VITAL TOPICS FORUM

Anthropology in and of MOOCs

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INTRODUCTION: MOOCS AS MEDIA WORLD

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The suddenness with which Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, sprang upon us left many within the academy grasping for interpretations. Early proponents touted them as revolutionary tools that could enhance on-campus learning while also making high-quality education accessible to a vast global population, reforming a malfunctioning university system, and producing new kinds of data on how people learn. Critics countered that behind this latest techno-utopian fad lurked an all-too-familiar conservative agenda to downsize the university; the global ambitions of a few elite, resource-rich schools; Silicon Valley corporate interests; and the disciplinary priorities of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (the STEM fields). With some critical distance, the eight scholars in this Vital Topics Forum draw upon their experiences as anthropologists involved in MOOCs and anthropologists doing studies of MOOCs to propel us beyond such facile responses. Doing what anthropologists do best, they employ contextually rich analysis to upend received wisdom about what MOOCs mean, provide processual accounts of how they are made, and offer first-hand observations of how students are using them on the ground.

I begin with the caveat that this collection certainly does not capture all there is to say about MOOCs, even within our discipline: its focus is limited to cultural anthropology, even though our colleagues in other subfields have been actively involved in making MOOCs and debating their value (on archaeology, see Alcock et al. 2013). This forum also does not address the verbal aspects of computer-mediated communication that are most intriguing to me as a linguistic anthropologist. Finally, it leaves crucial issues related to labor conditions within the university relatively unexamined. Taken together, however, the essays here do begin to lay a conceptual groundwork for a cultural anthropological

approach to MOOCs as a *media world*—an orientation that links "media production, circulation, and reception in broad and intersecting social and cultural fields: local, regional, national, transnational" while also attending to "the impacts of media technologies themselves" (Ginsburg et al. 2002:6).

Each contribution focuses ethnographically on a particular node within a broader network of media production, circulation, and reception—from the offices where programmers build the underlying software platforms (Kelkar), production teams strategize digital pedagogy (Laserna), and professors film their online lessons (Downey, Starn) to the distant or not-so-distant places where students, with their own ambitions and abilities, take the resulting courses (Buyandelger, Flamenbaum). Others reflect critically on the conditions of the network itself, examining how conventions of style and content facilitate its global extension (Looser, Rouse). At the same time, these authors exemplify the variety of methodologies necessary to encompass the complexity of such a media world: participant-observation (Flamenbaum, Kelkar), visual anthropology (Rouse), symbolic anthropology (Buyandelger), comparative analysis (Looser), reflexive autoethnography (Downey, Starn), and participatory action research (Laserna).

MOOCs are not external to anthropology; they are bewilderingly close. Regardless of what they do or do not offer as a learning tool, they express deep uncertainties about the identity and mission of the contemporary university in which anthropology itself as an academic discipline largely resides. "Education," as Jerome Bruner (1996:13) reminds us, "is a major embodiment of a culture's way of life, not just a preparation for it." There is no question that MOOCs, as an educational vision, reflect a current mood of what Dominic Boyer (2013:134) calls "digital liberalism," a "codeterminate dynamic between neoliberalism and digital media." In this context, Boyer challenges anthropologists to "reflect on how our research imagination, our research designs and methods, and our modes of analyzing and representing the world around us are adjusting to new informational and

communicational circumstances" (2013:175). MOOCs provide a significant opportunity to undertake this reflection, as the following essays amply attest.

This is swift-footed ethnography for quickly moving events, but the insights presented here suggest long-term strategies for engaging with digital communication as both an object of research and a means of knowledge dissemination. Of course, there is cause for caution. Carolyn Rouse pointedly interrogates the aesthetic and political compromises that MOOCs make in order to establish authoritative claims of universal knowledge. In positing a global audience, Tom Looser argues, MOOCs promulgate a conceit of unqualified universality not easily compatible with anthropology's commitment to "local knowledge" (Geertz 1983). Shreeharsh Kelkar calls our attention to the profound institutional implications of a seemingly inconsequential programming technique built into the operating protocols on which MOOCs depend; perhaps the bigger story after all concerns what MOOCs can tell us about ascendant cultural authority of computer scientists within the university.

Yet it is hard not to be reassured—inspired even—by the experiences of anthropologists who have taught MOOCs of their own and recount, like Orin Starn, the wondrous diversity of online discussion sessions or, like Greg Downey, meeting a student pursuing anthropology as a traditional college major after starting out with his online module. Working as a production manager on MOOCs in other disciplines gives Catalina Laserna another kind of opportunity to apply anthropological sensibilities to shaping online education from the inside. These three essays in particular should prompt anthropologists, as professionals whose field often struggles to assert its relevance, to think creatively about the opportunities MOOCs might offer as a further tool of sharing our ideas and expanding our modes of conversation.

