The Promise of MOOCs:
Communities of Practice and Affinity Spaces
to Support Life-long Learning for Teacher-Librarians

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Abstract

This research paper presents the findings from a final survey of those who registered in The Hyperlinked Library MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) offered by the School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State University in the fall of 2013. The survey questions analyzed deal specifically with the development of a sense of community within the MOOC. Key findings include: purpose (shared interests and shared experience), people (connecting with others – participants and instructors and those outside the MOOC), participation (reading, writing, sharing, joining, responding, etc.), pedagogy (decisions about teaching and learning in the MOOC are so critical) and platforms (spaces for collaborative learning inside (BuddyPress) and outside (social media). School library organizations should look to the power of MOOCs to connect teacher-librarians with each other and provide professional development.

Keywords: MOOC, The Hyperlinked Library, professional development, community, teacher-librarians

Introduction

Teacher-librarians often work in isolation in their schools and school districts and professional develop opportunities available in schools and districts may not always meet their learning needs. Technologies such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube allow teacher-librarians to access professional development opportunities and make connections with others. A new professional development opportunity for teacher-librarians is the emergence of the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course).

This research paper presents the findings of a survey that examined the experiences of participants who completed *The Hyperlinked Library MOOC* offered by the School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State University in the fall of 2013. The MOOC had 363 registrants, was modeled on connected learning, and was hosted on BuddyPress ("a fully featured social network inside a wordpress.org site").

Research Questions

This paper will explore the respondents understanding of the term community and what community mean in terms of the course and the MOOC. The paper will also describe if, how and when a sense of community in this course developed for participants. Respondents who developed a sense of community were asked to identify the ways they saw community being constructed within this MOOC. The paper will also describe the experiences, formats and/or tools that participants felt contributed to this sense of community. Using these findings, the authors will discuss the implications of the MOOC environment for the professional development needs teacher-librarians, in particular, and for librarians and teachers, in general.

Literature Review

Much has been written about one-size-fits-all professional development (PD) approaches (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2008) and current research suggests there are many PD alternatives to consider such as online communities (for example, Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit & McCloskey, 2009; Duncan-Howell, 2010), professional learning communities (for example, Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010), and informal learning (for example, Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011). A new form of PD is emerging as a possibility for teachers, librarians and teacher-librarians.

In the literature, although the development of MOOCs is attributed to the theory of open education, an educational model that has been around since the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Massachusetts Institute of Technology's OpenCourseWare initiative or MIT OCW launched in 2002), MOOCs are considered a relatively recent phenomenon. The term "MOOC" was coined in 2008 by David Cormier and Bryan Alexander when they described an open online course on Connectivism and Connective Knowledge" called *CCK08*. Widely considered as the first MOOC, CCK08 was created and facilitated by two prominent Canadian educators, George Siemens and Stephen Downes.

However, it was not until July 2011 when Stanford University announced its online course called "CS211: Introduction to Artificial Intelligence (AI)," taught by Stanford professor Sebastian Thrun and Google's Director of Research Peter Norvig, that MOOCs exploded onto the scene of higher education and became more popular. Stanford's open and free online course on AI garnered about 160,000 registered participants from all over the world, of which 20,000 completed the course (Rodriguez, 2012, p. 6), a course registration number that was more massive in scale compared to that of the first MOOC. *The New York Times* declared 2012 as the "Year of the MOOC" (Pappano, 2012). The "Year of the MOOC" also saw the launch of MOOC start-up companies in the United States, such as MITx, Udacity, Coursera, and edX. There are three key themes in the current debate about the impact of MOOCs in higher education. These themes include the dichotomy between cMOOCs and xMOOCs, the issue of MOOC accreditation and sustainability, and the overall efficacy of MOOC for student learning and success. In this review, we will briefly summarize the differences between cMOOCs and xMOOCs and discuss MOOC for learning and success.

