

Blogs and Forums as Communication and Learning Tools in a MOOC

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of research carried out into the use of blogs and forums as communication and learning tools in Connectivism and Connective Knowledge (CCK08), a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) that was run between September and December 2008. The course was unique in many ways: it included a small credit-bearing course within a network; it was completely open and very large, and it included a unique aggregated network of blogs, which was one of the reasons why an unusually large number of online interactions took place in blogs rather than just in forums. The research used a survey and email interviews to explore a number of themes identified in the postings in the course which included: the importance of conceptual connections, personal connections, personal autonomy, media affordances and approaches to learning. The research identified three distinct clusters of respondents, with the following preferred modes of interaction: (1) blogging, (2) using the forums, (3) using both blogging and forums. A number of other modes of interaction were also used by the respondents. Many respondents used both blogs and forums for at least some of the time in the course.

To a large extent, blogging and forum use correlated with specific individual learning styles and media affordances: the use of blogs was associated with the ability to create personal space for personal learning, quiet reflection and developing personal relationships with bloggers and others. The use of forums was associated with fast paced challenging interaction, relationships based on sharing of ideas, more open discussion and more links to the discussed themes and bigger picture. However, the research also identified three dimensions (home > < bazaar, long-loop> < short-loop, and engagement> <reflection) within which the new media provided different and new opportunities for participating in learning networks. Respondents used these to explore and develop their own affordances for learning in varied and even surprising and novel ways, sometimes using blogs or forums for particular purposes, but sometimes using them almost interchangeably. The research points to a maturing of media users in online learning. These users are developing their own personal learning networks, and using the new media in innovative and nuanced ways.

Keywords

Blogs, forums, Web 2.0 tools, media affordances, learner autonomy, learning style, conceptual connections, personal connections, connectivism, CCK08, MOOC.

Introduction

The goal of this study was to explore participants' preference for blogs versus discussion forums in CCK08, run by the University of Manitoba and led by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. A mixed methods research

approach was used (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), including a Survey Monkey questionnaire and email interviews, followed by further email ‘conversations’.

The MOOC was a twelve week credit-bearing course for 24 learners, within an open-access network, including over 2200 registered participants, of whom about 150 remained active. Learners from around the world participated in the MOOC. Rather than serving in the role of ‘primary sensemaker’, the instructors designed the course to encourage learners to develop personal learning networks in which they would use tools of their choice. With more than 2000 participants, that was a challenge. Early in the course, learners frequently expressed frustration and confusion. The Moodle forums were swamped with messages in the early weeks, with over 1000 posts in the Introductions forum from 560 participants. As the course progressed, learners began to form networks to make sense of the subject matter. The instructors sent out a daily newsletter capturing the ongoing conversations. They held live weekly discussion sessions and brought in guest speakers. A Moodle discussion site was set up, in which the instructors gave the learners as much choice and freedom as possible. Some learners participated only in the forums, others participated only in their personal blogs and some learners used blogs and forums for communicating in the course. Learners who found the forums daunting and overwhelming were encouraged by one of the course instructors to leave the forums and to use blogs to interact with others. Some learners set up a SecondLife component, Facebook sites and wikis; some translated the course syllabus into different languages and others created their own mailing lists and scheduled regular online meeting times.

The authors of this paper were also learners in the CCK08 course. We decided to explore the following questions: i) What were the reasons for choosing between blogs and forums as communication and learning tools in the CCK08 course? ii) What factors affect the choice of blogs versus forums as communication and learning tools?

