

Transcultural Elements in Connectivist Massive Open Online Courses

Nazife Sen Ersoy

*School of Foreign Languages, Dumlupınar University, Turkey
sen.nazife@gmail.com*

Evrım Genç Kumtepe

*Open Education Faculty, Anadolu University, Turkey
egkumtepe@anadolu.edu.tr*

Abstract

This study was conducted to explore the transcultural elements in connectivist massive open online courses (cMOOC). It was designed as a holistic single-case study that consists of a cMOOC which took place in the Summer term of 2016 and it was the 4th cycle of the course up to that year. It was completely online utilizing solely open and distributed environments including course website, Twitter, Google+, Blogs, and Facebook.

Data of the study were obtained via different methods and tools such as observation, semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and document analysis. Four of the course tutors/facilitators and 10 of the active learners in the course were the primary participants of the study. Data were analyzed using the content analysis technique by means of Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Results reveal that there is some sort of transculture formed in this course. Accordingly, there is an authentic community with a participatory culture based on acceptance, sharing, openness, collaboration, kindness, and trust. However, the course itself lacks structure unlike traditional online courses, and in turn, didn't support teaching and cognitive presence for certain learners. It was challenging and confusing for some learners who were not self-regulated and didn't have enough digital literacies to learn effectively in a connectivist course since it adopted and encouraged a distributed learning approach.

Keywords: Connectivist Massive Open Online Courses, Connectivism, Transculture.

Introduction

With the rapid development of technology and especially the introduction of computers into our lives, the way individuals access, share and produce information have been through a process of transformation which makes it possible to access information at any time and share it with people anywhere around the world. And thanks to the advancements in information and communication technologies, spatial boundaries between countries have become more permeable. As a consequence, cross-border communication has become possible for many people from different geographies and the world has now turned into “a global village” as McLuhan (1964) stated. An individual from any country or nation has an opportunity to communicate, exchange information and data with a person from a different country or nation. Meanwhile, the interaction of different cultures has become highly possible. Especially with the widespread use of the Internet, web-based online courses have also become widespread over time. In such courses, there is a heterogeneous student population with diverse individual characteristics from all over the world who have had the opportunity to take the same course that provides a basis for multicultural encounters and intercultural interaction. Owing to these interactions and diversities, the formation of a new, hybrid culture called “transculture” becomes highly possible as well. Massive open online courses in this sense ensure a great atmosphere for unifying people with diverse characteristics thanks to being free and open to anyone with a suitable device and internet connection.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Connectivism and Connectivist Massive Open Online Courses

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are unique in the sense that, unlike a typical online course, they provide open and mostly free access to anyone who has access to the internet regardless of their age, education, gender, location, socio-economic status, etc. There are two main types of MOOCs; connectivist massive open online courses (cMOOC) and extended massive open online courses (xMOOC).

cMOOCs are based on the principles of a relatively new learning theory “Connectivism”, proposed by George Siemens (2005) and Stephen Downes (2005). This learning theory suggests that the process of learning is facilitated by and rests within the connections between people over a digital network. Connectivist learning doesn't dwell on the transfer of knowledge from an educator to learners. Instead, it involves the active engagement of learners with resources in communication with others. In addition, learning is distributed across the Web especially on online peer networks, such as social media, blogs, and forums (Royster, 2018; Kop, 2011).

Here are the principles of connectivism (Siemens, 2005).

- Learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.

- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known
- Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality.

On the other hand, cMOOCs are learner-centered courses with a non-rigid and dynamic course structure that emphasize creativity, cooperation, autonomy, and social connections within the learning community (Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2010). Bates (2014) stated in his blog that a cMOOC is “a loosely organized online community of learners focused on a shared interest in a content area, using various social media and personal interaction to both learn from and share with the participants' collective knowledge.” An essential feature of a cMOOC is the use of a variety of connectivist tools tailored to the needs of the student such as a learning management system, knowledge networks, personal learning environments, and social media (Royster, 2018). In line with this, there are several distinctive design characteristics of this type of MOOC (Bates, 2014);

- Social media use is essential,
- Content is driven by participants themselves.
- Communication is distributed through the network.
- There is no formal assessment.

