MOOC will be considered as an active

and relational process (Fenwick *et al.* 2011) which emerges through the ‘intra-action’ (Barad 2007) of the subjects, activities, technologies and objects of online education. This process of relational transformation allows the MOOC to be theorised as a space of mobility rather than stagnation, in which space is continually remade.

This research experiments with the possibilities of post-qualitative (Lather 2013, MacLure 2013, St.Pierre 2013) and Deleuzian-informed (Coleman and Ringrose 2013) methodologies, as well as sociomaterial approaches (Fenwick *et al.* 2011), in order to *perform* the spatial enactments that follow. Data was collected through participant observation in numerous MOOCs, and analysed through diffractive readings (Barad 2007, Hultman & Lenz Taguchi 2010), and the ‘plugging in’ of data and theory (Jackson & Mazzei 2013), to experiment with non-interpretivist and non-representational research. It is not a methodology which claims to describe the world of the MOOC, but to involve itself in the creation of new and different spatial concepts; to interrupt and transform the dominant arrangements of space in this emerging and influential educational format.

Global-Institutional Space

Coursera, edX and Udacity have emerged as the principle MOOC platform providers, promoting themselves as global organisations that disrupt geographical barriers to higher education. In doing so, the space of the MOOC is portrayed in a curiously two-fold manner: the elite institution and the global classroom.

Slogans on the Coursera and edX homepages advise ‘Take the world’s best courses, online, for free’ and ‘Take great courses from the world’s best universities’, respectively, promoting MOOCs as both global and yet exclusive, far-reaching but nonetheless select. It is these two facets which have dominated the extensive media coverage, habitually emphasising vast enrolment numbers, alongside partnership with prestigious US universities (for example Adams 2012, Lewin 2012, Marginson 2012, Pérez-Peña 2012). The MOOC platforms themselves also emphasise class sizes. The Coursera homepage prominently displays a dynamically updating figure for total signups, or ‘Courserians’, with the figure at the time of writing close to 5 million. Scaled participation also appears to be at the heart of the edX promotional material; president Anant Agarwal introduces edX by asking viewers to ‘imagine taking a class with a hundred thousand or more students’ (edX 2013), while two further videos state that edX’s goal is to enrol a billion students from around the world (2012a, 2012b).

Alongside these international ambitions, there are clear attempts to preserve a particular kind of institutional space as a core feature of participation at scale. Images of prestigious campus real estate form the primary visual content on pages dedicated to partner institutions. Traditional buildings feature prominently on the Coursera pages for Ivy League institutions such as Princeton University and The University of Pennsylvania, as do conventional study spaces, such as the oak panelled library displayed on the Harvard edX page. Thus the historicity of the elite institution, and the time-honoured spaces of scholarly study, are being utilised here to legitimise the MOOC, to provide a spatial grounding from which a sense of authenticity can be achieved. Where the digital is often perceived to be troublesome, unconventional and to undermine the established routines of education, the sedentary space of the campus provides stability and recognition.

This highlights the puzzling kind of space that MOOC platforms seem to promote. The experience of engaging with a university for the vast majority of global participants is not going to involve leafy quadrangles, grand façades, or the social interactions of campus study, yet these are the kind of spaces at the forefront of MOOC promotion. The very elitism that these MOOC organisations claim to overturn seems to form the basis of their wish to appear as genuine educational providers. The prestigious campus, while being rejected on the grounds of inequality, is reinserted here as a potent symbol of authenticity.

This two-fold space of the MOOC is exemplified in a recent visualisation created by Coursera, which depicts a spinning globe, peppered with markers indicating its partner institutions, and displaying nation states in a hue according to the number of students enrolled (see figure 1).

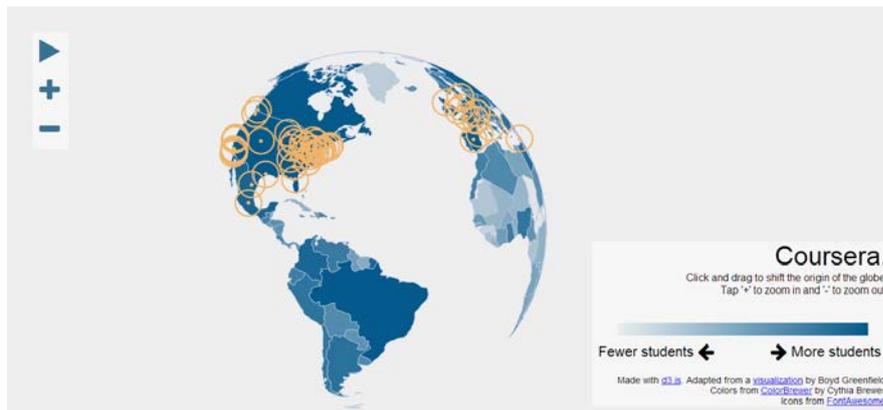


Figure 1: Coursera visualisation depicting the location of institutions and colouring nation states according to student enrolment numbers. <http://viz.coursera.org/2013-02-20-globe/>