Rodriguez argues that there are two types of MOOCs: cMOOCs or connectivist MOOCs and the "AI-Stanford like courses" (2012, p.1). On the one hand, cMOOCs are known as the type of MOOC that is based on connectivism and networking (Daniel, 2012 p.2), while on the other, the "AI/Stanford-like courses" (Rodriguez, 2012, p.1) or what is now known as "xMOOCs" is based on behaviorism (Daniel, 2012 p.2). *The Hyperlinked Library* MOOC was a cMOOC.

According to a study of MOOC participation in Edinburgh University, MOOC students are diverse – from high school students to retired professionals and individuals with a Master's degree, only 33 per cent of its MOOC students wants to get a certificate from the university which suggests that there are *other* motivations at play as well, such as, learning new things, trying online education, improving one's career, meeting new people, etc. (Swope, 2013). Hence, apart from the acquisition of "credits" or at least a "certificate of recognition," MOOC participants have other reasons in mind for their willingness to join MOOCs.

The topic of student success or lack thereof is also a major concern for educators who are keeping track of the MOOC phenomenon. Indeed, how do we evaluate what participants are learning in a MOOC? How do we assess what is being learned if there are no requirements to take final examinations and/or hand in projects at the end of the course? Guzdial (2013) explains that MOOC's completion and retention rates can be as low as 10 per cent (p. 18).

Indeed, the two popular kinds of participation in a MOOC, that is, active participation and lurking, are seen as an interesting aspect of this new educational model. Particularly, the concept of lurking challenges our traditional ideas of learning. This level of autonomy bestowed upon the students in MOOC settings is also what is considered attractive and unique about MOOCs. Indeed, as De Coutere (2014) points out, "in a MOOC, people self-register based on interest. Through a process of self-selection, a community of learners who have reached the learning goals at least as well as they would have done in a classroom program emerge, but on top have shown their dedication for the topic" (p. 21). Moreover, De Coutere believes that a "MOOC is probably the formal learning format that gets closest to achieving [for years now what we have been talking about in terms of "putting the learner in the driver's seat of his own learning process]" (p. 22).

To continue examining of the notion of a community of learners, Wenger (2006) shares the three necessary components of a community of practice: the domain, the community, and the practice. "In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information" (Wenger, 2006, para. 4). Communities of practice can be small or large, local or global, face-to-face or online, formal or informal. However, Gee (2004) cautions the overarching interpretation often associated with communities of practice, particularly as these communities can create "belongingness and close knit personal ties among people which do not necessarily always fit classrooms, workplaces, or other sites where the notion of a community of practice has been used" (Gee, 2004, p. 77). Instead, Gee (2004) suggests the idea of affinity spaces as a more representative term to identify a socially situated group of learners.

DeVane (2012) questions, "How can communities have hundreds of participants?" (p. 165). Essentially, affinity spaces "are not centered on a social group's constitution or boundaries of membership, but rather on the knowledgeable activity undertaken by learners and knowledge domain in which said activity takes place " (DeVane, 2012, p. 166). Affinity spaces are centered upon the common endeavor of the space, as compared to class, gender, race or disability. An individual's participation is concentrated upon their affinity for the space, whether they are newbies or masters. As we come to think about what a MOOC experience might mean to a learner, we can also consider how might the experiences of library professionals in *The Hyperlinked Library MOOC* help us to understand how the professional development needs of teacher-librarians might be met.

Methodology

Participants in *The Hyperlinked Library* MOOC in the fall of 2013 were asked to complete two Web-based surveys at the beginning and end of the course. A little over 40% (135) of the participants completed the final survey about their MOOC experiences. The survey included demographic queries, Likert scales, and open-ended question types. This paper analyzes questions related to the participants' experiences in the MOOC community. The survey results were analyzed by looking for common themes and trends that emerged across questions and throughout the respondents' comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998).