But do MOOCs work? Manduhai Buyandelger's and Rachel Flamenbaum's ethnography responds with another question: work for whom and for what? In postsocialist Mongolia, Buyandelger identifies an improbable parallel between the cultural resonance of two paradigmatic figures: the shaman and the engineer. Here, MOOCs work to channel the ambitions of a generation in the epistemic embrace of technoscientific utility. In Ghana, Flamenbaum finds that MOOCs work differently, giving an equally ambitious group of students a tantalizing opportunity to circumvent traditional modes of authority and enact their own local vision of digital liberalism. Both of these contributions identify what seems to me a crucial feature of the global uptake of MOOCs: the role of mediating institutions in both providing and structuring access to online education. If MOOCs or online education in other forms continue to spread, these mediations themselves will become only more important as foci of anthropological research and opportunities for anthropologists themselves to intervene.

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING FROM ONLINE EDUCATION IN GHANA

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Coursera co-founder Daphne Koller (2012) ends her popular TED talk, "What We're Learning from Online Education," by suggesting the next Einstein or Steve Jobs might be "living somewhere in a remote village in Africa." The implications—that a remote village in Africa is the antithesis of Silicon Valley and that MOOCs like those Coursera offers will magically bridge the chasm between these two mythically divergent places—are both problematic. My current research in Ghana focuses on the place of Internet in the lives of students at an elite university, in the rural town in which it is situated, and at a MOOC-based school, the Open University of West Africa (OUWA), in nearby Accra. My fieldwork suggests that Koller's soaring rhetoric of third world transformation obscures significant factors impacting the reception of MOOCs on the ground.

My main fieldsite lies just outside Accra, Ghana's cosmopolitan capital—marginal but hardly remote. Coursera probably won't help transform the (computerless) public schools in a town where only 20 percent of students enter secondary education. It is rather the privileged students at the university, most of whom come from computer-equipped households in Accra, who dream of being the next Steve Jobs and readily take advantage of MOOCs. Similarly, students who attend OUWA in Accra have access to a range of infrastructures and skills—including English literacy, broadband Internet, and a panoply of digitally mediated competencies—that most in Ghana simply do not.

If Koller's rhetoric ignores obvious structural disparities, it also erases local motivations for taking up MOOCs. Even as uneven access to emerging technologies reinforces class hierarchies, youth aspiring to the Ghanaian middle class see online learning as one tool among many to strategically position themselves outside rigid age-graded hierarchies (cf. Burrell 2012; Meyer 1998). For a privileged minority, MOOCs are aspirational resources leveraged in attempts to move beyond the contemporary African "economy of desired goods that are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy, but to which one will never have material access" (Mbembe 2002:271).

These students frequently frame the ostensibly endless possibilities of online learning as the opposite of "chew and pour"—Ghanaian slang for the pervasive pedagogy of rote learning—which they in turn link to intractable public-sector bureaucracy. Many further suggest that the Ghanaian emphasis on unquestioning deference to parents, chiefs, elders, and other authority figures is to blame for holding back not only their own material advancement but also that of the country as a whole.

OUWA embodies this attitude. Cofounded by two U.S. entrepreneurs in 2012 as an online-only portal providing

access to internationally produced MOOCs, it quickly spawned a tight-knit (predominately male) community devoted to entrepreneurship training and startup incubation based in a 24-hour Accra hub. This community has consciously evolved an informal interactional ethos (in person, in digitally mediated realms, and in their nascent businesses), permeated by the same ethic of collaborative, open-source liberalism (Coleman 2012) behind MOOCs—all in self-conscious opposition to the Ghanaian status quo.

OUWA's rapid transformation reflects the necessity of intermediary structures like high-bandwidth Internet, generators, shared computers, and offline access in a context in which most people connect to the Internet via mobile phone. It also points to an equally critical, but frequently erased, feature of "last mile connectivity" (Stone 2011:768): the local cultural frameworks that shape attitudes toward MOOCs. OUWA students' enthusiastic stories of active learning through brainstorming sessions or hands-on workshops suggest that part of the appeal of MOOCs lies in the symbolic negation of ways of thinking and interacting that they believe standard Ghanaian pedagogy promotes. Indeed, this suggests that an apprenticeship in user-centric pedagogical norms may itself be a critical prerequisite for students coming to MOOCs from different educational cultures.