Blogs and forums

A blog can be defined as a ‘personalized webpage, kept by the author in reverse chronological diary form’ (Du & Wagner, 2005, p.2). Blogs can give students a social presence (Anderson, 2005), and can be a medium for connection, self expression, self indulgence, and rich and critical distribution of information (Macduff, 2009), and for recording, revisiting and reflecting upon experiences (Xie & Sharma, 2005). Students using blogs generally work autonomously and independently (Wheeler, 2009), beyond the reach of any recognised authority, so it is debatable to what extent educational institutions can, or should attempt to ‘manage’ such learning technology. More pertinently for this research, and those bloggers who were ‘refugees from the forums’ (see below), Alm in her article on blogs as protected spaces (2009, p.20), points out that “the blogger leads the conversation ... [because] the reader is unable to change the course of the conversation ...[they] only have ‘asymmetrical communication rights’, [i.e.] the option of reacting, by choosing to comment or not to comment”. Blogging is nevertheless a social activity, but one which provides “as Gumbrecht (2004) suggests, a ‘safety net’ or a ‘buffer ... from immediate social interaction’ ” (Alm 2009, p.20). Alm continues (p.22) that the “perceived protection in blogs was contrasted with the classroom in which students encounter ‘stage fright’, the fear of looking ‘like an idiot’ ... and the ‘instant reactions of others’ ”.

Forums have been identified as an essential ingredient of an effective online course, providing the bulk of asynchronous communication and instructional interaction. They are thought to enhance networking opportunities and increase opportunities for consultation and collaboration with other professionals (Anderson & Kanuka, 1997). Significant in the success of online forums is the role of the instructor or moderator (Berge, 2006; Anderson & Kanuka, 1997). Salmon (2004) bases online learning and interaction on discussion forums. Within this widely established approach the role of the instructor or moderator is to ‘weave’, ‘thread’ and ‘respond’... regularly, posting new material, encouraging activities and discussions [so that] students respond with enthusiasm and regular participation.’(Harasim, et al., 1995, p.43).

Although forums provide structure and an overall ‘narrative’, considerable openness and flexibility can be incorporated to allow for emerging and new themes, and even for changes in direction. Nevertheless, participation and interaction in forums is always based on establishing and maintaining comfort (in the technologies), and a supportive ‘space’ within which people can try out and develop new skills, formulate tentative ideas, and become part of a community of inquiry. Trust is all too easily broken, and once broken, difficult to repair: what Barnett (2007) calls the ‘fragility of the will to learn’. If open networks are about building *learning* networks /communities, the fragility of the will to learn must inform network design and practice. The learners most affected are those novices/lurkers who are learning to learn, and to become part of a learning community.

Methodology

The Moodle forums and participants’ blogs were searched for statements about the use of blogs and forums for interaction and connectivity and a list of statements was compiled. Concept mapping (CMap) was used to identify statements, grouped under four themes: personal connections (with each other on a personal level), conceptual connections (with the ideas and concepts introduced in the course), technology (how participants made use of a variety of web 2.0 technologies, but principally blogs and discussion forums) and learning (the approaches that participants took to managing their learning). These themes arose from the course content and learning experiences. The forums and blogs were searched for email addresses and levels of activity. Participants who set up a forum profile or a blog but did not engage any further were excluded from the survey.

An online questionnaire was created using Survey Monkey. The survey consisted of 67 statements with 33 on blogging, 33 on forums, and one on learning style. The respondents rated the statements on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The survey was emailed to 167 bloggers and 134 forum users including the two course instructors (N=301).

Analysis of the survey results revealed that the most significant differences between bloggers and forum users lay in their perceptions of conceptual connectivity, personal connectivity, personal autonomy, identity and approaches to learning. These themes were therefore used as a basis for the email interview questions, which were sent to the 58 CCK08 participants (including the two instructors) who had agreed to be interviewed by email.

Findings and discussion

The survey was responded to by 90 participants; a response rate of 29.9% (n=301). Twenty-two of the 58 participants who agreed to an email interview responded to the email questions; a response rate of 37.9%. Analysis of these results showed that many people did have strong preferences and some of these had exclusive preferences when choosing to communicate in blogs or forums.

Changes, shifts and strategies

In CCK08, participants were given a uniquely wide range of choices, and invited to engage with the ‘open’ course in their own way. Participants engaged with the choices, and with the emerging and changing course and interactions in interesting ways and most engaged in some way with both blogs and forums: 82% posted to a blog, 86% ran their own blogs, 75% posted to other people’s blogs and 84% posted to forums. Furthermore, it was not possible to distinguish stable, persistent groups of ‘bloggers’ and ‘forum users’, because their choices and strategies were subject to considerable, and variable pressures from some of the instructors and learners. Two unique events in CCK08 affected participant choices. 1) In the first few weeks one participant dominated much of the discussion, characterised by many of the respondents as ‘forceful intellectual debate’ or just ‘rudeness’, and 2) near the end of the course, one of the instructors changed the settings on the email updates, so that everyone got all the updates, whether they liked it or not, and they had to actively find and change the

settings to avoid getting inundated with messages. Both of these events raised a considerable amount of ‘heat’ in the forums.

