



“Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?”: Conceptualizing Student and Teacher Roles in the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC

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Abstract

This project investigates expressed student and instructor roles within the second iteration of the “Writing II: Rhetorical Composing” MOOC. We utilize cluster criticism and curricular analysis to explore the ways in which MOOC participants slide along a spectrum of roles between student and expert. Our analysis of two primary sites, the course discussion boards and peer review platform (the Writers Exchange), complicates existing MOOC literature, which configures students as either passive recipients of knowledge or active agents who generate knowledge in these massive open online environments. Instead of conforming to the roles of either passive learner or expert teacher, participants in “Rhetorical Composing” shift between these roles frequently and depend upon role switching to both consume and produce knowledge in the MOOC environment. Our findings suggest that we should move beyond traditional, binary ways of understanding performed roles of student and instructor so that we can better understand how learning takes place in these online writing environments.

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In the fall of 2014, a team of five professors and three PhD students from The Ohio State University taught the second iteration of a massive open online course (MOOC) called “Writing II: Rhetorical Composing.”¹ Within two weeks of the course’s opening, participants began contributing to what would become the most viewed discussion board thread of the course: “Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?” This thread forced us to identify what “Rhetorical Composing” does as a MOOC and how it sets out to teach students about writing. After the conclusion of the course, we began to re-explore and document instances in which students and instructors expressed concerns or ideas about where they fit into the structure of the course – an observation of *who learns what from whom* in “Rhetorical Composing.” What we found surprised us. The literature that exists on MOOCs did not adequately explain what was taking place in the “Rhetorical Composing” discussion boards. What has been written on MOOCs suggested that all massive open online courses can be placed in one of two categories: those that allow for students to learn from each

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¹ “Writing II: Rhetorical Composing,” by its very name, suggested it was the second in a sequence of writing courses; however, it had no prerequisite for joining aside from access to a computer, stable internet access, and agreement to terms of use laid out by Coursera, its host MOOC site. “Writing II” in the course’s title did not establish the course’s relation to other writing courses hosted through Coursera per se, but rather situated it alongside similar second-year writing courses at Ohio State. We were both employed as graduate research assistants for this iteration of “Rhetorical Composing,” and recognized early on the unique challenges for teaching a massive open online *writing* course.

other (called cMOOCs) and those that are structured (and marketed) as courses where students learn from one or a few select distinguished, expert professors (called xMOOCs).² Current research on MOOCs suggests that students and teachers occupy different roles in online environments; however, our research suggests that the two serve overlapping pedagogical functions. We argue for greater attention to how students and teachers perform and shift roles on an expert-learner spectrum rather than occupy static binary roles.

The distinctions between xMOOCs and cMOOCs do not provide an adequate explanation for our own findings and understanding of “Rhetorical Composing” as we experienced it in the fall of 2014—especially in terms of the shifting roles that participants and instructors took on. Studying two key components of the course, the online discussion boards and the Writer’s Exchange peer review platform, this article illustrates how teachers and participants in “Rhetorical Composing” collaborate and teach each other, blurring the lines between static student and teacher roles in the course. We employ cluster criticism and curricular analysis to examine and understand discourse about student and instructor roles. Our findings highlight the importance of role switching in the massive open online writing course and draw attention to the need for further research that attends to student and instructor role switching in online learning environments.

1. Background

MOOCs, by definition, are courses that are offered online and are freely accessible to anyone with an internet connection. The free and accessible nature of MOOCs has led scholars and commentators to associate these courses with the democratization of higher education (Lewin, 2012; Skiba, 2012; Dillahunt, Wang, and Teasley, 2014) as well as the undermining of models that view higher education as a business (Mazoue, 2013). Public excitement surrounding MOOCs is best exemplified by Laura Pappano’s famous proclamation of 2012 as “The Year of the MOOC.” Courses taught by the world’s most eminent instructors can be accessed without the need for enrollment in a university, travel to campuses, application for international study visas, or (usually) a fee.³ As a result, many students, often numbering in the tens (and occasionally hundreds) of thousands, flock to each course offering. But as the excitement surrounding MOOCs has settled, focus has shifted to the growing number of scholars who point to the ways in which the lofty goals of the MOOC are both unattainable and problematic (Emanuel, 2013; White, 2014). Composition scholars have also been cautious in lauding the MOOC for all its proclaimed potential, citing completion rates (Roth, 2013; Jordan, 2013) and poor software design (Gibbs, 2014), potential effects on face-to-face education (Rice, 2013), and abundant student grading (Krause, 2013) as evidence of the need for the field to take MOOCs seriously. Jeff Rice (2014) has also suggested that hesitation to embrace the MOOC in the field has been at least partly because they are often not viewed (or taught) as uniquely new educational spaces. Commenting on MOOC completion rates, Rice argued that these “conversations regarding retention speak more to the commonplace [. . .] and not to the MOOC itself” (p. 90). Similar arguments are made outside the field of composition as well. Robert Wright (2014) argued, for example, that instead of criticizing the drop out rates of MOOCs, researchers should be asking why people decide to drop in. These points suggest a reframing of the MOOC as de-centralized online educational space and the need for continued research that considers how the spirit of the MOOC is one that repurposes traditional learning environments to offer access to educational spaces and experiences that could otherwise be esoteric, elitist, and inaccessible.