There is a very real possibility, then, of a class of MOOC-educated students who have indeed been transformed—but in ways that make it difficult for them to successfully navigate the institutionalized hierarchies they seek to sidestep. Without accredited certification and connections within established local networks, the independent entrepreneurs OUWA may produce will lack access to the capital that their grand visions demand. If these and other complexities are resolved, it will be through extensive additional support from OUWA in tandem with broader societal shifts—not, as Koller and others would have it, through singularly transformational access to online education (cf. Gupta 2012 on literacy).

ENGINEERS AND SHAMANS AS HERALDS OF THE NEW MONGOLIA

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A recent *New York Times* article celebrates the accomplishments of Battushig, a 15-year-old boy who, working online from his native Mongolia, achieved a perfect score in a sophomore-level electrical engineering MOOC from MIT, where he subsequently matriculated as a freshman. The suggestion that MOOCs are a powerful tool for top universities to recruit far-flung prodigies comes at the expense of casting Mongolia as an education and technology backwater. "How does a student from a country in which a third of the population is nomadic, living in round white felt tents called gers on the vast steppe, ace an MIT course?" asked the article

(Pappano 2013:50). The Orientalist undertones of this question, along with the article's focus on one extraordinary individual, obscure some of the ways that the everyday educational culture of postsocialist Mongolia helped to create welcome possibilities for MOOCs.

In socialist Mongolia, egalitarian secondary education was free and almost universally available both in urban and rural areas, but higher education was reserved only for students sifted through a meritocratic examination process that ultimately produced the country's elites. Humanities and social science disciplines enjoyed the highest prestige in this system, as they served to cultivate political cadres, cultural producers, and the state's ideological brokers. State cultural production created a normative epistemology by controlling knowledge about the past, limiting outside influence, and, most importantly, promulgating the image of a future worth striving for (see Watson 1994)—a future that the state itself helped implement through central management of the economy.

The collapse of socialism in 1990 was much more than an economic and political crisis. As I have shown in my book (Buyandelger 2013), it was also an epistemic crisis, depriving Mongolians of tools with which to think about the new world and their place in it. Anxiety about an unstable present and unpredictable future proved fertile ground for the proliferation of shamanic practices. Shamans came to provide alternative ways for understanding the present and controlling the future, while also epitomizing the epistemic crisis of postsocialism and anxieties of the neoliberal economy.

These same factors reinforced the deeply rooted value of education but also prompted changes. Some of the first businesses to arise in the 1990s were private colleges and secondary schools oriented to international curricula and foreign study. Despite the financial precariousness of many Mongolian families—or precisely because of it—parents remortgage their houses, sell their livestock, and take years' worth of salary advances to send students to these schools. The growth of enterprises related to mining, commerce, and banking has given schools that emphasize STEM education a particular appeal, while the disappearance of state support for humanistic fields related to cultural and ideological production has only increased the cachet of science and engineering. Combined with widespread Internet access and cheap personal electronics flooding over the border from China, these cultural conditions provide a receptive climate for MOOCs.

Sant, the private secondary school from which Battushig graduated, is well known for placing students in high-ranking colleges around the world. Over a series of interviews, its principal, Enkhmunkh, told me about his efforts to implement pedagogical innovations (e.g., learning by doing, encouraging creativity) and active embrace of STEM education. It was under his initiative that Sant offered students like Battushig the chance to participate in MIT's "Circuits and Electronics" MOOC. "I think that we succeeded in creating just the right atmosphere for students," Enkhmunkh

told me. "We created a blended learning environment that combined lectures and laboratories in a casual work setting. The arrangement worked for almost everyone regardless of their speed of learning and individual backgrounds. Some students watched their lectures and were free to ask us questions. Others worked on their circuit boards, discussed their ideas and problems with peers, and talked to us."

In short, Battushig and some (but not all) of his classmates succeeded in part because Sant was able to give them what a MOOC itself does not: a classroom environment with strong social support, empathetic teaching, personal attention, and rigorous preparation in math and science. Now, the National University of Mongolia has followed suit, incorporating MOOCs into its on-campus curriculum.

Young Mongolians today are growing up with a sense of urgency—even inevitability—about STEM education. Postsocialist malaise, the neoliberal economy, and the burgeoning mining industry—not to mention the advent of MOOCs—together are fostering a generation of neotechnocratic subjects. When Battushig, for instance, tells an interviewer, "I don't like to read literature books because they seem useless" (Young 2014), his words reflect the one-sided values of current Mongolian educational culture more broadly. In this expression of a categorical embrace of technoscientific utility, he embodies, like the figure of the shaman, the nation's hopes and fears as it searches for its place in global modernity.

