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Understanding lurkers in online learning communities

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In an open online learning community there are different types of learners. Hill (2013) identified four:

- Lurkers: Enroll, just observe/sample a few items at most.
- Drop-Ins: Become partially/fully active participants for a select topic within the course, do not attempt to complete the entire course.
- Passive Participants: View course as content to consume, expect to be taught.
- Active Participants: Fully participate.

Though other learner types are known, lurkers are more of a mystery in the literature since they are generally invisible in contrast to other learner types. We propose the following research questions:

Why do people lurk in online communities? Is it a lack of confidence, competence or something else? Is there one main reason for lurking, or a variety of different reasons? What shifts a lurker into becoming an active member? Our participation in open online courses over recent years has prompted each of us to think about these issues. Until recently there had not been much research into looking at the different motivations of these silent participants – who can often form the majority of members of such communities (Sun 2014) and our research aims to address that gap by adding to the positive literature about lurkers.

This presentation summarises the results of our ongoing research about lurker motivations in one open online course, where Twitter was one of the main platforms for learner participation (#CLMooc). Much of the literature about lurkers focuses on what they do not do. In our research we focus instead on what they actually do and argue that, contrary to popular belief, lurking can be a positive action that empowers independent learners. We begin by sharing our social network analysis (SNA) of #CLMooc tweets and explain how we used this to identify and contact potential lurkers. We then discuss the findings from our interviews with our lurkers explaining how we use these to refine models in the current literature.

Some lurkers believe that they benefit as much from lurking as they would do by actively participating (Sun, 2014). Although this might conflict with social constructivist principles, there is evidence from research into peer review (e.g. David Nicol's REAP and PEER projects) that suggests learners can learn more from seeing how their peers would approach questions than from answering questions themselves, and we will ask whether online lurking has the same positive effect and is actually vicarious learning.

We conclude our presentation by suggesting that online lurking be understood not as freeloading, but as a cognitive apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger 1991), and asking how lurkers can make the transition to become active members of a community. We consider possible strategies for motivating participation from quieter members and invite an audience discussion about strategies for encouraging active learning.

References:

Hill, P. (2013). Emerging Student Patterns in MOOCs: A Graphical View. Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive and Computational Perspectives)

REAP (Re-engineering Assessment Practices in Higher Education) project: <http://www.reap.ac.uk/Home.aspx>

Sun, N. et al (2014) Understanding lurkers in online communities: A literature review. Computers in Human Behaviour 38