“Rhetorical Composing” is a MOOC constructed and team-taught by faculty members and graduate students at The Ohio State University. It functions as a standalone course that engages students “in a series of interactive reading, research, and composing activities along with assignments designed to help [students] become more effective consumers and producers of alphabetic, visual and multimodal texts” (“Writing II: Rhetorical Composing”). Although the course is structured around a curriculum of five writing assignments that encourage participants within the MOOC to consider various elements of rhetoric and the writing process, the “Rhetorical Composing” team views the course “as a learning community that includes both those enrolled in this course and the instructors” (“Writing II: Rhetorical Composing”). This emphasis on a de-centralized model of teaching is further illustrated in the Coursera description for the course,

² xMOOC and cMOOC are terms coined by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. We discuss these terms and the way they position students later in this article.

³ The costs associated with MOOCs have been the subject of recent scrutiny. Karen Head (2014) for example has drawn attention to the “hidden” costs of both producing and enrolling in a MOOC. And while these costs bring into view the need to interrogate the ways in which MOOCs are products that operate within a complex educational economy, they still provide a unique opportunity to learn, usually at little to no financial cost.

where the “Rhetorical Composing” team declares “We bring our expertise in writing, rhetoric and course design, and we have designed the assignments and course infrastructure to help you share your experiences as writers, students, and professionals with each other and with us” (“Writing II: Rhetorical Composing”).

The administrative team behind the first iteration of the course, Kay Halasek, Ben McCorkle, Cynthia Selfe, Scott DeWitt, Susan Delagrang, Jennifer Michaels, and Kaitlin Clinnin (2014), noticed early on that in order to serve the needs of the writers in their course they would need to reexamine their assumptions about how teaching and learning functioned in the course:

We began revising our sedimented professional narratives about teaching and learning for the new MOOC environment. By the time the class opened, for instance, we found ourselves increasingly reluctant to refer to the individuals enrolled in the class as “students” and had started referring to them as “writers.” And when our conception of this audience changed, our narrative about ourselves as teachers also began changing. (p. 158)

From this newly-framed mindset, the team developed a new peer-review platform, emphasized discussion forums and outside social networking areas for collaboration, and altered course content delivery to remove language that assumed students were passive recipients of knowledge. In effect, it increasingly became difficult to point to specific “experts” in the MOOC, as that role was adopted by both instructors *and* participants. This article illustrates how teachers and participants in “Rhetorical Composing” collaborate and teach each other, blurring the lines between static student and teacher roles in the course. A reconceptualization of student as active participant informed the second, and most recent, iteration of “Rhetorical Composing,” of which both of us were a part. As members of the teaching staff, our duties were to help the “Rhetorical Composing” team in developing, implementing, delivering, and responding to curricular and pedagogical elements of the course. Furthermore, since neither of us were part of the first iteration of the course, we observed and then documented ways in which participants and instructors wrote about their roles in the course. These instances were usually informal – participants or instructors contributing to discussion boards, for example – and we quickly recognized a perceived disconnect between how instructors described the roles participants should assume in the course and the expressed roles participants expected to assume. The evidence we have gathered complicates previous MOOC educational models, which locate knowledge in *either* instructors *or* students. Instead, we propose a re-conceptualization of participant engagement in the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC that acknowledges the dynamic ways in which students and teachers disseminate knowledge.⁴

2. Current Configurations for Student Roles in MOOCs

Research related to MOOCs has primarily focused on classifying these online learning environments based on how they are taught. George Siemens (2012) and Stephen Downes (2011) have defined this classification system for MOOCs as a scale, where a MOOC is either driven by “expert” (xMOOC) driven pedagogy from skilled professionals or by “connectivist” (cMOOC) constructs that draw upon the collected expertise of the group enrolled within the MOOC to generate course content and learning. Educause blogger Michael Caulfield (2013) has identified xMOOC as “a term used to refer to the current breed of elite hyper-centralized Coursera- and Udacity-style MOOCs.” Student experiences may differ depending on course content and instructional pedagogy; however, in general, these MOOCs tend to be rigidly structured, where clear separation is set between expert university-level instructors and enrolled students. For instructors, this could mean recording videos and delivering content to students, which would then be tested for retention or composed in a writing assignment that will then receive one-dimensional peer-level or computer-generated feedback, if feedback is offered at all.

The xMOOC also presents a unique rhetorical situation in which the success or failure of the course depends not upon the measured learning of students but upon the establishment of the instructors as *experts*. In the xMOOC model,

⁴ The use of the terms “students,” the individuals who signed up for the course, and “instructors,” the faculty and staff who constructed the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC, remains crucial to understanding how participants view themselves and engage with others in the course. Thus, we will continue to rely on these terms that come up so often in the course’s discussion boards. However, as this article will demonstrate, these categories are not as stable as many might think. Students shift roles throughout the course and they take on responsibilities that have traditionally been associated with instructors. Similarly, instructors occupy learning roles often associated with students. Studying these shifts is important because it helps us to understand how learning manifested in “Rhetorical Composing,” providing a foundation to consider the implementation of similar role-switching paradigms in other classroom environments.

students receive knowledge on a topic passively; there is no need for students to interact, as learning is a one-way channel that flows from distinguished professors. The function of collaboration, if it exists at all through peer feedback, is to serve the needs of the instructors, who could never respond to the tens of thousands of students who enroll in their classes.