MOOCS, OOPS, AND ANTHROPOLOGY AS A PUBLIC GOOD

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In an atmosphere of mixed hype and anxiety, discerning the real dangers and opportunities presented by MOOCs is a challenge; MOOCs tend to serve as a Rorschach inkblot, provoking apocalyptic academic fears or digital messianic visions—or both. I believe anthropologists should participate enthusiastically in MOOCs, assured that they will fail to overthrow traditional tertiary education but also confident that they will help to generate important innovations in the ways that we teach, publish, and interact with the broader public.

At the end of 2012, I became involved in Open2Study, a new MOOC platform built by Open Universities Australia (OUA). My employer, Macquarie University, is part of the OUA consortium. I had already created an online version of my course on human evolution for OUA and had committed to developing another on psychological anthropology.

The Open2Study project developed very rapidly, frenetically even, over summer break. The organizers decided, partway through the process, that the platform needed to be standardized: each MOOC would be a uniform, four-week-long "xMOOC"—that is, a content-driven and highly automated short course. The design was so autonomous

that I had to register as a student to respond to other students' questions on the discussion boards. Since my course, "Becoming Human: Anthropology," launched in April of 2013, more than 6,000 students have registered (Downey 2013a). The course completion rate hovers just below 30 percent, significantly higher than the industry average.

My motives for becoming involved in MOOCs were to develop my skills and my dedication to open educational resources principles (see Johnstone 2005). My home university is already committed to online education; refusing to participate in MOOCs would not slow this process. However, like many who completed degrees in traditional university settings, I felt ill-prepared for the distinctive pedagogical and technical challenges of online education. For me, "Becoming Human" was a "skunkworks": a low-risk pilot space in which to test new technologies and pedagogies. The MOOC offered a chance to collaborate with software designers, online education experts, and media producers; learn about video production from a professional production team; experiment with electronic publishing (Downey 2013b); and even build a simulation-based learning tool with software designers. Not all of these efforts were successful, but the learning opportunity was invaluable.

I argue that anthropologists should view MOOCs not as a threat to traditional university education but, rather, as an emerging genre of open publishing for a general audience, integrating forms of interactivity and feedback afforded by digital technology. A MOOC is a stepping stone—one that is comfortably familiar because it emulates to some degree the classroom. MOOCs are a path to a bigger project for anthropology: a comprehensive Online Open Publishing Strategy or "OOPS." Ideally, MOOCs will drive students into our degree programs and increase uptake of more substantial online projects: web-based documentary film, long-form popular writing on specialist blogs, even open access (OA) journals. However, they will also help (some) anthropologists to master new media, experiment with forms of online network building, and attract the next generation of anthropologists.

During our university's "Open Day" earlier this year, a young man leaned over the table in the anthropology booth and told me, "I did your MOOC . . . I'm going to major in anthropology." That was my hope: MOOCs not as a substitute for a degree but as a "gateway drug" into anthropology, leading interested students to more advanced training. Elsewhere, I've argued that MOOCs like the one I created are "education-y" and "course-ish" (Downey 2013c). They are an opportunity to put our best foot forward as a field but also open ourselves to a broader universe of publications, courses, and other opportunities.

The enthusiastic uptake of offerings from Coursera and other providers show just how attractive these types of materials are, even when they do not provide a clear pathway to a degree or certification. In fact, when university credit for MOOCs was made available at cut-rate prices from

Colorado State University-Global Campus and the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning, no one took up the offer (Kolowich 2013).

Anthropologists are faced with exciting but potentially disruptive new channels for online publishing and teaching. The opportunities will be great through MOOCs (and their successors) for public outreach, multimedia publication, interactive forums, collaborative authorship, even "citizen anthropology," enrolling the public directly in crowd-sourced research like the Mass Observation project (www.massobs.org.uk), Google's Endangered Languages Project (www.endangeredlanguages.com), or Open Context (www.opencontext.org). These forums will allow us to demonstrate to a broad audience the value of anthropology as a public good.

THE MAGICAL LAND OF MOOCS

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We know that much about U.S. higher education is broken.

Just to get into Duke University, where I teach, you need the perfect SATs, the 4.0, and to have won the Tchaikovsky piano competition or at least founded an NGO, not to mention parents who can pay the gigantic fees. You also must, it seems, be young. We have almost no returning students here in the semifascist age segmentation typical of most pricey private colleges and universities nowadays.

The great MOOC promise, of course, is democratizing education, if only just a bit. U.S. colleges and universities, as troubled as they may be, remain the world's envy. MOOCs let people from everywhere to take free classes with top professors from a huge variety of disciplines and fields. All you need is a decent Internet connection.