I would like to add that the two barriers to participation on the forums IMHO were X’s appalling behaviour and XX’s patronising and ‘teachery’ posts and actions (who knows how many timid people or those whose first language is not English we lost). (NCP: non-credit participant)

However, we could distinguish groups on the basis of ‘preferred modes of interaction’ for blogs: 40.9%; forums: 30.7%; both blogs and forums: 23.9%; and for other media: 4.5%. The actual preferences for modes of interaction (blogs, forums, or both) were based not only on prior personal preferences, but also on substantial shifts within the context of the MOOC, (see the two unique events referred to above).

Of the 90 respondents, more than half (51) ceased participating in forums for some or all of the time, and gave the following reasons for this:

- 27.4%: Structural and procedural reasons (including lack of forum facilitation, and unwieldy forums)
- 64.6%: Unacceptable behaviour (including forceful intellectual debates, feeling of forced participation, and rude behaviour)
- 8%: The expertise divide, between novices and participants familiar with the concepts and technologies.

Some of the respondents shifted back and forth between blogs and forums, or shifted between using just one of these media, to using both at the same time. Within this dynamic movement, back and forward, fifty two respondents moved into blogs, and their reasons for specifically moving into blogs, rather than exploring other options, or just opting out completely, were as follows:

- 15.3%: Structural reasons (including lack of forum facilitation)
- 46.2%: Unacceptable behaviour (including forceful intellectual debates, rudeness and feeling of forced participation)
- 36.4%: The advantages of blogs (including topics only available in blogs, own space and pace, ease of use, and attempts to find a better alternative), and
- 1.9%: Course requirements.

Openness and Autonomy

The course was designed to encourage learners to develop personal networks for learning, with an emphasis on openness and autonomy. The fact that more than half the respondents were able to shift out of forums and into blogs endorses this design in principle. However, the vast majority of them did not shift out of forums because they chose to exercise their autonomy, or take advantage of the diversity of media, but because they found the forums didn’t work for them. This is an issue since about one third (31%) of the respondents said that they prefer to work in forums, as illustrated by comments from these respondents:

Discussion in the forum was stimulating and led in many cases to great interactions that hardly seemed possible in a blog-and-comment format. (NCP)

Moodle brought another space of interaction and dialogue, which allowed for a more extent of audience than blogs. (NCP)

In effect, the potential for openness, diversity and autonomy was reduced (Mackness et al., 2009). None of these negative factors are unusual in online learning, but the strength and extent of the reaction to them does raise serious issues.

Aggregated network of blogs

The proportion of respondents in CCK08 who used blogs primarily or exclusively was unusually high for an online course, particularly one that emphasised openness and learner autonomy. In CCK08 the instructors encouraged, created and supported what was in effect an aggregated network of blogs. This in turn created new affordances within online learning for networked personal learning, which many people responded to with enthusiasm. These ‘affordances’ are capacities for effective interaction and learning. They are not wholly determined by the technologies, but also by the interaction of particular learners with media opportunities within specific contexts.

The data shows that some of the problems of scale in a MOOC (the expertise divide, excessive pace, and languages barriers) were associated with a shift into blogs as the primary mode of interaction. The data also shows that many of the bloggers were indeed ‘refugees from the forums’, and they may or may not have become enthusiastic ‘networked personal learners’ once they had left the forums.