Transculture

Culture is a loaded word and it is in every part of our lives. Especially in educational settings, thanks to the internet and communication technologies, it is much easier for learners with diverse cultural characteristics to come together and learn from each other. And if certain prerequisites such as structure, sense of community, interaction, and social, cognitive, and teaching presences (Sen-Ersoy, 2021) are fulfilled, the formation of transculture is highly possible. In the simplest terms, transculture can be defined as a new hybrid culture that is formed owing to the interactions between people from different cultures. During these cultural exchanges, some cultural features change, some disappear and some stay the same which results in a new, hybrid culture (Welsch, 1999; Murray, 2010). Especially in online learning environments, the interactions between different learners and different cultures have a greater tendency to create a transculture. To this end, Möhrer et al. (2015)'s definition of transculture complies best with this research's context, “the behavioral proficiency to effectively establish a common working culture based on shared local experiences that fosters the efficient proceeding of intercultural transactions within a multicultural context”.

Online learning has a high potential to be transcultural beyond being multicultural or intercultural, as it enables various learners with different cultures and characteristics to interact, exchange information, and produce and share knowledge (Salvadori, 1997). However, it can be said that the majority of the studies on culture in online learning in the literature are mostly carried out in local contexts or formal courses with limited cultural diversity. Also, such studies are mostly “intercultural”. because; they are basically based on comparing cultures in terms of similarities and differences. But transculture is much more than these comparisons, it is more about different kinds of interactions that result in new and hybrid transformations. In this respect, there is a need to investigate the phenomenon of transculture in online environments in order to examine these hybrid transformations and to identify new identities and cultures created jointly. In this respect, cMOOCs provide an ideal environment to look for the formation of transculture since they promise greater diversity in terms of participants due to being free and open with no prerequisites.

Methodology

Research Model

This study is conducted to explore the transcultural elements in connectivist massive open online courses (cMOOC). It requires the investigation of transcultural elements in their real and natural context without any manipulation. Therefore, qualitative research methodology is mainly adopted. It is designed as a case study since it provides the researcher with the opportunity to examine and understand the phenomena in depth (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2008) while allowing the researcher to investigate events, people, and situations in their natural environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Case studies vary according to the type, the purpose of the analysis, and the limitation of the case (Stake, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2014). To this end, a holistic single case study design was employed in order to examine the phenomenon of transculture in a cMOOC context in depth.

Context

The case of the present study comprises a cMOOC which took place in the Summer term of 2016 starting in July. By the time of the study, it was the 4th cycle of the course up to that year. It was a completely online course utilizing solely open and distributed environments including course website, Blogs, Facebook, newsletters, and primarily Google+ and Twitter. It was a free and open initiative of a group of people who conducted the first three cycles of this MOOC as a part of a national project which was then canceled. It was a four-week course with a one-week purposeful break to provide the participants with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the course so far.

Participants

Four members of the course team (facilitators/tutors) and 10 of the active participants of the course were the primary participants of the study. Their demographics are as follows:

Table 1. Demographics of Course Team Members

	Role	Gender	Age	Level of Education	Country	Occupation
1	Facilitator	F	52	PhD	Scotland	Learning Technologist
2	Make cycle leader	F	66	Masters	USA	Teacher
3	Assistant facilitator	F	58	Bachelors	USA	Project-based Learning Coach
4	Participant/facilitator	M	50	Masters	USA	Teacher

