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Taking on Different Roles: How Educators Position Themselves in MOOCs

Rebecca Ferguson and Denise Whitelock

IET, The Open University, Walton Hall, MK7 6AA, UK
{firstname.lastname}@open.ac.uk

Abstract. Educators in massive open online courses (MOOCs) face the challenge of interacting with tens of thousands of students, many of whom are new to online learning. This study investigates the different ways in which lead educators position themselves within MOOCs, and the various roles that they adopt in their messages to learners. Email messages from educators were collected from six courses on FutureLearn, a UK-based MOOC platform that had 26 university partners at the time. Educator stance in these emails was coded thematically, sentence by sentence. The resulting typology draws attention to the different ways in which educators align themselves in these settings, including outlining the trajectory of the course, acting as both host and instructor, sometimes as fellow learner, and often as an emotionally engaged enthusiast. This typology can be used to explore relationships between educator stance and variables such as learner engagement, learner test results and learner retention.

MOOCs were derived from connectivist theory, which emphasises the role of social context within learning [1]. The originators of connectivist MOOCs emphasised that ‘you are teaching while you are learning’ [2]. However, most MOOCs are not connectivist, so what is the educators’ role when they are talking to and guiding thousands in an unfamiliar setting? ‘Qualitatively different approaches to teaching are associated with qualitatively different approaches to learning’ [3], so we would expect to see some changes in these new environments.

Goffman was clear about the role of presentation of self in any interaction: ‘Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him’ [4, p1].

We conducted a preliminary study to investigate educator stance in six MOOCs presented on the FutureLearn platform and to understand how their communications can encourage participation and promote confidence. We took ‘stance’ to mean the alignment of the educator to learners/educators/content, signaled by linguistic cues or by changes to the frame of reference.

Our focus was on ‘lead educators’, the university-based individuals who signed off emails associated with the course. These are the educators most likely to be encountered by learners on FutureLearn, because these emails are sent weekly, or more frequently, to everybody registered on the course.

The study required a subtle yet rich instrument to encompass the lead educators’ alignment to a very large group of students. Previous categorisation systems, which

included those used for the study of group interaction sessions [5], tutor comments [6] and online tutor assistance [7] proved to have limitations in this context. We therefore coded the emails thematically, sentence by sentence, resulting in the category system outlined here, which we then used to consider educator stance in different MOOCs.

- Academic grouping: member of a grouping within the university
- Assessor: assessing student work
- Course team member
- Emotionally engaged
- Evaluator: evaluating the course
- Explainer: justifying why the course is structured as it is
- Group: member of the group of learners on this course
- Host, or part of a team of hosts
- Instructor: providing instructions and / or options
- Lead educator, on this course
- Outliner: outlining what is happening on the course
- Recommender: recommending resources, including course materials and URLs
- Social media user
- University member

This typology draws attention to the different ways in which educators align themselves in these settings, including outlining the trajectory of the course, acting as both host and instructor, sometimes as fellow learner, and often as an emotionally engaged enthusiast. The typology also identifies variation in educator stance between courses. Some were concerned with building a sense of community and obviously considered themselves to be part of that community, while others remained more aloof.

This preliminary research offers a new lens with which to explore teaching and learning activity within MOOCs.

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