Motivation

When survey respondents were asked why they participated in blogs, the most important reasons, in rank order, were: 1) space to develop my own ideas, 2) ownership, 3) self-expression, 4) familiarity with using blogs, 5) an attractive layout to express ideas, 6) personal learning, 7) quiet slow reflection, 8) personal relationships, 9) own pace, 10) establishing a presence, 11) thoughtful long-term relationships, and 12) personal voice. There were interesting comments on this part of the survey, such as:

Engaging online does not depend on the technology but on the people interacting. (NCP)

The blogging was a massive spin-off bonus for all concerned. With the use of tagging and RSS, it becomes apparent how a controllable useful personal learning network could be fostered. (NCP)

When survey respondents were asked why they participated in forums, the most important reasons, in rank order, were: 1) familiarity with forums, 2) faster pace, 3) more lively debates, 4) tougher challenges, 5) big picture links, 6) less effort, 7) easier to find and follow, 8) more people to interact with, 9) more open discussions, 10) relationships based on ideas, 11) more accessible, 12) more sense of being in a group.

Strategy and Affordances

These general results from the survey confirm the relevance of media affordances, conceptual connections, personal connections, personal learning, learner autonomy, and learning style as a basis for many of the choices that participants made between the use of blogs and/or forums. These results also confirm that many of the participants saw the affordances of blogs and forums quite differently. Judging from comments in the survey as well as the email interviews, many respondents used the two media for quite different purposes. Blogs were seen as more useful for personal relationships, forums for conceptual relationships; blogs were more useful for quiet, slower reflective learning, and forums for more engaged learning.

Blogging was a comfortable, more friendly environment in which to work. (NCP)

Sharp exchanges and forthright views [in the forums] were also very valuable in making one think. (NCP)

I think both reflections and discussion in blogs and Moodle forums have their places. I tend to gravitate toward blog. (NCP)

I found the Moodle got you a diverse balance of feedback. (NCP)

Whilst this is not surprising, perhaps what is noteworthy is that the agreement rankings were far stronger for blogs than for forums, i.e. the distinctions were more pronounced for blogs than for forums.

Dimensions of learning in blogs and forums

The initial survey showed that in general terms, respondents predominantly used three modes of interaction: blogs, forums, or both, and developed and consolidated the mode of interaction that best suited them in the context of the MOOC. However, the comments in the survey and in the email interviews showed that the respondents' actual practice was far more nuanced, strategic, dynamic and contextual than making a straightforward choice between blogs and forums. Almost a quarter of the survey respondents (23.9%) used both blogs and forums to some extent, and there is evidence that respondents adapted their strategies quite often, across at least three dimensions that we can clearly identify: 1) home > < bazaar; 2) long-loop > < short-loop; and 3) engagement > < reflection. Each of these dimensions is a continuous spectrum across blogging and forum interaction, and our research shows that variations can occur on all three dimensions at the same time.

1) Home > < Bazaar

The home > < bazaar is the dimension of presence, identity, autonomy and having a home base, such as is provided in either the blogs or a in a communal space such as the forums. This dimension ranges from highly 'personal thoughts', i.e. a set of thoughts-in-progress, to myself; to 'emailed thoughts' sent to known others; to 'blogged thoughts' available to known/unknown others, to contributing to 'a forum's thoughts' where personal thoughts start to merge into the 'thoughts of the forum'; to contributing to 'virtual forum's thoughts' (e.g. SecondLife), which can cycle through the whole spectrum again, from the (virtual) home to the (virtual) bazaar. Within the home > < bazaar dimension we can also trace different preferences: for 'connecting with people' or 'connecting with ideas' which, in the questionnaire results, were generally associated with blogs (people) and forums (ideas) respectively.

One of the course instructors described the 'home dimension' very clearly:

I'm drawn to blogging. I can participate on my terms and in my context. I find blogs more valuable than forums due to the individual identity of blogs (as well as personal autonomy). The additional benefit of creating my own space for idea formation is the ability to search resources. I find I constantly search my blogs, delicious feeds, etc. Autonomy in participation is like autonomy in learning – i.e. personalization.

Interestingly, the emphasis here is on 'relationships between ideas' in blogs, whereas in the questionnaire results the majority associated conceptual relationships primarily with forums, demonstrating that different learners can use different media to pursue the same affordances.

I preferred to interact in the Moodle forum, rather than creating my own blog. I found that through the running dialogue, questions and ideas were explored and investigated in diverse ways by a range of people and through this process my understanding grew in diverse ways too. (NCP)

Also of note was that some respondents saw individual blogs as 'personal aggregators'.

