Facilitating the Community as Curriculum in Open Education

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Background and prior facilitation experiences

I have been a faculty member and mentor with the State University of New York for more than 30 years. As a lifelong learner with a MFA Education, I recently earned a MS degree in Creativity and Change Leadership from SUNY/Buffalo State. Currently, online global and open learning is of particular interest for my research and practice.

The majority of my experience in the past 20 years has been with online learning, as both a facilitator of Higher Education (HE) learning and as a student of learning. As a course developer (using this terminology as evidence of how long I have been in the “business of education”) as well as learning facilitator (teaching faculty), I have been strongly influenced by the words attributed to Alvin Toffler:

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

As a lifelong learner, I have always explained to students that I expect to learn as much, if not more, through them, as they will learn through me. And so, I have always considered myself as a learning facilitator on a two way street of learning, unlearning and relearning.

Having worked with the Learning Management System (LMS) in several different iterations and varieties as well as a few more open platforms such as Moodle, I am always eager to learn of more integrated and engaging methods of learning and facilitating learning.

More recently my interests have broadened to include global open education venues that incorporate opportunities for more collaborative learning. Borrowing from an African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others.” The opportunity to spend a week with people who have vested interests in education is a prime example of working together and going farther than if one gives a summary of what Open Education portends. The
experience of being in an open education course opens the potential for more co-facilitation and collaboration as global circumstances and opportunities evolve. As global technology and innovations speed ever faster, I wish to go far in sharing learning and learning opportunities. In the past I have been in global education, specifically Greece and the Middle East with blended learning and most recently MOOCs … as a student and as a developer/facilitator. This opportunity expanded those initial horizons.

Spending two years as a student/participant in a number of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) gave me some familiarity and practice with open and distributed learning. It seems to me that life is its own cMOOC (connectivist MOOC as a networked and distributed learning environment) and that type of learning is life and that for me, life is learning.

Combining the elements of the more formal degree disciplines with my own lifelong learning, Open Education, cMOOCs and my PLN (Personal Learning Network), the 2011 Creativity and Multicultural Communication (CMC11) was launched under the aegis of SUNY/Empire State College as a credit and non-credit learning option. It is still somewhat active (although not as a credit bearing option), most particularly via its Facebook group, and on occasion, with folks who just want to play in the CMC11 sandbox. The success of this experiment is documented in an article in the OLC (Online Learning Consortium) Journal and has, unfortunately, recently been placed behind a pay wall. I have since designed and co-facilitated two additional cMOOCs for SUNY/Empire State College: VizMath and Metaliteracy MOOC.

If we look at the community as the driving factor in the curriculum of the cMOOC (Downes, 2013), then the facilitator is both a learning facilitator and a learner. Most recently I have been a participant in the globally offered Peer to Peer University (P2PU) course Rhizomatic Learning. While the underlying platform is P2PU, the community is the driving factor for the curriculum. When the initial 10 week slot for the course ended, a number of the participants decided to continue with a new topic/question each succeeding week. The topic was crowd sourced with the remaining participants. From this experience a number of interesting initiatives have evolved with participants collaborating on a number of projects, such as: a self-facilitated continuation of the course by some of the participants; two separate
research projects that are crowd sourced as part of the research sourcing; a new weekly EdTechTalk Q&A broadcast addressing education questions; collaboration on several conference presentations; and new participants joining the ongoing “uncourse”. This is a prime example of the facilitative opportunities of a community as the curriculum.

**Experience and reflections from personal North West OER Education Week facilitation**

The NWOER course was conceived as an exercise for facilitators and others as a community for professional development. As such, it offered an opportunity for a wide range of educators to work with social media in an open environment and further develop their PLN and additional online communication skills. The foundation for facilitating this community as curriculum developed out of a myriad of experiences brought to the “course” by the expertise and various experiences of the participating facilitators.