Findings

The paper presents the findings from a survey completed at the end of The Hyperlinked Library MOOC offered by San Jose State University. The findings will be presented based on the themes that emerged from the analysis of the four open-ended questions. In one closed question, 105 of the 135 respondents felt that they belonged to a community in the course.

One question asked participants to describe what the term community meant in terms of the *The Hyperlinked Library* course and a MOOC in general. The majority of respondents indicated that community meant commonalities – shared experiences, shared interests, shared backgrounds, and shared commitment. One respondent shared that "community is a group of people with common ties and goals." Another felt that the MOOC "was a place in the cloud where you can interact with like-minded people." A third respondent explained "communities are made up of people with similarities… either in goals, locations, jobs, etc. In this case the community was made up of librarians or library students who were interested in social media." Several participants were clear that community could be "physical or virtual." A respondent summed this up when (s)he wrote that a community is "a sense of belonging to a larger than life group of LIS professionals who have collectively brought so much to the course."

Respondents also indicated that community meant finding a "cozy" place in the MOOC – either within a homeroom (group of 40 students who worked together) or as part of a tribe (self-selected and created interest groups). One respondent stated, "I really liked the small homeroom that I was assigned to along with the different tribes, so that would be my community." Another respondent stated that a "community is a group that has something in common. For MOOC the community could be broad - 400 participants or more cozy, tribes and friends. Some community members are active and engaged and others live on the fringes."

Respondents also noted that working collaboratively and cooperatively to learn news things and share information helped crate a sense of community. One respondent wrote that "a community should support/help achieve your goals by supporting you and challenging you to be better. It involves active participation, thoughtful 'listening' and responding." Another respondent wrote "I want to begin by stating that I love the word 'community.' In terms of this course, community meant a safe and supportive group of individuals who wanted to discuss anything about libraries. It was a group of collaborative and creative people."

For some respondents, contributions made the MOOC a community. One respondent shared that "this MOOC did a great job identifying a large number of venues for community (tribes, homerooms, etc.). The most successful ones shared things. The least successful just had performance for the teacher." Another respondent wrote that the MOOC was a community because of "interaction, content creation, the "feeling" of a collegial community, sharing with each other for the sake of it without expecting anything in return, common collective interest in furthering the goals of the library world." Another respondent added that "in this course and in a MOOC, a community is a group of students who share their information, their learning, their knowledge. They meet virtually in a forum, or via social media. They give each other peer feedback. All learning should be open and accessible to all students."

Others highlighted connections as the key to a community and in the MOOC this meant between participants, instructors and homeroom leaders. Some of the respondents felt very connected in the MOOC but others did not. One respondent wrote, "I never developed a sense of community in the course. It wasn't obvious to me how to get involved. I was told to post my interests and establish communities. I didn't as I couldn't find other communities to join. I never figured out the purpose of homerooms or even who else was in mine." Another respondent wrote, "In general, community means the place someone lives/works/spends a lot of time - some people helpful, others not so much. There is a life lesson in general in that definition. In terms of the MOOC, a community is represented by the members of the MOOC and the instructors. Again, some people are helpful, some not (to be clear instructors and

homeroom moderators were in the helpful category). Community - a place where you go to live, learn, ask questions, hopefully get answers, and possible provide insight for others as well."

Respondents were asked to identify when a sense of community developed in the MOOC. The findings indicated that community developed when the participants were involved in some sort of action: joining, blogging, writing, responding, commenting, sharing, reading, viewing, belonging, encouraging, and interacting. One respondent felt that a sense of community developed "from the beginning. Especially when I joined particular groups that related to me." Another wrote that community developed, "once I started joining tribes and accepting friendships we could further share ideas and each other's blogs." Another shared, "I took the time to subscribe to some tribes and read posts of the people in my homeroom." A further respondent shared that a sense of community developed "immediately upon joining. The week before the first lecture materials were released the MOOC felt like being back in the dorm before the semester started, everyone getting to know each other, finding their way around, helping each other out, creating and joining tribes and chattering with enthusiasm."