This visualisation is interesting on a number of levels. Despite the global emphasis, the vast majority of partner universities are clearly located in the US, with a burgeoning number in Western Europe (see figure 1). It also embodies the broader trends of ‘Big Data’ and ‘Data Visualisation’ as ways of presenting and displaying large scale social phenomena. It is through such methods that Coursera and edX propose to provide new insights about the learning process by collecting vast amounts of data derived from MOOC activity. However, in this visualisation participant data is being used as a promotional tool; to create a spatial representation that serves to publicise Coursera’s claims of global influence.

However, rather than this data ‘speaking for itself’¹, in other words representing with perfect fidelity a ‘real’ space out there, it has been collected, structured and displayed in order to create a particular kind of spatial arrangement. MOOC participants are represented, not through their individual global location, but through an affiliation to a nation state. Thus Coursera’s educational relationship with its various worldly participants manifests as the colonisation of territories; it is thus not individual participants that are represented, but entire countries. Furthermore, this arrangement also portrays a global space in which populations are homogenised and distinction between nation states is simply a matter of how many people are signed up.

This visualisation is an example of the instrumental approach to technology that MOOC providers appear to endorse. Indeed, it is technology which is positioned as the means to coalesce the seemingly inconsistent spaces of the elite university campus and the distributed global classroom. Coursera, edX and Udacity position web-streamed video as the technology able to perform this spatial expansion, allowing the institution to extend its presence beyond the confines of the campus walls in the form of recorded lectures – the primary educational content in most MOOCs. Crucially, the video lecture, perceived as an indisputable record of an authentic university event, leaves the institution intact in this process. Whatever is extended is also preserved, and the authenticity, rigour, and historical legitimacy of the institution is maintained in the global reach.

Homely Space

A salient example of the use of video can be found in the ‘Modern and Contemporary American Poetry’ (known as ModPo) course from the University of Pennsylvania in partnership with Coursera. As part of the introductory material, this course provided a video tour of the Kelly Writers House, a campus building associated with the instructors of the ModPo MOOC and creative writing students at the University of Pennsylvania.

As a production of space, this video offers a remarkable enactment of the domestication of the MOOC, involving, I suggest, the production of familiarity and the practice of mapping. Rather than the imposing campus edifices foregrounded by the MOOC platforms, this faculty-level promotion aims at establishing a space of intimacy and community by providing a tour of the building which hosts the ModPo course. Course convenor Al Filreis hosts the tour, providing commentary as he is filmed proceeding through various rooms within the building, in which he interviews each of the ModPo Teaching Assistants (TAs) in turn. Of primary emphasis in this video is the promotion of a community at the Kelly Writers House. Being interviewed, ModPo

¹ Reference to Chris Anderson’s wired article ‘The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete’ (2008), in which he states: ‘With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves’.

TA Dave stresses the accessibility and hospitality of the space, declaring ‘it’s been great to have a place that’s so welcoming to anybody. There is no requirements, you know, you don’t have to be a grad student or undergrad, or involved in the school, you can be anybody in the community, and it’s just been a great welcoming place’ (ModPo 2012). Photo albums and wall displays also feature prominently, exhibiting various social events and the abundance of visitors to the building (see figure 2). In the final scene, Filreis addresses the camera and invites viewers to visit: ‘I hope and I seriously ask you to come when you are in Philadelphia or nearby, stop in at the writers house, you don’t need to announce yourself, just walk in the front door...just come and enjoy yourself’ (ModPo 2012). The space of the ModPo MOOC is being framed here as open, but firmly located somewhere. It attempts to maintain an intimate and convivial approach, positioned within the Kelly Writers House as the authentic site of community.



Figure 2: Still from the Kelly Writers House Tour Video showing photographs of community members and visitors

Participant responses to the video tour in the course forum often subscribed to this formulation of intimate homely space. One respondent endorses the video: ‘Thank you - for the tour and for making ModPo, as well as the Kelly House, a place that is, as Dave put it in this video, so welcoming to anybody!’. Another participant concurs with the community focus, suggesting ‘I felt like an honored guest being invited into the home of ModPo with all of the “family” there to greet me’. These sentiments resonate with the findings of Bayne *et al.*, in which distance students associate themselves strongly with their programme of study and its community, rather than with the institution (2013). However, a further forum participant alludes to the potency of the university space portrayed in the video, responding ‘I really want to visit ... It would be fun and I might absorb some of that Ivy League brain power!!’. The physical campus space of the elite university is considered here to have exceptional qualities with regards to learning, qualities that, despite the specified aims of the course, are not perceived to transfer into the online spaces of the MOOC. The majority of respondents appeared to perceive the video tour as providing unrestricted and authentic access to the central and legitimate space of the course. Another respondent attests, ‘The tour of this house made me realize why the tone of your Mod Po videos seem so genuine. Kelly Writers House is a welcoming place full of genuine faces where the individuals are recognised...’. The ocularcentricity of the video medium is highlighted here, assumed to facilitate direct admittance to the space and to convey the authenticity of the people involved. The framing of human bodies and the emphasis on eye contact are key aspects to the ways this space is being constructed. It is the medium of video itself that provides this sense of ‘reality’, not only depicting genuine space and the validity of site through sight, but facilitating its transference to a distributed audience of global participation.