All this has, as we know, sparked much debate, much of it silly and uninformed. Boosters paint Coursera, Udacity, and the other MOOCs as a great leveler. Now, the likes of Thomas Friedman (2013) would have us believe that an Egyptian ditch digger has the same access to great education as the Yale-bound Upper East Sider. The reality is that MOOCs can never give the fuller campus experience—the clubs, the contacts, the cultural events, the face-to-face interaction with peers and faculty. Nor are most MOOCs even as good as the old-fashioned, nonvirtual version of the same course. Something gets lost in translation across so many liquid crystal screens, webcams, DSL lines, and wireless connections.

However, I also have little patience with knee-jerk opposition. You hear the whispering about MOOCs as some creepy plot by "the neoliberal university" to cut hiring, fire adjuncts, and otherwise downsize, restructure, and sell out to unspecified interests. Such fears are worth taking seriously, and yet I see little evidence so far for MOOCs having much effect on life back on our leafy campus wonderlands. MOOC students are mostly people without access to re-

ally good university classes for one reason or another. In my "Sports and Society" class on Coursera (Starn 2014), I had a paraplegic Scottish grandmother, an elementary school teacher from Bangladesh, and an accountant at a Taiwanese electronics company patching in during his lunch break. We certainly need to work toward making a conventional college education available to a far broader range of people—older students, kids from poor backgrounds, veterans, and more. Meanwhile, MOOCs answer to the giant, really quite moving thirst for knowledge out there worldwide. The crazy large enrollments (I had 20,000 students in "Sports and Society," a relatively small MOOC) testify to that planetary desire.

What the polarized debate also fails to capture is the sheer weirdness of doing a MOOC. It's horrifyingly hard to get a decent course together. Each of my 30 or so lecture videos was like producing a short film (and usually not a very good one at that). Most of us university professors would have been TV newscasters or movie stars if we had any talent in front of the camera. Then, once the course starts, it is like teleporting onto a strange new alien planet, the funhouse and horror show of virtual higher education. There are the creeps, trolls, and flamers on the discussion boards. Then there's the earnest Ukrainian student, offering to Skype with anyone who wants the latest from Kiev, or the high school P.E. teacher from Wichita interested in the relation between sports, culture, and politics. One of my students turned out to be a recently retired soccer star, Thomas Hitzlsperger, a midfielder on Germany's 2006 World Cup team and now a prominent gay rights activist. He joined one of our Google Hangouts with students from Malaysia, the Philippines, and Turkey for a terrific conversation that could only have happened online. In teaching a MOOC, you get a whole education yourself, as your students feed you ideas, readings, and films to watch.

There's much more to say about the good, the bad, and the wacky about MOOCs. I do find it quite striking that only just a few anthropology courses have been offered on Coursera, edX, and the other major platforms. I'd like to see anthropologists become more involved instead of leaving online teaching to business, engineering, medical, and more preprofessional courses, as threatens to happen.

The strange new land of MOOCs is, I think, very much worth exploring.

TOGGLING BETWEEN "PARTICIPANT" AND "OBSERVER" @ HARVARDX

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As digital media increasingly influence traditional teaching and learning, anthropologists in higher education find their own institutional circumstances shifting. I view what some have called "disruption" (Neem 2012) as an opportunity to participate in this transformation. Here I share a few of

the insights gained from toggling between two roles: that of an anthropologist of education and that of the leader of the "alpha test" of the first humanities module developed at HarvardX.

In April of 2013, I began working with Lisa New, a professor of literature at Harvard, to help transform her residential course on American poetry into a MOOC module. Having been director of the Harvard Extension School's Office of Online Teaching and Learning for the past eight years (Laserna and Leitner 2008), I knew from experience that online education places different demands on faculty than creating traditional scholarly products (books, research articles, etc.). It asks that they reconceptualize their teaching performance as a digital product with its own distinctive mode and means of production. As an anthropologist, I was also eager to study this educational experiment to observe which traditional scholastic norms and values would give way and which ones would persist.

We experimented with video formats and locations. One early shoot took place in the church Anne Bradstreet had attended, in which she had read her eulogies for her grandchildren. To get students to imagine Puritan spirituality, Lisa had them sing from the *Bay Psalm Book*. As they sang, she commended, "Beautifully terrible!" That is precisely how the pilgrims were to sing: imperfectly (see New 2013a). Both in the moment and when reviewing the footage back at HarvardX, I was struck by the power of the authentic stage. Being away from the classroom and in this historical setting enlivened the speech of both the professor and her students.

When Lisa watched the footage, she was disoriented at first. Her image was shrunken onto a computer screen. Her online students would have complete control over her performance: they could pause, rewind, and fast forward her! Gone was the control her physical presence exerted over her residential students. Yet this objectification also created space for reflection. Lisa soon assumed direction of her own performance. She began to revise her view of her role and reshape her teaching practice to encompass this new sense of professorship.