The creators of the original open online courses had a very different pedagogical framework in mind than the xMOOC model that now guides many courses offered via Coursera, edX, and Udacity. In 2008, Siemens and Downes offered “the first course to incorporate open learning with distributed content” (Yeager, Hurley-Dasgupta, and Bliss, 2013, p. 134). This course, entitled “Connectivism and Connected Knowledge,” rejected the premise that effective education depends on a handful of experts conveying knowledge to students. Instead, Siemens and Downes’ experimented with a new form of online education where teachers adopted an ancillary role in the course. While they provided 25 University of Manitoba students and 2,300 students from the general public with “course content. . . available through RSS feeds,” the revolutionary aspect of their project was that “learners could participate with their choice of tools: threaded discussions in Moodle, blog posts, Second Life, or synchronous online meetings” (Yeager et al., 2013, p. 134). The philosophical underpinnings of these early MOOCs lies in connectivism and the students who took very active roles in generating and dispersing their learning in these courses.

Downes has been a compelling advocate for connectivism since he released his foundational articles “An Introduction to Connective Knowledge” in Downes (2005) and “Learning Networks and Connective Knowledge” in Downes (2006). However, an article he wrote for *Huffington Post* in 2011 entitled “‘Connectivism’ and Connective Knowledge” provides his most succinct summary of the relationship between connectivism and the earliest MOOCs:

What is important about a connectivist course, after all, is not the course content. Oh, sure, there is some content – you can’t have a conversation without it – but the content isn’t the important thing. It serves merely as a catalyst, a mechanism for getting our projects, discussions and interactions off the ground. It may be useful to some people, but it isn’t the end product, and goodness knows we don’t want people memorizing it. . . At its heart, connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks. Knowledge, therefore, is not *acquired*, as though it were a thing. It is not *transmitted*, as though it were some type of communication.

Connectivism re-imagines knowledge as a product of connections between participants embedded in a network. With this in mind, connectivism challenges the basic premises of an xMOOC, namely that teachers are gatekeepers to knowledge and education is the transmission of “facts” from teachers to students. Instead, Downes (2011) argues that “Knowledge is not something we can package neatly in a sentence and pass along as though it were a finished product. It is complicated, distributed, mixed with other concepts, looks differently to different people, is inexpressible, tacit, mutually understood but never articulated.” The earliest MOOCs, offered by Siemens and Downes, took this philosophy seriously and gave students a space where they could share knowledge through interpersonal communication. They label this model of online instruction a cMOOC (Siemens, 2012).

The “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC – as might a multitude of other MOOCs being offered – does not fit neatly into the xMOOC or cMOOC models. On one hand, Coursera markets the MOOC as a course constructed by faculty associated with The Ohio State University. This xMOOC-style branding creates student expectations that they are going to learn rhetorical strategies from expert faculty members, as evidenced by discussion board titles such as “Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?” To a certain extent, “Rhetorical Composing” does rely on expert teachers to create and distribute content. The Ohio State University faculty members and staff create video lectures and documents that introduce “ideas and techniques to inform and persuade audiences” (“Writing II: Rhetorical Composing”). On the other hand, “Rhetorical Composing” also fashions itself “as a learning community that includes both those enrolled in this course and the instructors” (“Writing II: Rhetorical Composing”). In this conceptualization of the course, the emphasis is placed on the community of learners rather than a handful of expert individuals. Meaning-making, from this perspective, comes from the connections participants form with other individuals in the process of completing work. The “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC combines characteristics of the expert-driven pedagogy of the xMOOC with the connectivist-based ideology of the cMOOC.

The xMOOC/cMOOC binary suggests distinct and static roles for teachers and students. The xMOOC and cMOOC models show how student roles can be configured as either passive recipients of knowledge (reminiscent of the banking model of education which Paulo Freire (1996) critiqued in his landmark 1970 text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) or active participants in the generation and learning of course content both for themselves and other MOOC participants.

However, this xMOOC/cMOOC binary does not adequately help us understand student roles in MOOCs that may draw upon both models. Writing instruction within the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC provides a unique opportunity to explore how one case study might complicate this assumed binary of MOOC participation. As such, we pursue an understanding of how student roles are situated within MOOCs that do not cleanly fit into the xMOOC or cMOOC paradigms. Furthermore, we explore how participants themselves write about the roles they are asked to assume. If students are asked to take on both learner and expert roles within a MOOC environment, then they are not quite passive learners, but also not quite expert teachers. Our analysis suggests that students and teachers exist on an expert-learner spectrum and constantly switch pedagogical roles to meet the demands of the course. In this way, “participant” becomes a generalizable term that describes a more robust range of people that engaged in learning within “Rhetorical Composing” – a range that included both enrolled students and instructors. Looking to an expert-learner spectrum to describe learning behavior within “Rhetorical Composing” allows for a more complex conceptualization of the MOOC beyond that of xMOOC or cMOOC. Whereas, for example, an xMOOC clearly defines students as learners and instructors as experts and a cMOOC does not allow for students to drop into a course without contributing to the production and material of the course, an expert-learner spectrum allows for more fluidity in tracing a complex movement of learning and expertise within a MOOC.

