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Conference Item

Original citation:

Bryant, Peter (2015) Harnessing the power of the 'Massive': an innovative approach to participation, digital citizenship and open learning on-line. In: Learning with MOOCs II, 2-3 October 2015, New York, USA.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64225/>

Available in LSE Research Online: October 2015

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Harnessing the power of the ‘Massive’ – An innovative approach to participation, digital citizenship and open learning on-line.

Presented at the Learning with MOOCS II Conference, Columbia University, New York, October 2-3 2015

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Abstract

In January 2015, the London School of Economics and Political Science (UK) launched an innovative civic engagement project, which aimed to crowd source the United Kingdom Constitution. One of the key intentions of the project was to leverage and magnify the power of the community and the ‘massive’ in order to empower participants to engage in debate, identify solutions and come to a common agreement about the need for and the content of a UK Constitution. Involving over 1500 participants and generating tens of thousands of on-line interactions that increased as opposed to decreased over the 14 week duration of the ‘course’, Crowd Sourcing the UK Constitution challenged some of the dominant paradigms of Massive Open On-line Learning. We will present the findings arising from a critical evaluation of the project and pose a number of questions that emerged from both our engagement with the project and from the participants themselves centred on enhancing the effectiveness of a pedagogical design to harness the power of the massive, a large community of engaged participants working together in order to solve a problem, effect change or develop capacity.

In January 2015, the London School of Economics and Political Science (UK) launched an innovative civic engagement project, which aimed to crowd source the United Kingdom Constitution. One of the key intentions of the project was to leverage and magnify the power of the community and the ‘massive’ in order to empower participants to engage in debate, identify solutions and come to a common agreement about the need for and the content of a UK Constitution. Involving over 1500 participants and generating tens of thousands of online interactions that increased as opposed to decreased over the 14 week duration of the ‘course’, Crowdsourcing the UK Constitution challenged some of the dominant paradigms of Massive Open Online Learning. By creating a pedagogical model that integrated discontinuous engagement, informal learner-centred learning and drew on the principles of participatory democracy and digital citizenship to facilitate learning through doing, we aimed to empower participants to make and participate in change as part of a ‘massive’ crowd.

The innovative model of engagement and participatory online learning challenged the structured assumptions of many MOOC pedagogies and designs. The approach was built on the potential that exists in leveraging and magnifying the power of the community and the ‘massive’ through social media, in order to empower citizens to engage in debate and apply their learning in order to identify solutions to what may be intractable, impossible or controversial problems or challenges. The design model drew on the application of a number of conceptual frameworks such as peer learning (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007, 2010), incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), digital pedagogies (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Siemens, 2005), crowd learning and ideation (Wexler, 2011) to a higher education informed online environment. It also integrated aspects of participatory practices such as hacktivism, making and digital citizenship which allowed the project to explore the notion of learning as incidental, tacit and exploratory. There were no readings, there was no ‘course’, no lectures, no explicit theories, just a series of challenges, a semi-gamified process of engagement and a framework to create, motivate and empower the community to make something based on what they knew and had learnt. There was no teacher or lecturer. There was no specific sequence of learning or activity, although because the ‘course’ was delivered through the London School of Economics there were very real expectations by participants of learning at a higher level.

The project was informed by the assumption that learning can occur through a variety of informal and formal methods, supported by both peer and academic engagement, but not privileged by either, effectively flipping the role of the academic and academy (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). Many of the practices of civic engagement, societal capacity development, information search, participation, action and social change that occurred within the platform and on other social media facilitated the creation of publicly visible ‘educational situations’ within an emerging and often agile democratic dialogue (Andersson & Olson, 2014; Linders, 2012). This

occurred at non-sequential points within the project, as new users entered, old users bounced in and out and the community embraced and rejected opinion and thought leaders that arose from within the community itself.

Some key findings

Our intention was to encourage participants to bring to the project (and not be bound or prejudiced by) a wide variety of schema, learning trajectories and experiences. Participants were involved in developing and structuring their own learning (or lack thereof). They chose when to engage and when to withdraw, and most interestingly, when to return. Participation was not a linear process within the platform. Participants chose to 'dip in and out' of the project at a variety of different stages, with some returning for voting or for refining to defend or promote their ideas and other orphaning their own ideas to engage with others. The project experienced a significant boost in participation when voting was introduced as a priority task in the final weeks. These humps of participation run counter to the statistical experiences of most MOOCs that have a large drop off between registration and commencement of the course, then a progressive decline in engagement as each week progresses (Kizilcec, Piech, & Schneider, 2013; Ross, Sinclair, Knox, Bayne, & Macleod, 2014). This project experienced the exact opposite with numbers progressively increasing over the course of the platform being open, including a huge bump in the last two weeks (over 30% of participants joined the project in this time). There was no penalty for joining late, although there was a task attached (the sheer volume of contributions and the breadth of the debates) which for some was simply too big (around 15% dropped out for this reason). The discontinuity allowed participants the opportunity to enter assuming that the answers or solutions had not already been found and if they had been already offered, they were presented with an opportunity to challenge, support or edit them.

Participants entered the project with clear expectations of learning. We found that approximately 80% of participants stated that they had 'gained new knowledge' and 70% stated that they 'gained new skills'. What was most interesting in the context of leveraging the massive was that 88% of participants were influenced by community discussions and 50% of participants stated that working with others directly contributed towards their learning experience. Whilst many of these figures support the efficacy of collaborative online learning, it was interesting to note that 50% of participants changed their mind about civic engagement through the participation in the community.

Key questions for discussion

What are the educational affordances that arise from empowering a community to engage in social change or betterment? Can an informed digital citizenry be developed from the interaction of individuals and communities coming together from a variety of backgrounds, skill levels, knowledge bases and expertise? Does this new form of digital civic engagement create an environment where participation is not simply encouraged but facilitated and where the crowd becomes the instrument by which society can be improved through the actions and the learning being undertaken by individuals? How do we enhance the effectiveness of the pedagogical design to harness the power of the massive, a large community of engaged participants working together in order to solve a problem, effect change or develop capacity?

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