Throughout the project, I audiotaped and transcribed all of our conversations, as if doing fieldwork. Turning our conversations into objects (texts) gave me the time and space to step back as well. Beyond summarizing the knowledge we had produced, I was able to reflect on our process. What questions had we discussed? Had I been careful not to interrupt Lisa's train of thought? How were my suggestions received?

Not all were received well. When preparing some material for a unit on Emily Dickinson, I suggested that, because some of the original manuscripts had been digitized by the Houghton library, online students could be given the chance to annotate these digitized manuscript pages as well as the printed text; Lisa refused. Her reaction struck me as analytically significant: for her, the poets' manuscripts retained an "aura" (Benjamin 1969), even in the context of digital reproduction.

I got into the habit of drawing large diagrams that synthesized the structure and details of the module on the writable walls of my office. Over time, terms like "storyboarding," "IPA problems with the annotation tool," "Hello World," and "Khan Academy–type shorts" indexed the features of the emergent digital product.

Lisa and I worked together to identify fundamental research questions raised by the process of building the MOOC. Lisa wondered, "How do people learn to read complex texts? Under what conditions would students experience *flow*?" These questions dovetailed with my own longstanding interest in what I call "cybercy," the navigational aspect of cyberspace (Laserna 1998). I ran these questions by the HarvardX research team, but they weren't the kind of problems that could be addressed quantitatively using the big data generated by the edX platform. Indeed, these may be precisely the kinds of questions that demand a qualitative, ethnographic approach.

As of this writing, both modules have been tested, and the complete course, "Poetry in America," will launch in the fall of 2014 (see New 2013b). Through my participation in the MOOC project as an ethnographically trained producer, I toggled between creating "models of" and "models for" (Geertz 1973:93) an emerging practice. This experience raised questions that deserve further reflection: What are the opportunities and pitfalls of working as applied anthropologist in the online education? How does the ethnographic craft of producing grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1999) equip us to intervene in the future of cybercy phenomena?

THE MOOC AS LABORATORY: THE IMPLICATIONS OF A/B TESTING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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One of the most surprising discoveries of my ongoing ethnographic research on the implementation of MOOC platforms, curricula, and the attendant learning research is the underlying interest that many of my interlocutors—software engineers, educators, and learning researchers—express for a technique that is both utterly familiar and yet strangely distant: A/B testing. Although the A/B test is superficially similar to the kind of controlled experimental study common in education research, my fieldwork suggests that the inspiration for its use in higher education comes from another source: Internet platforms such as Google, Amazon, and Netflix.

An A/B test on the World Wide Web is a randomized experimental comparison of a control and a treatment group in terms of their response to particular stimuli. Web companies like Google and Amazon use it to determine what

features work best to maximize clicks and sales: from the order of search results to the right shade of blue for a particular interface. In terms of its social organization, this technique differs radically from the controlled experiment. First, web companies use it at an almost unimaginable scale: Google has hundreds of A/B tests running continuously, involving millions of unaware users (Christian 2012). Second, these tests can often be turned on with the click of a button and monitored in real time. Third, results are not published in journals; rather, they are encoded back into the design of the software, accelerating the production processes. Finally, these tests blur the line between research, marketing, and business decision-making.

MOOCs have given software engineers and computer scientists an opportunity to extend the reach of A/B testing from the world of online commerce to higher education—and with it, I argue, come social norms associated with the software industry. The two largest MOOC providers, edX and Coursera, are organized as software companies that primarily employ engineers; their product is a software-driven platform that universities and professors use to create, build, and execute courses. MOOCs also provide computer scientists an opportunity to make learning a topic of research and inquiry. These new actors draw on techniques from computer science and software engineering—A/B testing, yes, but also machine learning, crowdsourcing, and data-driven "analytics"—to not only refine processes of teaching and assessment but also reconfigure institutions. I term this process "platformization."

So why should anthropologists take an interest? The university has always been a laboratory of sorts. Along with the prison, factory, and hospital, the school figures centrally in Michel Foucault's (1977) account of modern forms of disciplining human subjects and producing knowledge about them. Platformization marks a new phase in this Foucauldian narrative, as an ascendant group of experts (computer scientists) implement infrastructural reforms that align higher education with their own disciplinary ethos. What kind of experimental apparatus are the platforms they create, and what kinds of power-knowledge do they produce? My fieldwork suggests some answers—and more questions.