Table 2. Demographics of Course Participants

	Gender	Age	Education	Country	Occupation	Number of MOOC Experience
1	M	72	Masters	USA	Teaching Artist	5
2	M	44	Masters	USA	Instructional Coach	5-6
3	M	60	Masters	USA	Librarian	5
4	F	52	Masters	USA	Middle School Teacher	60+
5	M	70	Masters	USA	Retired Educator	3
6	M	56	Masters	Netherlands	Educationalist	16
7	M	61	Masters	USA	Instructor at a University	12+
8	M	41	MBA	USA	Informatics Manager	2
9	F	58	Masters	USA	Teacher	1
10	F	58	Bachelor	USA	Project Manager	8-10

Data Collection and Analysis

In case studies, it is considered important to diversify the data in terms of ensuring validity and reliability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Data of the study were obtained from various sources. A semi-structured interview form comprising of six questions for course team members and an open-ended questionnaire with seven questions for the participants were created to examine their experiences and opinions regarding the transcultural elements within the course. Besides, participant observation and document analysis were the other primary data collection techniques employed.

All the permissions for data collection were granted from the course administrators before the course started and an informed consent form was used with all of the individual participants. In addition, both data collection tools got approval from the human subject committee of the researchers’ institution before the data collection procedure started. Data were analyzed using the content analysis technique by means of Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Two of the distinctive themes, community, and structure, in Sen-Ersoy (2021)’s research were used as the main framework regarding the formation of transculture and in reporting the findings.

Findings

This study addressed the phenomena of transculture from three different perspectives within a connectivist massive open online course; tutor experiences, learner experiences, and course structure. Based on Sen-Ersoy (2021)’s research, there are two main aspects signaling the formation of transculture which are community and structure.

According to a comprehensive literature review conducted based on these two aspects, shared interests and shared culture are two main elements of a community from a transcultural stance.

a. Tutor/Facilitator Experiences

Four tutors shared their views and experiences in this cMOOC. According to the results, what motivated them to administer and take part in such a MOOC project was basically a sense of belonging, friendship, and responsibility to sustain the community. Here are two examples from tutors' interviews supporting this finding:

"I did this cMOOC last year because I knew some of the folk from other cMOOCs. I wanted it to happen this year too, so when I found out that it was not funded anymore this year I was keen to help make it happen anyway." (Tutor 1)

"The people/participants and facilitators of past cycles feel like online friends and colleagues with whom I feel a deep connection...keeping the community going seemed a good thing to do for everyone." (Tutor 3)

Tutors are of the opinion that, unlike a traditional cMOOC, this cMOOC was unique in the sense that it was more of a community and experience than a course. Accordingly, the distinctive characteristics of this course were openness, a sense of community, creativity, collaboration, support, and lifelong learning. Tutor 2 and Tutor 3's these explanations support this finding;

"Its creativity, generosity, and openness (in that we are open to others' ways of thinking and being, and suggestions) ... I think it is similar to DS106 in that both of them are communities. I think it differs from MOOCs by, say, Futurelearn that are full of content written by experts for learners to consume." (Tutor 3)

"The distinctive characteristics are 1) inviting - honoring any participation and to jump in (or not) at any time 2) considerate - thoughtful, respectful, clarifying responses that invite further responses 3) supportive - sharing how-to and asking questions or offering guidance -- any support needed 4) relevant and deep thinkers - analyzing tools and thoughts/ideas for replication and relevance in education 5) resilient - willing to struggle, fail, and try again with new tasks, connections, analysis, etc. and knowing there is support 6) real - use of any tool, digital or not, to learn and connect" (Tutor 4)

Another tutor explained in detail what made this course particularly different from other courses he had experienced or administered from a connectivist learning perspective putting an emphasis on community, sharing, building connections, and dialogue.