Respondents indicated that the act of blogging helped a sense of community to develop. One respondent wrote, "I am one of the community members who struggles(ed) with social media, struggled with the technology behind the course tools (e.g. creating my own blog), and struggled with exposing myself to peer review. But I stuck it out and did manage to create my blog (first time ever) and keep up with weekly postings to correspond with our modules. I found that being able to read my colleagues' blogs made me feel part of a community, and eventually I started to feel more comfortable with putting my opinions 'out there'." The acts writing, responding and commenting on blogs was key to developing a sense of community for many of the respondents. One respondent shared that "I felt through comments to my blog posts and the ones I gave to others, I developed a sense of community." Another respondent explained, "I was so excited the first time someone commented on my blog post. I never expected that. I felt I was creating a conversation." A respondent shared, "I am not a natural blogger so this was a new development for me. It was great to see that people commented on posts and offered suggestions. Very cool form of engagement." For one respondent, "Logging in to read and contribute comments was important to me to ensure that I didn't become isolated."

There were also respondents who found *The Hyperlinked Library* MOOC to be difficult in terms of building a sense of community. Reasons for the lack of sense of community included "not being able to fully engage", "lack of time", "not in my nature, there were lots of opportunities to connect with others, but I didn't take advantage of these", "didn't have enough energy after work to participate in the MOOC", "didn't participate", "some personal issues and not doing the work." One respondent wrote, "I wasn't as fully involved as I could have been, maintaining a blog and communicating virtually with a large number of people is new to me, and I am of an age (or generation) that still finds it difficult to be so open to a virtual world, to virtual self-exposure." One respondent noted, "At first it was really difficult for me because I am a very private person and I don't like to post information about myself online. As the course progressed I felt more comfortable and it was great to find other people who shared the same passions. Another respondent shared, "several people reached out to me. If that has not happened, I think I would have felt like I was just writing and responding for myself." A third respondent explained that "the number of participants is too large to feel that I was a co-community member with everyone. I did however feel we were doing something together/having a shared experience."

Several respondents highlighted the idea of a shared experience in the MOOC by speaking specifically about the importance of sharing in building a sense of community. One respondent wrote that, "I like sharing things that were related to the course. I found the off topic sharing to be a little distracting. There were a lot of things I immediately used and that was some of the best instances of community. Discussions related to badges, public libraries and cutting edge tech were useful. Another respondent shared, "My first community experience was probably the sharing of websites in the Big Blue Marble group. There was a

lot of back-and-forth in that group; later the library resources group had the same kinds of interactions." A third respondent noted, "My reading of fellow students' posts including useful information, inspiring reflections and people's comments these days further touched me by their candidness and spirit of sharing for the best."

For some respondents, the acts of reading and viewing helped to develop a sense of community. One respondent wrote that, community developed, "as I read more of the writing of other participants." Another respondent shared that the "videos by lecturers helping give a feeling of one-ness to the large group since I knew that everyone was seeing the same videos." "From the very beginning Michael and Kyle made it feel like a community by the way they delivered the lectures (talking to us not at us)" wrote another student. Another respondent noticed that, "the lecturers referred in their lectures to blog posts they had read and sometimes that commented [on blog posts]." This notion of reading and viewing was highlighted by another respondent who wrote, "By reading and viewing the selecting course materials with a large group and then reflecting via blogs and homeroom chatter, the community developed. The video presentations felt personally developed for the MOOC community to guide us, I especially liked them." Another noted that, "the lectures by Michael, Kyle and the guests were empowering and passionate. This was a critical part of the community as they sparked conversations, ideas and learning among participants."