Using “Rhetorical Composing” as a case study, we examine spaces in which participants write about their roles in the MOOC. We apply a systematic search to these spaces for language that triggers discussion on a participant’s role as a student in the course using cluster criticism (Foss, 2004) to examine “Rhetorical Composing and uncover how students and instructors situate participants and their learning within certain roles. First, we look to the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC discussion board to find instances in which participants address issues of student roles within a MOOC both with each other and with instructors of the course. Then, we turn to the “Rhetorical Composing” curriculum, especially to its use of the peer-review platform The Writer’s Exchange (WEx), to evaluate how these administrative features of “Rhetorical Composing” afford or constrain participants in their expressed student roles. By applying this approach to “Rhetorical Composing,” we practice a methodology that can be further applied to other areas of “Rhetorical Composing,” and other MOOCs, to better understand how MOOC participants and instructors conceptualize the roles of students within the massive open online environment.

3. Analyzing Student and Teacher Roles in “Rhetorical Composing”

The “Rhetorical Composing” team built ten discussion board forums for students to ask questions and provide feedback related to course objectives and assignments. Six of these ten forums contained specialized sub-forums, so students could find appropriate spaces to communicate their concerns or share their work. These sub-forums were found in the “General Discussion” forum and in the forums specific to each unit. For example, clicking on the “Share and Discuss Unit 1: Thinking and Responding Rhetorically” forum link guided participants to the “Share Questions about Unit 1 and Assignment 1,” “Discuss Unit 1: Thinking and Responding Rhetorically,” “Read and Share Assignment 1: Who Am I as a Writer with a Cause?” and “Share and Respond: Other Writers, Other Causes” sub-forum links. Although participation in these discussion boards was optional, out of the 12,114 participants who visited the course, 2,753 browsed the forums. This means 22.7% of those who accessed the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC took time to browse the discussion boards at least once. Current MOOC research does not tell us whether this is a significant amount of student engagement. However, this statistic does suggest that nearly a quarter of the students found the discussion boards to be an important means of accessing information and communicating with one another. For this reason, we found the discussion boards to be compelling sites of study.

Both instructors and students exerted some control over the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC discussion boards, influenced the direction of the conversations, and shaped the learning taking place within these boards. Students were free to create any thread they like (as long as the thread did not breach Coursera’s Code of Conduct). However, thread titles and content were often directed by the headings and descriptions of the forums created by the “Rhetorical Composing” instructors and staff. For example, the “Meet and Greet Other Writers” sub-forum within the “General Discussion” forum encouraged participants to introduce themselves in a way similar to how bricks-and-mortar classrooms would encourage students to introduce themselves on the first day of class. The image below illustrates the kinds of responses yielded by this forum: [Figure 1](#)

However, even in this simple example, we see how the roles of “student” and “instructor” are being negotiated. In an attempt to maintain order and direct conversation, instructors and staff created forum categories. Still, we see

All Threads	Start new thread	Top threads	Last update	Last created
Help with a small survey	Started by Christa Ramirez-Roca	Last post by Christa Ramirez-Roca (5 days ago)	0 posts	7 views
A Manual of Rhetoric: Principles	Started by Dhanraj E Ramji	Last post by Dhanraj E Ramji (2 months ago)	0 posts	10 views
Welcome to Rhetorical Composing	Started by Kaitie Connor Brien	Last post by Olga Sotnikova (2 months ago)	0 posts	205 views
Hi from Adelaide	Started by Corina A. Piggard	Last post by Kay Nebesh INERNETOR (2 months ago)	2 posts	36 views
Hello from India	Started by Shresha	Last post by Kay Nebesh INERNETOR (2 months ago)	0 posts	47 views
Hi there from Saltar	Started by Sarah	Last post by Sarah (2 months ago)	0 posts	10 views
Introducing myself	Started by DANIA VILELA CABRACHO SAENZ	Last post by DANIA VILELA CABRACHO SAENZ (2 months ago)	0 posts	1 views
Introducing myself	Started by Mohamed Elshesha National	Last post by Kay Nebesh INERNETOR (2 months ago)	4 posts	103 views
Skype Group	Started by Jose Luis Soto	Last post by Mar Delacruz Oliva (2 months ago)	0 posts	23 views
G'day from Australia			1 posts	2 views

Figure 1. “Meet and Greet Other Writers.” Sub-forum from

participants making creative use of the “Meet and Greet Other Writers” forum to organize Skype groups and send out calls for survey participants. In effect, participants used the forum as an opportunity to connect, learn, teach, and collaborate with other participants, calling into question the boundaries of “student” and “instructor” in the course. In this example, students demonstrate a willingness to actively determine their education. However, as we shall soon illustrate, other circumstances encouraged passivity among students.