"Its main goal is to live connected learning principles. That means honoring all participation [or not] and all paths to the learning the participants take, connecting people first and content next -- creating conversations on ideas for living, not just for an educational institution or situation. It is lifelong learning in bursts, turns, twists, and rests that fit the learners' needs...and in the community of learners, as they share, reflect, converse, remix, and publish, everyone learns. Everyone learns in a personalized way. The 'adjacent possible' creates depth and surprises, and innovation results from openness, collaboration, conversation, and reflection. The connected community is a social symphony - our individual contributions promote, invite, encourage a harmonious epiphany of what the world could be, each making the world better for each other." (Tutor 1)

Shared values - principles mutually agreed on for good conduct of interaction and collaborative learning- are critical in order for a community to be formed and sustain. According to the tutors, what determined the shared values in this course were its participatory nature and being open to anyone to be a part of this community along with sharing the joy of this journey with others not with judgment but in collaboration. Here are some examples that support these findings:

"Ability to drop in, drop out, lurk...respecting different perspectives, in other words, no judgments, much encouragement." (Tutor 2)

"It is very fluid, the framework is loosely defined, encourages veering off in new directions. Not full of 'assignments' and 'grades', but self-directed experimentation and growth with the guidance of others." (Tutor 1)

"...the playfulness, the openness of multiple entry points and the sense of collaboration and connectedness." (Tutor 4)

On the other hand, Tutor 3 expressed both her appreciation and criticism of the openness of some of the course's social media accounts to anyone interested. She stated her opinions as;

"I appreciate that the Google Plus community continues and is open/public for others to view or join the journey. That is important if such communities are to flourish. The walled community of Facebook prevents the possibility of others joining or building a similar opportunity. I think the Facebook community needs to be opened. Otherwise, it's just a gated and elite community..."

b. Learner Experiences

Results revealed that the shared interests in bringing the learners together under the roof of this course are somewhat similar to tutors'. Some of them were participants of the previous cycles of the course and built friendships that lasted until then, while the others were in the course out of curiosity, creativity, collaboration, flexible and stress-free learning, and a sense of community. Here are some examples supporting these findings:

"I have been involved since the start, I knew it would help me find good reads and good tools, I knew I would learn and experience new things." (P4)

"Joy of collaborating with smart, talented, positive people" (P7)

"The creative 'play' and the no stress and flexible schedule..." (P10)

Learners have diverse opinions regarding the distinctive characteristics of the course. Openness, collaboration, sense of connectedness, reciprocation, sharing, acceptance, being small scale, and supportive.

"This MOOC is built on the foundation of Connected Learning, but what makes it special is the playfulness, the openness of multiple entry points, and the sense of collaboration and connectedness. The open doors to emergent ideas - the unexpected that sparks collaboration - this is really the key element (and difficult to plan for)." (P2)

"The powerful bonds of social capital shared, both bonding and bridging. Reciprocation is powerful and is always trying to reach from virtual to real and back again." (P5)

"The 'assignments' are instead 'makes' calling creativity into the mix, and everything is optional, do as you like, when you like." (P6)

"The Community, the trust, the risk-taking; mutual respect across differences in age, experience, and culture, curiosity, inventiveness, kindness and compassion..." (P9)

"More focus on connections, generosity, and willingness to continue connections over time..." (P10)

In terms of the participants' opinions regarding the shared culture –an amalgam of common ways of doing things and learning, ethics, norms, rules- within the course, there were various opinions mostly in line with the distinctive characteristics of the course. The most prominent opinions about the shared culture of this course are as follows: culture of collaboration, acceptance, trust, creativity, openness, inclusion, peer support, and mutual respect. These quotes exemplify the findings above:

"Mutual respect across differences in age, experience, and culture...curiosity, inventiveness, kindness, compassion" (P1)

"Openness and lack of self-focus, more willingness to validate others, more motivation to encourage and include." (P3)

"There is, at least, a shared enthusiasm to encourage others to engage in tasks. Participants support each other's expanding efforts with positive suggestions/feedback, intentionally building shared 'products'." (P4)

"...maybe a shared ethos about collaboration and celebration of people doing what they are doing, in whatever form and in whatever way they feel comfortable doing it" (P6)

What participants thought about the shared values bringing and keeping them together within this community were more or less aligned with their opinions regarding the shared culture in the course. Some of them even seemed to be confused which is probably because these are interrelated and abstract terms that are not easily put into words.