My first set of questions is ethical and political. Who designs, authorizes, and performs A/B experiments in education: software engineers, educators, learning researchers, or university administrators? What kinds of institutional and teaching decisions will be based on A/B testing and data-driven analytics? When must university IRBs be consulted? Who owns the results? Are findings disseminated in the form of generalizable knowledge, or are they folded back into software as proprietary design features? Do teachers have a say in whether education researchers can "splice in" their experiments into a course? Will the ubiquity of A/B testing redistribute authority between engineers, teachers, and researchers? The actors I observe are currently negotiating all these issues.

My second set of questions is epistemological. Among other things, scientific research on education seeks to understand the causes of learning. Even if an A/B test yields results in the form of a statistically significant difference between control and test group, to explain why it does so, one needs a theory of learning. My impression is that the computer scientists are less interested in why subjects respond in particular ways to certain stimuli (e.g., rearranging the order of math problems) than in applying the experimental results to amplify desired outcomes. Thus, the logic of techniques like A/B testing might radically shift the objectives of learning research.

While recent debates have focused on institutional transformations (the neoliberal university, reductions in state funding), A/B testing reflects other kinds of infrastructural shifts that are less readily visible but equally important to understanding the implications of MOOC-type education platforms for both the transmission—and production—of knowledge. The Internet platform is simultaneously a medium for commerce, social interactions, and cultural production (Gillespie 2010). These platforms offer real value to higher education; yet the technical practices they embed are also worth debating and discussing because they profoundly affect what it means to be human in a world of algorithms and software.

MOOCS AND THE POLITICS OF VISUAL BOREDOM

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At film school in the 1990s, we were essentially forbidden from making films built around talking heads. A talking head, for those who are unfamiliar, is a person or persons speaking formally to the camera, generally in monologue, about a topic they know well. Most documentary aficionados can easily name a number of filmmakers who successfully employ this style of exposition: Ken Burns, Errol Morris, and Morgan Neville, the latter of whom recently won the Academy Award for *20 Feet from Stardom* (Neville 2013). However, talking heads, as my professors at the University of Southern California noted, are a poor use of a visual medium. Film, they would always remind us, is an art form that uses visual signifiers to evoke (Eisenstein 1975, 1977). The Hollywood-bound film students in my program knew that their careers depended on learning how to make their films speak without words. The visual anthropology students like myself wanted to produce visual documents of culture like our teacher and mentor Tim Asch.

Our graduate program included classes in film production as well as critical studies, where we read film analysis, literary criticism, and postmodern anthropological theory. In critical studies, we would discuss how film leads to the reproduction of dangerous ideologies as viewers interpellate themselves into the films they watch (Nichols 1981). Films play with our emotions, seduce us with sound, and

often suspend our critical reason, but after complaining about filmmakers who exoticized, aestheticized, or fetishized their subjects, we would walk into our film production classes and do just that. If one is not going to inspire the passions of the viewer, what's the point of making films?

As digital technology replaced film, wasting film on talking heads stopped being an issue, and filmmaking became a tool for the masses. The Internet became a soapbox, and now anyone who wants to share his or her opinion has a platform. Lost in all of this are the lessons of my professors at USC.

The most egregious example I have seen of the two-dimensional use of moving images is MOOCs—and I refer particularly to those in the social sciences. These massive courses were built around experts pontificating in monologue to the camera with cutaways used to index facts spoken by the professor. Indexical representation, in which images simply stand for facts, is the least sophisticated use of film. At its best, film is evocative; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, a MOOC on Buddhism might use cutaways to Buddhist monasteries when the lecturer speaks about Buddhist monasteries. The juxtapositions of sound and image are decidedly not supposed to provoke dream states, shatter a sense of the real, undermine authority, fuel desire, or any of the many things that good cinema does that glues us to our seats and transforms our sense of self.

MOOCs rely instead on what I am calling "the politics of visual boredom." The information presented in a MOOC is supposed to represent an objective or empirically based truth. Because they are framed as the dissemination of authoritative knowledge, MOOCs by definition cannot be cinematic. Evocative filmmaking destabilizes the idea that there are unquestioned truths. More importantly, MOOCs demand that students be tested on the facts they acquired. Quantifying a student's "progress" translates into forms of capital and legitimates the value of the MOOC.

The politics of visual boredom became clear to me as I tried to make a MOOC with my international research network. Our raw footage consists of about ten hours of conversations where we attempt to unpack how postcolonialism, ethics, engagement, democracy, and economics are taken up differently around the world. In the end, I abandoned the idea of trying to turn our footage into a series of classes and instead chose to create an evocative 50-minute piece that captures the instability of knowledge systems. From my perspective, this film will do more to capture our critical interventions than hours of conversational footage.