To further investigate “student” and “instructor” boundaries in “Rhetorical Composing,” we turned to the full corpus of threads to investigate how students and instructors wrote about their own perceived roles in the course. After considering the many threads to begin analysis, we were immediately drawn to the “Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?” thread for a number of reasons. First, the thread resonates as one that overtly deals with conversations surrounding student and instructor roles in the course. At 650 views, the thread was also the most viewed in the class, about three times as popular as other threads. The thread also received the most replies of any thread in the course, with a total of 95 posts. We also found this thread a powerful place to begin an investigation of perceived and performed roles in the course because it was an active thread throughout most of the life of the entire MOOC and offers a rare glimpse into if and how conversations surrounding perceived roles shifted throughout the ten weeks “Rhetorical Composing” ran.

We began our analysis by examining students’ statements about the responsibilities of teachers and students. To allow for a succinct analysis that still allowed for the freedom to explore the formation of patterns around discourse about student and instructor roles, we took up Sonja Foss’s (2004) work on cluster criticism to identify and select keywords to help guide our reading of the thread. Cluster criticism itself was developed by Kenneth Burke to help “discover a rhetor’s world view and thus identify motive” since often, through the application of cluster criticism, the critic gains insight into the rhetorical connections of discourse that “may not even be known to or conscious for the rhetor” (p. 367). The prime benefits to our implication of cluster criticism, then, was not only one of efficiently understanding how student and instructor roles were discussed, performed, and negotiated within the discussion forum. Utilizing Foss’s method was also a way of understanding how students and instructors have connected their discourse, and especially the selection of words that represent their perceived status on a spectrum between learner and expert, to engrained – even subconscious – patterns of expression of perceived relationships between this discourse and desired action within the MOOC.

Keywords we selected for our analysis included “participant” and “student” to examine how contributors to the thread described themselves, “instructor” and “teach/er” to likewise see how contributors represented the MOOC’s teaching team. Other keywords included “learn,” “(I) think,” “(I) believe,” “should” (as in this “course should” or “students should”), “role,” and “(I) want.” As we read through posts connected to these keywords, we then expanded our search to additional words that sometimes appeared near them and further identified patterns of use: “(I) need,” “expectation,” and “frustrate.” The results of this search suggest a pattern of contributors who very clearly saw themselves as “students” in the course, both in name and perceived role that a “student” takes within a learning space. Use of the term “participant” was primarily used by teaching staff, and the term “student” was mainly used by participants. Altogether in the thread, “student” was used 800% more than “participant,” showing that overall, people enrolled in the class were far more often viewed as students. Even though the difference between these terms might be perceived as a subtle shift in discourse, the conversation that surrounded the use of “student” and “learning” in the thread reveals one such reason why the shift was needed: participants viewed their role in the MOOC as consumers of knowledge that they expected the instructors to supply and even subconsciously expressed the motive to be perceived as consumers and not collaborative creators

of that knowledge. These examples from the “Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?” thread illustrate how participants viewed their role in the MOOC:

We have done two assignments and discussed the first one with our fellow students. ... I’m trying to discover how to review other people’s. However, if that’s all the course is going to consist of, we aren’t going to learn very much.

I want to learn about the art and craft of rhetoric. I want instruction from those who have absorbed and digested the art of rhetoric over decades. I want to walk away from this course illuminated.

The problem is that if you don’t ‘hook’ your audience (students) right from the start then they will be confused, frustrated and leave this course.

There is no doubt about the potential for interactive learning we have here. I only felt bad about having to “prove” my rhetoric writing skills without receiving any sort of direction from the course team.

One problem we perceive in the conversation of participant as student is that, as students, MOOC participants become very active in the desire to be passive learners in the course. “Rhetorical Composing” is structured as “a learning community that includes both those enrolled in this course and the instructors” (“Writing II: Rhetorical Composing”). However, by viewing themselves as outside the confines of this community, participants struggle to comprehend how they can contribute to a writing environment as mere “students.”

But these conventional understandings and expectations were not uniform. We noted that other students’ statements contributed different and less conventional understandings of both learners and teachers’ roles in the course. In fact, at times other participants were very active in their voicing of how others should be learning and collaborating in the course. For example, shortly after a poster offered his initial suggestion that “there has been no attempt to provide any instruction about ‘Rhetorical Composing’, or anything else,” another participant argued that that course taught him “5 critical points that forms a solid foundation for Rhetorical composition” and then presented an image of a pyramid that depicted five tiers crucial to “the art of persuasion to motivate and influence people.” Later, students responded favorably to this poster’s comments, offering his post more upvotes than any other in the thread. One participant endorsed the poster’s defense of the class with the comment “Bingo!” and another elaborated by saying, “The structure of the class has me convinced that it is a good way to approach a class of thousands representing myriads of writing levels and styles.” Still, other students argued in favor of the original criticism that instructor guidance was insufficient. One student contended that “For students like [redacted] and myself who have never even heard of the concept of rhetorical composing or what it entails (and I suspect many others) it was as if we were approaching the [Second] Assignment in the dark.” Quickly after making this complaint, a participant pointed out the rhetorical moves being made in this and several other posts in the thread:

Do you realize that in your comment you analyzed aspects of the course, synthesized yours and [redacted] comments into your post, and composed it in a logical arrangement using concrete words with a beginning, middle, and conclusion? Looks like you’ve got this rhetoric thing nailed. Rhetoric is how a person writes. Everyone has a different style and voice and we are developing rhetoric within our own styles and voices. How boring reading would be if everyone wrote the same way.