Chrissi Nerantzi was a participant in the CMC11 cMOOC and quickly became an integral part of my own PLN. We have collaborated on several occasions and when she invited me to be one of the facilitators for NWOER Open Education Week, I readily accepted. I always enjoy new and varied experiences with open and global education so this was a perfect opportunity to step into another global venue. In the process of inviting co-facilitators, my colleague from the SUNY/ESC cMOOC projects (Betty Hurley-Dasgupta of the US) as well as a PLN colleague (Lenander Singh of Guyana) from Rhizo14 were recruited by me for NWOER Open Ed Week. The community of collaboration expanded and became the core of the new facilitation adventure for a community as curriculum. Admittedly, this endeavor was a slight bit more directed than others I have worked in, as it was launched on a previously developed course and platform. As such, the curriculum potentially had a distinct outline, although the participants were free to select topics they wanted to follow, or not. This was a very good example of a Self-Oriented Learning Environment (SOLE) where the community of learners develop the curriculum according to their optional needs and wants of what to follow in order to create a flow of learning experiences.

As the week progressed, it became apparent that the participants (community of learners) engaged more through the social media than
the P2PU stand-alone “course” platform. Social media consisting primarily blog posts, Google+ discussions, Twitter and Hangouts became the curriculum building venues … developed by the community as an expansion of and sometimes a deviation from the originally suggested P2PU curriculum. The most active venues, with the most participants, were the daily tweetchat sessions. It was here that we observed more exchanges of ideas and a more obvious PLN development. Granted, the majority of those engaged (participants and facilitators) are intrinsically involved in the education arena as students, researchers or faculty. This means that self-directed learning (SOLE) is not as big a leap of faith as it might be for the non-initiated. Hence, the week went smoothly and the pace was in a state of perpetual “flow”. (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) The experience was stimulating and opened the door to new thinking as well as meeting new thinkers with whom to collaborate and add to one’s Personal Learning Network (PLN). This was the added value for me, and I suspect was the same for the other participants and facilitators. Expanding my horizons and engaging in a global network of learning is the core of my own lifelong learning goal. One of the major takeaways of the NWOER week was the self-actualization of the potentials of Open Education Week for each of the participants. It would have been interesting to engage more traditional students in the course for the week, if only to find out how easily they could follow our self-initiated learning styles. Who were the other participants and where did they come from? How many lurkers (non engaging participants) were there? What did they gain from watching from the “outside?”

A few concluding thoughts

One of the challenges, from my perspective, is finding solid incubation time in the faster-paced, more intensive learning endeavors. Time for deeper reflection of the learning is not always available. Certainly, blog posts offer some opportunity for reflection, and yet, there does not seem to be enough time to “bake” the reflective thinking and it tends to come out “microwaved”… at least in my own experience.

The NWOER week found that social media in the forms of Tweets, Hangouts and Google + and Facebook postings and discussion were
filled with expanded thinking and activity. It really seemed to be a learning event by and for facilitators that helped them further develop their own skills and understanding of an open education setting.

As we facilitated the specific daily tweetchat sessions for NWOER Open Education Week (Reed & Nerantzi, 2014), I found myself wondering if we started with one specific opening question for each session, could we then let the session evolve out of some of the replies and participant generated questions. Additional questions could be held in abeyance in case the conversation lags and needs impetus. This leads back to my thinking about learning where the community is the curriculum. One can always have additional leading questions “in the wings” and still leave the door open for more flow among the participants. The facilitation focus is then upon supporting the learners and learning rather than directing or molding the content thus allowing the questions to shape the direction and engagement. This allows questions to flow out of discussions and tweets rather than trying to get prepared materials “covered”. From my perspective, learning involves developing more complex questions rather than seeking a satisfactory “answer”. There are generally many possible answers, depending upon one’s needs and perspective. Perhaps this sort of learning venue would serve as a basis for professional development topics. The non-linear process would offer educators the opportunity to practice communication in the social media venues and serve as a model for deeper connections with their students in their other teaching/learning facilitation courses. Facilitation of educators by educators might enable all to develop their skills and gain a deeper understanding for open education in their own practice.

This takes practice and a willingness to cede control of the venue … a difficult task for most of us who have come through the traditional schooling modes.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the NWOER Open Education Week initiative and hope to be engaged in many additional initiatives in online open education as they become available and/or are initiated by the facilitators and participants in this NWOER Open Education Week and beyond. The network that developed has potential for further explorations.
References