My concern with the politics of visual boredom is that inept aesthetics hide how truly complicated MOOCs are. First, there is an implicit social contract between the producers and consumers of MOOCs that the information presented represents clearly defined truths. The dispassionate use of film unquestionably reinforces the terms of that contract, but film is by nature deceptive (Renov 1993). It is a two-dimensional medium that presents itself as four dimensional. However, as any student of photography, documentaries, or visual anthropology knows, images can never stand in for

truth (Hockings 1975; Ruby 2000; Sontag 2003). Second, images are constructs with their own ontologies and epistemologies (Boltanski 1999). A good example is the race and gender of most MOOC lecturers. One could argue that it is simply a demographic issue that more white men lead these classes, but hypothetically could an African American man, with an accent that identifies him as having grown up in the inner city, teach a course on continental philosophy? In other words, visually boring MOOCs are not free of fetishizing, aestheticizing, and exoticizing. Instead, they simply bury this truth in faux monastic dispassion. After trying to embrace this new form of distance learning, I am now more committed than ever to assigning wonderful documentaries and visual ethnographies to real-time, tactile, sense-rich, classroom-based classes.

MOOCS, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

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I have watched with some fascination as my university has restructured itself at the relative forefront of attempts to take on the varied forces behind globalizing higher education. For its new, full degree–granting campus in Shanghai, one might ask, what does it mean for NYU to offer a degree simply in the "Humanities" (rather than, say, in history, or area studies, or something more like anthropology in the social sciences)? Or—the only related alternative—in "Global China Studies"? In the latter, already one sees a potentially contradictory position in which nothing is local anymore even while the local is everything. In the logic of the global university, the basic terms on which a field like anthropology has depended (such as culture, or area) are now dissipating, while the fundamental viewpoints that have oriented such fields (the disciplines themselves) are vanishing (see Looser 2012). MOOCs are an integral expression of this global logic; this may be why they have not yet really died as some have implied (Chafkin 2013). This is part of the interest they hold for me.

It may help to start with a distinction, not always made, between MOOCs and online learning more generally: in principle, MOOCs are both massive and open. These are the characteristics that allow for the more altruistic claims (MOOCs ostensibly can expand education to anyone and in an open way), but they are the features that are most destabilizing of traditional universities as institutions. The massiveness and openness are also the qualities that make MOOCs an expression of the current order of the global in higher education.

In part, this has to do with how they restructure notions of "area." Area specificity in the world has not gone away; Accra is nothing like Kamakura, nor even is Shanghai anything like Tokyo. The logic of MOOCs' massiveness is premised on a principle of scale (the Internet goes anywhere) rather than of space or locality. Inevitably, critics have asked

whether a class produced in the United States, for example, can effectively teach students cross-culturally (see Sharma 2013). This apparent divide between a geographical world of spatial and cultural variation and a MOOC-world of scalar indifference is part of the current logic of the global in higher education—and the conundrum of the global university. It might be easy enough to resolve this by deciding that MOOCs would be better used in limited ways, integrated into traditional, site-specific classrooms, or that they might be used more interactively, again in site-specific ways. These trends are already evident, but—at least in principle—they push the MOOC back to something more simply like online learning. I'd like to stick with the idea of MOOCs as an expression of a distinctive global university form.

The risks of MOOCs (and of the economic and technological forces behind them) are by now fairly clear. Massive online classes can emphasize the authority of the individual instructor, both by increasing the distance between instructor and student and by perpetuating a star system that reduces the number of available perspectives. Attempts by Silicon Valley companies to take over the role of accrediting courses, apply big-data analysis to student performance, and create tracking systems that students will inevitably follow, along with the emphasis on courses in fields like business, technology, and life sciences, all encourage the reduction of education to the single value system of a quantifiable, largely profit-oriented, measure. Anthropology's disciplinary perspective, and the differentiations of area it relies on, are now clearly in play: the universals that we once thought we knew (the disciplinary differences that grounded our intellectual perspective and the configuration of cultural and geographic difference that defined the concept of an *area*) are being threatened and challenged by a very different conceptual order of the universal—one that the global university and practices like the MOOCs already presupposed.

It would probably be naïve to simply wish away these forces of globalization that are inscribing a reorganization of area and the spaces of thought and of life into institutions of higher learning. More limited use of online technologies might help us to engage with local, site-specific differences in new ways and perhaps even to break down hierarchies within higher education that are less conducive to truly creative learning. However, it is more specifically the MOOCs that point to the real complexity, and real necessity, of considering not only how to provide universal education but also what it now means to look for—and where to look for—possible categories of universal thought in the world today.

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