The effectiveness of this homely narrative is suggested by the presence of a single comment that challenges the dominant sentiment: ‘I suspect I won’t win a popularity contest for this ... I know Kelly House, like this course is open to everyone, but I did think of “I, Too” by Langston Hughes after I finished the tour’. The work to which this comment refers is a poem about social injustice in America, featuring a man who is excluded from eating in company on the grounds of his race. The commenter appears to be expressing notions of inequality here, where the video serves to indicate the marginalisation of MOOC participants from the authentic local community. The video tour can thus be perceived, not as providing access to the genuine nucleus of the course,

but merely serving to indicate what will always remain exclusive, inaccessible and unaffordable² to the majority of ModPo participants.

In conjunction with ideas about intimacy and inequality, the video tour can be perceived as enacting a particular kind of space in response to the digital. The act of guiding the audience through the Kelly Writers House manifests as a mapping of the course space. The physically located, sequential and linear navigation is offered as a means through which the ModPo participants can understand, and delimit, the site in which educational activity is to be grounded. The course convenor literally marks the boundaries of the space by walking through the building, mapping the frontiers of the Kelly Writers House and simultaneously signalling what is inauthentic and illegitimate course space. The student responses to this mapping show how the campus remains 'symbolically and materially significant' (Bayne *et al.* 2013). We can understand this domesticating performance as an act of taming the digital, or providing 'moorings' (Hannam *et al.* 2006, Edwards *et al.* 2011) in the sometimes unfamiliar and shifting spaces of the web.

Overwhelming Space

In contrast to formality and order, more decentralised, chaotic and unsettling MOOC spaces are to be found. 'E-learning and Digital Cultures' (known as EDCMOOC), a MOOC from the University of Edinburgh in partnership with Coursera, is one example of a course which produced distributed and mutable spatial orderings. Contrary to typical MOOC design, this course did not feature video lectures as the primary content, offering instead a range of public domain short films and animations alongside openly accessible academic readings. This approach was intended to invite EDCMOOC participants to explore, interpret and discuss this material in the Coursera forum, as well as in personal blogs and a range of other social media (Knox 2013, Knox *et al.* 2012). This arrangement - a combination of distributed course environments and student-created content, involving of thousands of blog posts and tweets - created a space that was interpreted by many participants as immense, chaotic and uncontrollable. This final section will focus on student responses to this overwhelming MOOC space.

Many of these reactions were expressed within the forum pages of the Coursera platform, which was inundated with thousands of posts and comments in the first few days of the course. One participant refers to the distributed spaces of the course, describing 'multiple discussion threads via several communication platforms....a lot of work in one week. I am overwhelmed. I am searching for some simplicity'. The simultaneity of different course spaces is suggested here to be an unwelcome complexity, premised on the ways that these different environments present course information and student discussion. A number of respondents began to express similar sentiments with the use of spatial metaphors, frequently attempting to evoke notions of volume and expanse. One contributor states: 'The course feels like an ocean so I'm making myself post this comment as a way of dipping one toe into the water...', while another commenter suggests that they are 'overwhelmed about how I find my niche and voice in this huge ocean of information'. Another contributor suggests 'we're all like we're wandering around a big airport picking up bits and pieces'. What is striking about these spatial ideas is how they express an anxiety about how to orient oneself to, and interact with, vast and unfamiliar spaces. We might interpret the ocean and the airport as spaces that are not arranged around the individual; rather, they accommodate the swarm and the crowd. These ideas of unbounded and engulfing space also emerged in visual work created during an image competition, held during week 3 of the EDCMOOC course. A prominent example is an image entitled 'Rabbit-hole' by participant june.B, which features a humanoid avatar seemingly afloat in an abstract space awash with social media icons, and clearly referencing the surreal adventures of Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (see figure 3).