To this end, the most common ideas about the shared values can be listed as sharing, openness, collaboration, acceptance, participatory culture, supportive and learner-driven. Here are some quotations from the learners supporting these findings:

"Make Cycles encourage making, playing, tinkering, and sharing. The underlying principles of Connected Learning create opportunities for exploring and sharing passions. The collaborative nature, most of all, is a welcome sign for anyone to join in." (P9)

"Acceptance is one of the shared values. Connected learning principles and values are at its core as well. Willingness to reciprocate, first. Second, a deep capacity to observe, understand, and then judge if need." (P8)

"The framework of the course, and the types of individuals it appeals to independent thinkers with a desire to create and expand their current knowledge and understanding." (P4)

c. Structure

The cMOOC of this study was completely online utilizing solely open and distributed environments. The main platforms used throughout the course were Twitter, Google+, and YouTube along with self-organized spaces such as Blogs, Facebook, and some applications. According to the course organizers, unlike what the "C" in the acronym cMOOC stands for, the "C" in this one represents "collaboration" not course. The MOOC itself was based on building connections and forming a community. In this regard, there wasn't a course syllabus or content since the course mainly revolved around "make cycles" which set the framework of what would be done or learned during each week. So the content was participant-driven, or in other words created by the participants collectively. Within the relatively fixated framework, participants could move freely. For instance; the first task of the 1st Cycle was "Introductions". For this task, participants were free to prepare and share their introduction in whichever way or platform they wanted. Some shared a photo, poem, cartoons, and drawings while others preferred blog posts, sticky notes, and songs for the same purpose. For each main task in every Make cycle, there were three different sub-tasks starting from easier to more challenging ones and participants were free to choose themselves. In this sense, it could be claimed that the course provided the opportunity for individualization since learners with different individual needs or styles could choose whatever fits best for their interests and competencies. There were also instructions, examples, and sample activities or ideas provided for each of them. They were provided in a detailed order and for those who were not familiar with the tasks, applications, or concepts, links including examples for each of them were also available. In terms of testing and evaluation, there wasn't any formal grading, assignments, or tests. Attendance, all kinds of participation, and contribution were optional and voluntary.

The course was administered by "facilitators, coaches, make cycle leaders/organizers, assistant facilitators, and facilitator for Twitter chats" as described by the participants of the study. The whole course team were very inclusive and encouraging and providing immediate feedback to make sure that participants felt safe to share and contribute. Therefore, based on the interactions during the course span—messages, posts, chats, etc.- it could be said that sharing, building connections, and community were encouraged and were within the heart of the course. Since this was the 4th cycle of the course, all course organizers, tutors and facilitators, and the majority of the participants/learners knew each other from previous cycles. It was apparent that they developed a sense of belonging and comradeship towards the members of the course community which was also stated by two of the tutors along with six of the participants. These words from P4, P7, and Tutor 4 support these findings: *"I participated before and have always found it and people here exhilarating."*, *"All my good old friends were here"* I did this cMOOC last year and I knew some of the folk from Rhizo14 and Rhizo15". For all these design and organization elements and facilitation processes, although lacking structure in some areas, it could be said that the course had a certain level of teaching presence in its own way. However, since cMOOCs differ from more traditionalist online courses and MOOCs in that they offer less structure, less instructor intervention, more learner control, higher level of flexibility and choice, they require learners to be more autonomous and self-regulated. In line with this, it was challenging and confusing for some learners in this study who were not self-regulated and didn't have enough digital literacies to learn effectively in a connectivist course since it adopted and encouraged a distributed learning approach.