For me a blog is a personal learning environment (PLE) that allows archiving knowledge for future reference or reuse. I do not feel this is the case with Moodle. (NCP)

This resonates with the 'aggregated-blog-network' structure set up in the MOOC. Several respondents also indicated that these affordances were dependent on context and prior experience, e.g.

I was mostly interested in understanding connectivism better myself rather than meeting new people online. Making new connections and strengthening existing online relationships was a secondary effect, but a natural consequence of posting on my blog. (NCP)

I was more interested in the theoretical conceptual framework. That's why I concentrated on the readings and recording. (NCP)

Another respondent states the issue more broadly, linking personalisation to motivation:

I think learner engagement rises directly from a sense of relevance and personal ownership over what is being studied ... [e.g.] establishing spaces and flexibility, whereby learners can dictate what they are studying, and the means by which they do so. (NCP)

The notion of home > < bazaar, primarily in blogs, comes across quite strongly in these examples.

2) *Long-loop* > < *Short-loop*

The long-loop > < short-loop dimension concerns pace, crafted responses and type of sequence. At the one end of the spectrum are blogs, where responses are carefully thought through and often crafted until they are just right. The bloggers tend to present an internally coherent set of postings in a single place, in a sequence, and often along a single train of thought for some time, in 'long loops'. At the other end of the spectrum are fast-moving forums, where postings and responses are rapid, often shorter, more recursive and generally multi-track, in much shorter loops. However, these affordances do not always align neatly with 'short = forums' and 'long = blogs'. The latest interactive mode, Twitter, is very much a hybrid of both. It is micro-looping, by definition, but it shares characteristics with blogs (a series of sequential, individual postings). It links to a wide range of other media: to blogs, Facebook, or updates to live events like the Elluminate conferences or UStream webcasts.

The distinction between long and short loops has little, if anything, to do with the length of individual posts; it is rather about variance in the turn-around time between posts. So although forums were described as sharp exchanges and forthright views [which] 'were also very valuable in making one think' (NCP), they were also said to be: 'lots of postings very quickly ... many were very long and academically challenging reading' (NCP), drawing attention to other variables, such as the volume and the complexity of the interaction. This distinction might also be described as busy > < quiet interaction.

Long loops provide affordances for people who want to respond to all comments: 'I liked the self-paced discussion of ideas on my blog, and my ability to respond to each and every comment posted about my blog post' (NCP), and to maintain individual 'ownership', whereas short loops (generally in forums) provide affordances for people who want to learn predominantly by engagement rather than by reflection, and who find it useful, interesting and stimulating to engage in forums (the bazaars) in which strictly individualised knowledge starts to morph or merge into the knowledge and ideas of the forums (or networks) themselves. One email respondent reflected this in a critique of blogs:

My concern with blogs is that the blogger may become too focused on his/her own ideas to explore or investigate the ideas and thoughts of others, or perhaps go off on their own tangent without reflecting fully on the gaps or weak links in their thinking. (NCP)

The short loops of the bazaar are inevitably multi-track, multi-person and multi-perspective, which are strong affordances for some, but disaffordances for others. Some blog postings were transferred to, and then responded to, in forums, and vice versa, which introduces another mode, of 'transferred affordances'. Lack of experience and expertise, or being a speaker of another language led some learners to avoid both long-loop media like blogs (because of lack of fluency in English) and short-loop media like forums (because of the pace). Twitter might be a good alternative.

3) *Engagement* > < *Reflection*

Surprisingly, respondents used both blogs and forums for engagement. For instance, one respondent's strategy was to 'engage first, theorise later':

If I have an experience, my first thing is to write the experience down [in blogs] ... I am a writing kind of person ... forums at a later stage - once my mind has some kind of structure ... For me this way of learning works well. It is like trying out an application or some new gadget... you do it, experience it... and all of a sudden you get ideas on how it could be used in a learning setting or something else. From that moment on another analysis is made. (NCP)

On the other hand, another respondent approached it in quite the opposite way:

Blogs are probably more self-reflective and meditative, but discussion in the forums was stimulating and led in many cases to great interactions that hardly seemed possible in a blog-and-comment form. (NCP).