The themes of belonging and encouraging were also present in the responses to the survey question. One respondent shared that, "everyone was welcoming, helpful and encouraging of each other." According to another respondent, the sense of community "started with the first email after being accepted to participate. The tone was welcoming. The first message from my homeroom leader Carlie was encouraging and understanding." Other respondents used words like "inviting", "overwhelmed by support", "helpful", and "personal feedback" to describe different experiences within the MOOC community. One respondent stated that, "Michael by his friendly professionalism, caring, knowledge, stature, helps set a tone from the beginning of the many positive values and respectful, authentic interaction to come." Another respondent summed up these feelings by writing that, "the group valued my input and my contribution and this makes me feel valued and gives me a sense of belonging."

Respondents were asked to identify the ways community was constructed within this MOOC. The use of BuddyPress as the learning platform and of other social media technologies (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, for example) enabled participants to build their community on many different levels. Respondents indicated that blogging was very important to the development of community with the MOOC. One respondent stated it clearly, "I think the blogging was the best means of developing a community." Another shared that, "being forced to create a blog (I struggled greatly at first) and post to it regularly and being able to read/comment on my colleague's blogs created a sense of community for me." "The blogs, tribes and updates forged a really strong sense of community. Encouraging us to comment on each other's assignments was a great idea" wrote another respondent. Further comments included sharing that, "the blogging experience (reading the comments from the other participants) gave me a feeling of classroom that I have not seen replicated in other online environments."

Tribes and Homerooms - smaller groups within the larger MOOC - were very important to developing a sense of community for several respondents. One participant shared, "I enjoyed the use of 'tribes' to make me feel connected to a smaller group within the wider community. Everyone was welcoming, helpful and encouraging of each other." Another participant explained, "I was friended by people I never would have met F2F. I learned things I would never have learned without participating in this experience. I thought it was quite useful assigning people to 'homerooms' so there would be some closer mentoring for those of us who are unfamiliar with MOOC process. The 'Tribe' concept was also fun, especially some of the silly ones that sprang up; it was a great example of how we can be separate, but similar." The community was built by "having a homeroom the friendly and approachable nature of those running the course, the Facebook-like interface and design, the various tribal interest groups, the common sense that we're in this together." According to other

respondents, the Tribes "was a great idea", "gave a sense of belonging", and was "a means of connecting those with like interests, experiences, and library settings." One respondent stated that, "the tribes - and the ability to create them and be invited to others - was helpful." "While the vast majority of tribes failed to stay active, I think the process of setting them up got people talking to each other" summed up one respondent.

Many of the respondents in the MOOC commented on the use of a Facebook-like social media platform called BuddyPress and how it supported the development of a sense of community. One respondent indicated that (s)he "really liked just clicking the recent activity link and dipping my toe into the stream of content that was flowing out from other students." Another respondent commented that, "the social media-esque design of the website had a lot to do with it. I felt I could post interesting things and leave a comment on anything that piqued my interest." "Logging into the Hyperlinked WordPress site and seeing who had recently been online and made comments was also wonderful. It movitivated me and illustrated how the community was a living thing" wrote another respondent. The MOOC instructors created a badge system within BuddyPress that allowed students to be rewarded for completing a task. One student wrote that, "I'm not one that really cares about badges as a priority - but when you get one you feel pleased. Like you truly accomplished something. Then you look and you see other participants awarded and you feel a similar proudness for your co-learners. If you are competitive, it gives you some thing to aspire to. It was truly amazing how the interactivity created an authentic cohesive participatory experience that some onsite classes do not achieve."

Respondents also indicated that they like the "allowing of the MOOC conversations and connections to go beyond the MOOC, i.e., Twitter, GoodReads, etc." Twitter was one tool that participants in the MOOC used to help build a sense of community. One respondent stated that, "the Twitter backchannel (#HyperLibMOOC) was also enormously helpful to me to find a smaller group of people who were interacting with the MOOC in ways that worked for me." Respondents indicated that Twitter was a great tool for finding "communities of interest" and for "helping identify who else was in this experience with you." One respondent felt that Twitter might be better used. (S)he suggested that, "maybe the instructors could engage via a twitter chat or the people involved could run a twitter chat and become more involved and be able to share their own work and places of work more." Some respondents felt that the many options for tools made the MOOC "overly complex" and some did not use "Twitter or Facebook" for the course. The pedagogical decisions of the instructors and the unique features of BuddyPress were critical to building community for many respondents. The responsive nature of the course and the role of the instructors were also key.

