

Quad-blogging: Promoting Peer-to-Peer Learning in a MOOC

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Tags

quad-blogging, peer-to-peer learning, MOOC, connectivism, peeragogy

We present the concept of quad-blogging, and its potential for facilitating and enhancing peer-to-peer learning in higher education, specifically in a massive open online course (MOOC) by increasing peer engagement, promoting the practice of blogging and fostering the formation of professional learning networks through social media.

1. Introduction

As participants in a Coursera MOOC this year ([E-Learning and Digital Cultures](#)), we explored the idea of quad-blogging prior to and during the five-week course, to create a strong sense of community in an otherwise potentially chaotic and random collective (EDC-MOOC attracted 44,000 participants). Well before the course began, its instructors emailed participants to encourage use of popular social media during the course, to help create connections and conversations, and use of blogs to document and reflect on personal learning.

Blogging seemed a good idea, and in addition, at the suggestion of one participant, several early enrollers decided to experiment with the practice of 'quad-blogging', developed by David Mitchell in Bolton, UK ([Mitchell, 2009](#)). Quad-blogging has been recognised in recent years for the dramatic influence it can have on students' active participation in blogging, their sense of authenticity and motivation in doing so, and their [rapid development of literacy](#), by connecting class blogs with a global readership.

In the context of higher education, the practice of quad-blogging as a way of fostering peer to peer learning seemed uncharted territory, and worth exploring. The particular attraction of the idea in the context of a MOOC was, to us, its potential to guarantee an audience for every blogger, and minimize potential feelings of being lost among the sea of thousands enrolling in the course. Unlike the case with school students, we knew from the start of the MOOC that we had a 'global audience', but one so large we felt a need to tame it somehow.

2. The practice and uptake of Quad-Blogging

An initial group of approximately 150 students self-organized quickly, and launching off from the 'official' Google Plus page, developed a Facebook group, and within that a file explaining the idea of blogging in small groups, and the basic procedures to follow (adapted to suit our purposes). Anyone interested in the quad-blogging experiment listed their name and blog URL, and waited for others to sign up and form groups of four bloggers - a quad. In our quads, each blogger was to be a featured writer for a week, and the other three would focus on commenting, and extending discussions beyond the quad members, by promoting the featured blog and inviting more visitors through other social media, such as Twitter ([#edcmooc](#)), the edcmooc Facebook group, and the edcmooc Google Plus community. In this way, every blogger involved would be guaranteed attention, feedback, and a rapidly expanding network.

We suggested at the start that a mix of proficiency within quads would be good, so inexperienced bloggers could see how more experienced blog writers operated - but it was open to personal preference how people grouped themselves, and some preferred to be with others of a similar proficiency, or same first language. In Mitchell's model, quads rotate, but we encouraged our quads to freely choose themselves whether or not to continue for another four-week cycle, or form a new quad with different participants. Each quad determined its own way of engaging with one other to ensure an interested and active audience.



Quadblogging. Interactive digital image
Thinglink <http://bit.ly/19nmT2a>

Prior to the course start date, bloggers were writing about their personal goals for the course, possible tools to use to create the required assessable **digital artefact**, the **definition of “digital culture”** and how they might manage the potential complexities of engagement in learning at MOOC scale. Once the course began, blogs were mainly being used to reflect on the course topics, short films and readings, and what it all had to do with formal education.

3. Outcomes of Quad-Blogging in the MOOC

Once the course finished, we posted across the social media an informal questionnaire about participants' blogging experience throughout the course. The survey created data about the relative impact of quad-blogging, by quantifying number of posts and comments on blogs, and comparing quad-bloggers with regular bloggers in the course - we wanted to see, specifically, whether there was evidence that blogging in a quad had led to more hits and comments in learner's personal spaces than blogging independently. We also sought qualitative feedback about the peer-to-peer learning experience.

We found that quad-bloggers had attracted, on average, three times as many page-views and comments than did bloggers in the course who were operating outside of these open groupings. This suggests that quad-blogging has great potential to expand a blogger's audience, and increase peer engagement. The survey also indicated that quad-blogging fostered greater satisfaction amongst learners. Quad-bloggers posted around fifty percent more than non quad-bloggers, and, asked whether quad-blogging influenced their engagement with peers online, seventy-five percent reported that their small group focused but very open practice directly influenced both the quantity and the quality of their blog posting and commenting.

Another interesting finding was that survey respondents believed blogging, especially quad-blogging, helped them form a much wider, ongoing, **PLN** (personal learning network). The PLN concept has become topical in education and professional development, and sixty-five percent of quad-bloggers said that theirs had grown as a result of their blogging experience, compared to forty-one percent of regular bloggers. It seems to us that the trust and sense of community built up through the practice of quad-blogging led directly to significant and organic formation of participants' PLN.

Blogging appears to have strongly supported the greater use of further social media that sustain such networks. Seventy-five percent of regular bloggers said that as a result of their engagement with peers through blogging, they interacted with other students in the course through various other social media, and that proportion was even higher amongst quad-bloggers - eighty-five percent reported they had more interactions with

peers on other social media sites as a result of their quad-blogging.

“It helps you connect with at least 3 people within the thousands on the course.”

“helps in forming trusting relationships, sharing interesting and useful information, encouraging other quad-bloggers, and getting feedback.”

“a great jumping off place to make connections and to interact with peers... I began interactions with other students beyond my initial quad-blog.”

“invaluable in building relationships when the reasons for doing so are very tenuous (e.g. class hasn't started) and you are total strangers.”

“We are still in touch with one another, even though we have moved onto other courses.”

On the basis of our experience and survey, we believe quad-blogging helped many people create and deepen the ‘connectivist’ learning experience (Downes 2012, Siemens 2004), anchor their collaborative learning, manage and enjoy learning in a MOOC, and write openly for a networked global audience. We think the practice warrants further investigation in relation to established and emerging theorisations of the role of dialogue in open learning (Cook 2002, Ravenscroft 2011, Siemens 2012). Overall, we find it significant that blogging in this small group peer-mentoring manner, facilitated more and lasting connections amongst peers. Inter-linked blogs provided a very personal space to reflect on course material, and a powerful platform from where learners could develop a voice that is heard and responded to, and an ever-widening network of trustworthy peers, through whom learning can continue for years to come.

4. Conclusion

This brief report, along with [our other account in this issue](#), illustrates how a PLN grew beyond a ‘formal’ course, through various social media and the new modes of interaction they afford. The practice of quad-blogging has yet to be extensively applied and theorised in higher education, but seems worthy of further development, experimentation and serious investigation, particularly where large numbers of learners may be at risk of ‘falling through the cracks’ and having a less than

wonderful learning experience, or where learners are simply keen to develop greater professional networking, and unsure how that might be achieved. We hope to raise awareness and interest in this practice, in the context of large courses where need for greater dialogue amongst learners is being increasingly recognised.

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Edition and production

Name of the publication: eLearning Papers
ISSN: 1887-1542
Publisher: elearningeuropa.info
Edited by: P.A.U. Education, S.L.
Postal address: c/Muntaner 262, 3r, 08021 Barcelona (Spain)
Phone: +34 933 670 400
Email: editorialteam@elearningeuropa.info
Internet: www.elearningpapers.eu

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