Lastly, unlike what connected learning presupposes, the course didn't accommodate diverse participants. Since the course didn't rely on an LMS or structured environment, the number of course participants was unknown. However, it was believed that there were more lurkers than the active participants. Data and observations revealed that all tutors and the majority of participants of this cMOOC were from the USA which was according to course facilitators because it was "a US-based initiative".

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to examine transcultural elements in a connectivist massive open online course. The phenomena of transculture were explored from three dimensions; structure, and tutor and learner experiences. Based on Sen-Ersoy (2021)'s study on transcultural aspects in online and massive open online courses, community and structure are the two primary elements for the formation of transculture. For these two aspects, shared culture, shared values, and interests along with social, cognitive and teaching presences are components to support the creation of hybrid cultures. Results reveal that there is an authentic community with a participatory culture based on acceptance, sharing, openness, collaboration, kindness, and trust. Similarly, sharing, building connections, and community were prominent shared values and were at the heart of the course. There was also a high level of social presence since the tutors and participants of the course developed a sense of belonging and comradeship towards the members of the course community.

The course itself provided opportunity and flexibility for individualization since learners with different individual needs or styles could choose whatever fit best for their interests and competencies. However, it doesn't accommodate learners of all types to meet diversity and openness criteria in connectivist learning (Downes, 2009). Although the exact number and demographics of the whole course participants are not exactly known, data revealed that it had predominantly US participants and tutors/facilitators. This prevented the multicultural encounters and, thus, intercultural interactions which could normally create an ideal basis for the formation of transculture. The course seemed to be challenging for some learners who were not self-regulated and didn't have enough digital literacies to learn effectively in such a connectivist course since it adopted and encouraged a distributed learning approach. In this sense, it could be considered that the course didn't support cognitive presence sufficiently.

With the increasing demand for online courses especially during the Covid-19 emergency remote education and after, designing culturally sensitive courses has gained more importance since online courses have a greater tendency and potential to have learners with diverse characteristics. To this end, transculture is a relatively new concept in the field of open and distance learning and there are only few studies present on new, hybrid cultures created in online learning environments. More studies are needed to explore the phenomena of transculture within different contexts, with different research methodologies and populations. Also, studies focusing on the factors and design elements supporting the formation of transculture might also be studied to understand what contributes to the occurrence of hybrid cultures in online settings.

References

- Bates, A. W. (2014). Comparing xMOOCs and cMOOCs: philosophy and practice. Retrieved from <https://www.tonybates.ca/2014/10/13/comparing-xmoocs-and-cmoocs-philosophy-and-practice/>
- Bogdan, R. C. and Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd Ed). New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA Sage.
- Downes, S. (2009). Connectivist dynamics in communities [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://halfanhour.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/connectivist-dynamics-in-communities.html>.
- Downes, S. (2010). New technology supporting informal learning. *Journal of Emerging Technologies in Web Intelligence*, 2(1), 27-33.
- Kop, R. (2011). The challenges to connectivist learning on open online networks: Learning experiences during a massive open online course. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 12(3), 19-38.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Möhrer, M., Pillath, M., Simmank, F. and Suurendonk, M. (2015). *Transculturalism and leadership excellence: Evaluation of the transcultural profiler*. Leadership Excellence Institute, Zeppelin and the Wittenberg Centre for Global Ethics.
- Murray, D. (2010). *Female North African–French students in France: Narratives of educational experiences*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of Nevada.
- Royster, D. L. (2018). Connectivism in massive open online courses: A content analysis of course syllabi. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Charter College of Education, California University.
- Salvadori, R.G. (1997). The difficulties of interculturalism. *European Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 8(2), 185–191.
- Sen-Ersoy, N. (2021). Transcultural aspects in online and massive open online courses: A multiple case study. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Institute of Social Sciences, Anadolu University.

- Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2(1).
- Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (p. 443–466). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Welsch, W. (1999). Transculturality: the puzzling form of cultures today. In M. Featherstone and S. Lash (Ed.), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*. London: Sage. 1999. 194-213.