² At the time of writing, total tuition fees for undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania are \$45,890: <http://www.sfs.upenn.edu/paying/fees.htm>

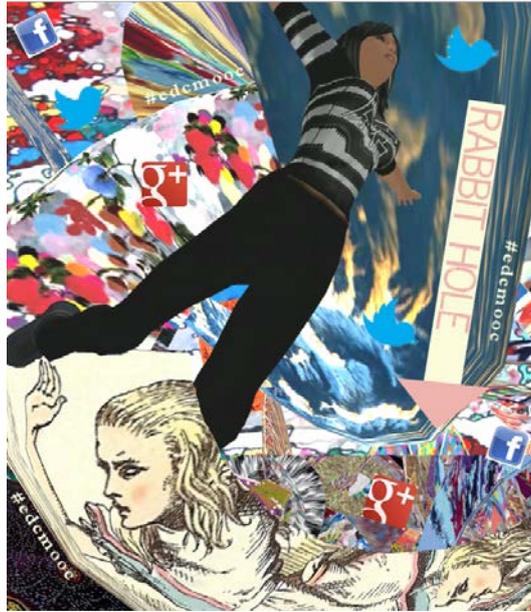


Figure 3: ‘RabbitHole’ by June.B depicting a humanoid avatar floating in abstract and symbolic space.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/78233395@N02/8480022492/>

This image provides a useful way of considering how complex digital spaces can disorientate learners who may be expecting the recognisable backdrops of the orderly classroom or the convivial learning community. Space is then conceived as exploratory; performed in relation with the symbolic, the perceptual, the corporeal, and technological (Fenwick *et al.* 2011).

Lacking a recognisable structure or systematic guidelines, engaging with the EDCMOOC Coursera forum itself became a focus for the concerns of the overwhelmed, described by more than one contributor as ‘navigating the maze’. This idea of disorientating space is reflected in a number of comments about discussion contributions being, as one participant states, ‘lost in the deluge of forum responses’. Another commenter suggests: ‘I feel if I make a post it is like shouting out in a crowded railway station trying to make myself heard above 40,000 others’, while a further participant describes ‘being swallowed by immensity’. This reaction to the scale, complexity, and unfamiliarity was also reflected in visual responses. Countering the comfort and intimacy of homely space, an image entitled ‘Always On’ by Angela Towndrow portrays a house in ruins, overgrown with plants, and including the caption, ‘Yes, she’s home, she’s just a bit busy with the edcMOOC’ (see figure 4).



Figure 4: 'Always On' by Angela Towndrow, depicting a derelict house overgrown with plants.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/90243669@N05/8461301620/sizes/l/in/photostream/>

Here the ordered structure of the home becomes a site of disorder, as undomesticated, wild non-human forms deterritorialise the structure. As implied by the caption, the neatness of the home requires maintenance, lest outside forces begin to enter into relations that alter the organised spatial arrangements. This interpretation thus becomes a useful starting point to begin to perceive how the diverse spaces of the web begin to intermingle and transform the orderly and established places of education in the MOOC. As revealed by the neglected house, we can consider MOOC space, not as the conservation of a rigid archetypal form, but a practice of digital hybridity; a spatial arrangement that is not static, but comprised of movement through relational transformation.

I have performed the space of the EDCMOOC here as a shifting arrangement, which, rather than attempting to maintain the established spatial orderings of the campus or the classroom, permits the emergence of fluid and hybrid arrangements, distributed across the web and ordered through irreducible amalgamations of humans, technologies, discourses and codes. In contrast to the idea of space as a passive container in which learning takes place, this suggests an active production of space, enfolded in the practices of education, and performed through co-constitutive relationships between the human and the non-human.

Conclusions

The three enactments of space in this paper have illustrated how space in the emerging domain of the MOOC is neither singular nor definitive. It is continually performed through entangled ideas, hybrid practices, and interwoven technologies. MOOC platform providers attempt to create a space that preserves the grandeur and authenticity of the educational institution, yet also traverses the planet. It is a space maintained through symbolic references to campus real estate and statistical constructions of global influence. The two-fold space of the elite institution and the global classroom appears conflicted, and the spatial arrangements in which the vast majority of students will engage remain unrepresented and under-theorised. Individual courses often work to construct intimate spaces that attempt to reassert the physical proximity and co-presence of a learning community. As we have seen in the ModPo MOOC, this leads to a privileging of centralised and exclusive space over that which might be dispersed, partial and irregular. Participant reactions to the unconventional and distributed spaces of the EDCMOOC revealed notable feelings of confusion and disorientation, suggesting that many students engage in MOOCs with entrenched understandings and prior expectations about the spatial arrangements of education (Ross *et al.* in press). However the irregular arrangements of the EDCMOOC influenced a number of responses that envisioned space in new ways, providing opportunities for educators to consider MOOC offerings according to different orderings; gatherings that acknowledge the fluidity and hybridity of the digital in ways that counter the dominant rhetoric of the instrumental use of technology. This offers a concept of the MOOC, not as the historic place of the university, but as an emerging space of difference. Different, not only from the campus spaces it often tries to emulate, but also different from itself. In other words, an active and shifting process in which educational space is continually produced in hybrid configurations.

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