There is another aspect to it, namely the way different people build up their own knowledge base and consolidate their learning resources. For some, access to the 'resource' of the forums, with a search facility, was adequate. Presumably some people stored copies of forum postings, and there was also some 'transcription' of material from forums to blogs, and blogs to forums. So a 'reflective' post in a blog could end up in the faster paced engagement of the forums, and vice versa.

For others the blogs functioned not only as a process of reflection, but also as a place to build resources for (later) reflection, a learning /knowledge management function:

For me writing on either Moodle or my blog is a similar experience in terms of expression. What does make a difference is that [in my blog] I can keep track of my personal learning also in the years to come. (NCP)

For some, blogs provided unique affordances for engaging with the bigger picture, and for defining their own learning context, within which they were 'situating' connectivism. This is more than just creating a PLE for managing resources, it is defining and managing your own personal learning context, within which you engage with the 'meaning' of the course:

[Blogs are]... a more self directed space, no need to stay with the play, but own time and space for developing ideas, and particularly ideas that may have intersected with those of connectivism rather than nothing but connectivism. (NCP)

Blogs also provided another strategic affordance, for *entering into* engagement in the forums:

The blogs could lead to off-target conversations without the hub so the wanderings were really useful for lurking and deciding whether to show your knowledge and to see if some of the same themes proved you were not an outsider on the wrong track. (NCP)

The flipside of these strategic issues is the issue of audience – the range of people you engage with, rather than the engagement itself. Contributing to the forums ensures a greater number of readers of your posts.

The good thing about Moodle forums is that you have a captive audience. In a blog you have to build one. (NCP)

In the forum I could go back each day and find responses and more questions. (NCP)

The blogs required aggregating and then going to a particular isolated blog to make a comment that might or might not relate to some other blog- very diffuse experience. (NCP)

Conclusion

The research explores how the use of blogs and aggregated blogs, an open choice of media (including discussion forums), and encouragement for learners to exercise autonomy in creating their own learning networks was experienced by participants in a MOOC. In CCK08 forums and blogs provided established affordances, of rapid public interaction, and quieter, personal ('protected') reflection, respectively. However, they also provided innovative, different affordances. The forums were structured largely by the learners, with minimal or no 'facilitation'. In effect they were not just online proxy tutorials, but rather tutor-less tutorials (as one participant said, "the kids had taken over the classroom"). The networks of blogs on the other hand, were aggregated on a daily basis by the instructors, in the course diary, known in CCK08 as 'The Daily'. This inverts the 'received wisdom' of online learning, as the expected facilitation of the forums was largely absent, and the expected self-networking of the blog community was substantially 'facilitated', particularly as a 'mention' in 'The Daily' was regarded as 'prestigious' by at least some of the participants. Faced with these largely implicit innovations, and the two unique events (one a lack of intervention, the other an unwelcome intervention, referred to in the findings), learners were very strategic in their actual use of blogs and forums. Given the choices, the majority of the respondents shifted out of forums, for largely negative reasons. The majority of them shifted into blogs, partly as 'refugees' and partly because of the positive affordances in blogs. However, nearly all participants contributed to, and commented to both blogs and forums, at one time or another. When asked about their preferred mode of interaction, however, participants did settle out into distinct groups: bloggers, forum users, and a substantial third group who used both media.

We also distinguished three dimensions of use, which resonate with several of the 'normal' affordances of blogs and forums, but which for many of the participants cut across particular media, or were even used oppositely to what the norm would predict. The affordances of these dimensions: home > < bazaar, short-loop > < long-loop, and engagement > < reflection are, in this context, much more independent of particular media than one might previously have expected.

Our findings point to a maturing of e-learning users, who are now creating both personal learning networks and affordances, rather than just being consumers or even 'content creators'. There is also an emerging and growing practice across the learners, once they realise the potential of the new affordances, to develop those affordances in innovative and nuanced ways, with little regard to the 'capabilities' required or limitations of the particular media. This also points to a maturing of social networking, as a network of affordances, rather than an aggregation of discrete and particular media. An interesting question for further research is whether this trend has been taken to quite a new level with the addition to the mix of Twitter in personal learning networks, and how this impacts on learning within an online course, social or learning networks.

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