Discussion

Understanding how students experienced community in *The Hyperlinked Library* MOOC can help us when we think about ways to reach out to teacher-librarians (and teachers and librarians) to connect and provide professional development. The majority of respondents indicated that community meant commonalities – shared experiences, shared interests, shared backgrounds, and shared commitment. Teacher-librarians tend to work in isolation and their work is quite different from that of other teachers in the school. A cMOOC for teacher-librarians would be a place to share experiences, interests and to advocate for school library programs. Respondents to the survey also indicated that community meant finding a "cozy" place in the MOOC. When thinking about online PD, it is important to remember that some participants may need to have a cozy place within a larger learning space. Respondents also talked about working collaboratively and cooperating to learn news things and share information. Teacher-librarians like to share and collaborating with other teachers is central to their work. A MOOC must have a place for sharing of resources. Having an opportunity to collaborate with other teacher-librarians could be a powerful learning experience. For some respondents, contributions made the MOOC a community. It is important that teacher-librarians see their professional development as contributing to some bigger than themselves and their own school library. Connections were also seen as an important part of the development of a sense of community in the MOOC. Teacher-

librarians who work in isolation especially need the opportunity to develop connections with others - researchers, teacher-librarianship educators, and other teacher-librarians from around the world.

The findings indicated that community developed when the participants were involved in some sort of action: joining, blogging, writing, responding, commenting, sharing, reading, viewing, belonging, encouraging, and interacting. It is important that a MOOC for professional development for teacher-librarians be an active space where participants are creating new knowledge. While many of the respondents to the survey felt that they developed a sense of community in the MOOC, others found it difficult to be successful. If an organization was to offer a MOOC for teacher-librarians, there must be an understanding that it cannot be too time intensive. One option might be to run smaller modules within a larger MOOC where people can pop in and out as their time allows. The importance of belonging and encouraging of participants was also highlighted in the responses to the survey questions. Any professional development opportunities offered in a MOOC format must allow for different ways to belong to the community and there needs to be MOOC leaders who will model encouragement, support and respect for all participants. It was also clear that the MOOC platform is important to the development of community. BuddyPress, for example, provided a social media-like space with an activity stream that allowed participants to follow the progress of the course and develop tribes (affinity spaces) to connect with others. *The Hyperlinked Library* MOOC also provided opportunities for participants to connect in other social media spaces such as Twitter, GoodReads and Facebook. There is much to learn from the participants in *The Hyperlinked Library* MOOC in terms of if, when and how they developed a sense of community.

Implications and Conclusions

Understanding the experiences of library professionals who participated in *The Hyperlinked Library* MOOC can help us think about and plan for effective professional development for teacher-librarians. Key findings include: *purpose* (shared interests and shared experience), *people* (connecting with others – participants and instructors and those outside the MOOC), *participation* (reading, writing, sharing, joining, responding, etc.), *pedagogy* (decisions about teaching and learning in the MOOC are so critical) and *platforms* (spaces for collaborative learning inside (for example, BuddyPress) and outside (Twitter, blogs, Facebook, GoodReads, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.)).

The notion of affinity spaces seems to apply to the way participants connected to each other through the MOOC. School library organizations should look to the power of cMOOCs to connect teacher-librarians with each other and provide professional development. In a profession where many teacher-librarians work in isolation, the authors see great potential in cMOOCs. Providing a learning space and a program of topics would be welcomed by teacher-librarians at the provincial/state level, at a national level, and at an international level (IASL and IFLA). Associations could work together to host different cMOOCs at different times in the year making professional development opportunities available to large numbers of teacher-librarians.

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