Engaging each other in this thread, students claim an active role in the exchange of information in the course. This exchange challenges the conception of participants in this thread as only ever just passive or active members of the MOOC community. In fact, it is in this exchange that a sense of role switching is created, where participants slide among a spectrum of roles between student and expert.

Instructors and graduate students who participated in the thread also demonstrated a propensity to shift roles as discussion unfolded. The authors of this article were the first MOOC team members to respond. Chad Iwertz admitted that the conversations taking place in the thread “made [him] think perhaps a little bit more about rhetorical composing as a concept,” as he discovered that the optional forums are the areas “where a lot of the learning in the course happens.” The students taught Chad that “Writing communities form here. Writing communities continue beyond here. It seems like a really interesting space to portray oneself and rhetorically construct the writing that represents us.” Michael Blancato, addressing students in the course, emphasized that “The more you write, the more we listen and improve.”

However, Prof. Scott DeWitt's later contribution to the thread provides the most compelling illustration of how teachers shifted roles in the "Rhetorical Composing" classroom:

The beautiful thing about a MOOC is that all of that conversation, all of that problem-solving and support, is happening among the students in the class and in public, and students are not looking to me as their sole source of information. The very first time we taught the MOOC, my colleagues and I initially panicked, and we thought we needed to jump in and respond at the first sign of confusion whenever we saw it. And then we learned something very valuable. There may be cases where we need to intervene and offer clarification (and we indeed do that a lot), but if we do that at every turn, we're cutting off huge opportunities for learning, interaction, and connection in the course. If the instructors just pause for a moment, someone usually steps up, and all kinds of positive, productive learning takes place. I sure wish I could replicate this feature of a MOOC in my face-to-face class (and I'm trying), because it's very powerful.

Prof. DeWitt's response is both an example of role-shifting in the course and an argument for its merits. As he highlights, the ability to role-shift creates "huge opportunities for learning, interaction, and connection in the course" that de-centralizes knowledge in ways that have the potential to enrich both teachers and students.

The "Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?" thread and the responses it generated demonstrate how quickly students and instructors reorient themselves on a learner-expert spectrum. When participants asked questions about course content and offered criticisms about the course structure, other participants readily jumped into the fray and demonstrated what they have learned from the course and how to navigate course content. Instructors also stepped in to address student concerns or express the ways they too were learning from students in the course. Students aligned themselves with others who expressed similar concerns and addressed others' ideas as they were presented. This banding together and collaboration proved to be a common practice in the discussion board forums, and not just in the "Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?" thread. With these discussion board dynamics in mind, we can offer an answer to the poster who posed the question "Are the Instructors Going to Teach Us Anything?" In "Rhetorical Composing," instructors and participants teach each other.

4. Role-Switching and Collaboration in The Writer's Exchange

Another key aspect of "Rhetorical Composing" that helped complicate the roles of students and instructors within the MOOC was the course's reliance on peer-reviews in the Writers Exchange (WEx). The discussion boards on "Rhetorical Composing" provide interesting sites of exploration for how students encounter and disseminate the material being taught in the MOOC, most especially as sites for participant role switching and collaboration – but also because they are supplemental to the curriculum of "Rhetorical Composing." Participation on the discussion boards does not determine completion of the course, so they offer a unique perspective on the ways in which students come into contact with course material and learning within the "Rhetorical Composing" MOOC. But it also is appropriate to examine the elements of "Rhetorical Composing" that are required for completion and awarding of Statements of Completion and the curricular structures that have been built around the requirements for granting these certificates. How can these curricular elements contribute to our understanding of participant role switching?

The syllabus for "Rhetorical Composing" lists the two forms of achievement that are recognized for certification in the MOOC: Statements of Completion and Statements of Completion with Distinction. For Statements of Completion, participants must complete at least three of four writing assignments on the "Rhetorical Composing" MOOC that undergo the peer review cycle on The Writer's Exchange (WEx). Participants often post drafts of these papers to discussion forums to receive additional feedback from writing communities they form within the MOOC; however, for credit in the course, these papers must be submitted through WEx. A product developed by Ohio State faculty and staff, WEx is built for the massive peer review that takes place on the MOOC.

Peer review is not a new concept to MOOCs. In fact, many scholars have noted the increased need and consequential implementation of peer review into MOOCs (Balfour, 2013; Piech, Huang, Chen, Do, Ng, & Koller 2013; Sandeen, 2013). Some, such as Chris Piech et al. (2013) have suggested that peer review scores are often quantitatively indistinguishable from expert review, citing that in 43% percent of cases surveyed peer evaluation was within 10% of the same evaluation of an expert grader. Others, such as Cathy Sandeen (2013), have suggested that peer review is a temporary solution until more superior machine-based grading counterparts are developed and implemented that can grade student writing. But until that time, MOOCs have used peer review as a necessary mechanism for evaluation of

student writing. According to Justin Reich (2014), an educational researcher at Harvard University, this embrace of peer review has allowed MOOCs to implement more robust testing of student knowledge than a quantitative assessment could.

But the peer-review approach deployed by WEx moves beyond using participants to fill an administrative need of offering robust testing of student knowledge; instead, WEx presents peer-review itself as a requirement for students to assume instructional roles in teaching writing in at least three different ways: by providing them training as expert readers/writing instructors, by practicing the role of expert reader/writing instructor, and by offering them feedback on their effectiveness as expert readers/writing instructors. When the course was first offered in 2013, over 30,000 participants enrolled. In 2014, for the second offering the course, over 20,000 students enrolled. For a writing course, it would be impossible to evaluate this much student writing without peer review. We do realize that by assessing student writing and offering generative feedback on this writing, peer evaluators fill an administrative need in the course. “Rhetorical Composing” needs peer review to meet the massive need to respond to the writing of tens of thousands of students; however, peer review in “Rhetorical Composing” moves beyond this administrative need. “Rhetorical Composing” requires an environment in which participants feel comfortable and empowered to shift roles between learner and expert, learning throughout this role switching and reflecting on their own writing after completing the process of acting as an active guide to other writers. Furthermore, the course moves beyond using peer review as an administrative function by incorporating peer review into the curriculum and learning outcomes of the course itself, necessitating the exchange of participant expertise.

First, to require participants switch between roles of student and expert, students were taught how to provide systematic and informed instructional feedback on written texts through a process called “Describe~Assess~Suggest.” This process of “Describe~Assess~Suggest” was outlined in the in the twenty-six page *WEx Training Guide* (DeWitt and Cohen, 2013) that accompanied each assignment submitted to WEx. Here, the process is described as one that trains peer reviewers in offering generative and constructive feedback to writers. In this training process, participants are asked to respond in three ways to the writing with which they come into contact. First, in the act of describing, participants are asked “in [their] own words, to describe the part of the writing that [they] are responding to” (p. 5). Krista Ratcliffe (1999) has described a similar process in *rhetorical listening*—a process by which one turns the intention of listening back onto the one listening and not just the one heard (p. 220). In the process of describing, reviewers are not just repeating information or pointing to where they are reading but establishing a connection and reinterpretation of the text as a way of beginning the process of accessing writing and suggesting ideas for improvement.

In the next step, assess, reviewers provide a score and discursive feedback for the writing under review. In “Rhetorical Composing,” this takes the form of numeric rating of the strength of a particular category outlined in the assignments’ rubrics. Furthermore, participants are trained in providing discursive assessment of writing. In the *WEx Training Guide*, assessment is described as “pointing out both strengths and weakness...where...writing succeeds and where it falls short of succeeding” (p. 5). Therefore, beyond only applying a numerical assessment on the writing under review, reviewers are also trained to utilize certain language that signifies assessment, such as “good,” “confusing,” “repetitive,” “useful,” “vague,” “clear,” and “underdeveloped” (pp. 18–20). Even though these words are not quantitatively assessing writing, they are still placing it within assessment and providing a most robust form of evaluation than simply a rating somewhere on a scale of one to five.

In the final step of the “Describe~Assess~Suggest” model, reviewers offer suggestions on how assessed elements can be improved. In the *WEx Training Guide*, this is described as a culmination of the reviewing experience and gestures forward to future writing that the original submitter will do:

After you describe and assess the part of the writing you are responding to, suggest how the writer might make changes if he or she were to revise or how the writer might think differently about writing in future assignments. In this class, writers might choose to revise simply because they want to improve their writing. Also, writers might take advantage of “Level Up” assignments, optional opportunities for them to publish their writing for a public audience, and your suggestions will help them produce their best writing for a wider readership. (p. 5)

This step of the “Describe~Assess~Suggest” model allows reviewers to connect with the text and the original submitter in ways that may be outside the purview of the assignment itself. The Describe~Assess~Suggest peer review model invites reviewers to demonstrate their expertise by evaluating a text for different audiences. The degree to which this reviewer demonstrates his or her expertise will vary; however, the “Describe~Assess~Suggest” model invites students (or more precisely, participants performing the role of student) to perform the role of expert. The peer review guidelines



Figure 2. The Peer Review Process on WEx.

for “Describe~Assess~Suggest” require participants to navigate different roles of learner and expert, and WEx is the platform that facilitates this shift.

The second way in which the peer-review approach of WEx invites students to switch roles between student and expert was in their participation in the process of commenting on other writers’ efforts. The process to complete a full cycle of peer review through WEx is complex.

1. The original submitter submits his or her paper online. This submission is then anonymized and sent to three other participants for peer review.
2. These three peers then assume the role of expert guide by reviewing the text according to the principles of “Describe~Assess~Suggest.”
3. After submitting their anonymous reviews, these three peers are then assessed on their individual helpfulness by the original submitter.
4. Finally, the original submitter reflects upon the reviews of his or her peers by writing a personal reflection detailing how he or she will incorporate these reviews into revision and what has been learned through the process.

This full cycle, the process of submission to reflection, is required for completion of the course and to receive a Statement of Completion and a Statement of Completion with Distinction. In order to complete this cycle, participants must balance and shift roles as learner and expert between these various steps. For example, during assessment of their peers’ reviews, original submitters are encouraged to shift from the role of learner to expert in order to evaluate the helpfulness of the feedback according to the guidelines of “Describe~Assess~Suggest.” Another role shift takes place when reviewers become reviewed on their effectiveness as critic under the “Describe~Assess~Suggest” model. In this further shift, peer reviewers then become recipients of feedback. Furthermore, in reflecting on the review process and the ways in which a draft might be revised, original submitters synthesize these roles of learner and expert to make judgements about their writing and must make informed decisions about how that process will continue into the future.

Figure 2.

Third, WEx encouraged role switching in students at the culmination of each peer review cycle when students received feedback on the effectiveness of their instructional efforts. During the process of revision, participants were also required to provide feedback to their reviewers. This feedback followed the same “Describe~Assess~Suggest” model that participants used when providing feedback to other writers’ efforts. In reflecting on their work and the feedback of their peers, participants were confronted with the opportunity to see their work from the perspective of a student: participants read and synthesized peer feedback into a narrative on how to approach revision of their writing for submission either later in the course or even in publishing avenues outside the course itself. But participants were also required to once again assume the position of an expert in evaluating and providing feedback to their critics. By requiring students to enact the roles of both instructor and student in their writing, MOOC participants were encouraged to view writing in ways that required participants to be responsible for both their own writing process and also learning how revision is tied up with both making and responding to good writing.

These three approaches were designed to encourage students to shift between the roles of writer and expert reader, between the roles of student and instructor. The “Rhetorical Composing” curriculum encourages participants to see themselves as members of a community where role-switching between learner and guide helps participants become “more effective consumer[s] and producer[s] of written, visual, and multimodal texts” (“Writing II: Rhetorical Composing”). It is important that we analyze this curriculum in addition to the structure of the course. Student roles are determined by both instructor pedagogy and course structure. Thus, by investigating how peer review assignments and discussion boards are deployed and utilized, we can begin to see how student roles are determined and represented in MOOC environments. While we have begun an investigation into how student roles shift in these areas of the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC, many others remain to be investigated, both in “Rhetorical Composing” and other MOOCs.

5. Conclusion

Our aim here is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. We wish to highlight the inadequacy of current conceptions that suggest MOOCs can only position students as either passive consumers of knowledge or active participants in guiding and shaping their own learning. After applying a methodological framework for investigating how roles are formed and represented in discussion board forums and curriculum in “Rhetorical Composing,” we find that characteristics which define these two models are inadequate in describing the teaching and learning exemplified by participants and instructors in the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC. Instead of conforming to the roles of passive learner or expert guide, participants in “Rhetorical Composing” shift between these roles frequently and depend upon role switching to both consume and produce knowledge in the MOOC environment. Instead of depositing knowledge into students, instructors often interacted informally with students and let the curricular peer-review approach of WEX require students to learn from each others’ expertise. By illustrating how roles function in the course discussion boards and the Writer’s Exchange peer review platform, we draw attention to the limits of student roles as they are articulated by the xMOOC/cMOOC binary endemic to scholarly literature on MOOCs. Instead, we apply a methodology that examines how participants themselves see their roles within a MOOC and how those perspectives are afforded or constrained within a curriculum. In “Rhetorical Composing,” for example, students who described their roles as passive consumers of knowledge in the course expressed frustration when the curriculum encouraged the students to occupy the role of expert guide.

Although our essay focuses on learning in massive open online environments, the examples of role-switching discussed here have implications for face-to-face and online-hybrid course management as well. The top-down, teacher-driven pedagogy of the xMOOC that defines students as passive learners has shaped education for decades (as evidenced by Freire, 1996 in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). Similarly, the importance of student connections in the classroom – to peers and assignments – has been documented by educators such as John Dewey (1997) and Maria Montessori (2002). The conversation about how students are perceived in xMOOC and cMOOC models thus has significance to more traditional forms of education. In examining how fluidly participants shift roles in “Rhetorical Composing,” we hope teachers begin to consider that bricks-and-mortar students also learn from and contribute to the classroom experience in manifold ways that resist reduction.

However, we also recognize that large enrollment numbers and student self-selection render MOOCs categorically different from college and university courses. 21,748 total learners signed up for “Rhetorical Composing,” an estimated 74% of which possessed a bachelor’s degree or more⁵. With these significant population differences in mind, we must resist hastily applying MOOC data to traditional college and university courses. Instead, more attention should be paid to MOOCs as discrete learning spaces worthy of research in and of themselves. As the evangelical rhetoric surrounding MOOC-based education gives way to more careful considerations of pedagogical use, we propose that composition researchers continue to examine writing pedagogy opportunities in these educational spaces. This essay is an attempt at such an examination. Our hope is that our findings regarding the fluidity of role-shifting in the “Rhetorical Composing” MOOC can serve as a springboard for further exploration about how other MOOCs can and should function. The potential benefit of this work is the creation of new learning spaces that make us reconsider who we are as teachers and students.

⁵ Demographic data provided by Coursera’s platform-wide demographic survey.

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