

Chapter 44

Getting “Girly” Online: The Case for Gendering Online Spaces

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ABSTRACT

While MOOCs and other fully online educational spaces and tools continue to proliferate at institutions of higher education, some worry over a persistent gender gap in online learning (Paul, 2014; Straumsheim, 2013). As debate continues regarding the existence of a digital gender divide, the perception of the gap may be enough to give female learners the idea that digital learning spaces are not for them. Females particularly may be silenced in MOOCs and other online spaces not by instructors or fellow learners, but by cultural expectations. I offer here reflections on two fully online girlhood studies courses interrogating notions of gender performance, norms, and scripts as successful models for positioning gender disparity as a teaching tool rather than a barrier to learning. The piece ends with six recommendations—most rooted in feminist pedagogy—for making MOOCs more welcoming to all genders and learners.

INTRODUCTION

MOOCs, like so many of the technological tools that have come before, are enjoying unprecedented popularity. By the end of 2015, more than 550 universities were offering MOOC courses and an estimated 35 million students had signed up for at least one class (Shah, 2015). But along with this massive popularity comes fear, distrust, and dismissal from educators and students alike. Lauded by many as inexpensive means to educate the masses and to erase barriers between the ivory towers of the educational elites and the general population, still others fear MOOCs are inferior in rigor and retention to traditional courses and worse still may be considered educational tools for “colonization” designed from the creator’s rather than from the learner’s perspective (Barlow, 2014). Like home computers, the Internet, and online education before, MOOCs hold promise as a great equalizer in education. Reflecting on his first encounter with MOOCs in the course CCK08: Connectivism and Connective Knowledge, considered by many the MOOC that started it all in MOOC education, Charles Lowe (2014) recalls “It seemed to me a fascinating experiment in online learning that continued a rich tradition of experimentation by

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educational technology innovators interested in seeing the ways in which the tools of the Internet and electronic discourse could provide alternative – or even better – methods for learning” (p. ix). MOOCs, and their digital and networked educational predecessors, promise limitless access to learning for all, a breaking down of hierarchies, and an end to discrimination of all sorts. While some of these goals were partially reached, each technology also failed to realize its utopian promise. This chapter considers ways MOOCs specifically fall short of goals for universal access to education and instead appear to perpetuate the much-debated digital gender divide persisting in online spaces. Teacher-research suggests that encouraging discussions about gender and other markers of difference in online spaces may be a key strategy for teaching critical thinking and cultural awareness, and I suggest that gendering MOOCs may also be a strategy for closing the gender gap. I offer here reflections on two fully online girlhood studies courses interrogating notions of gender performance, norms, and scripts as successful models for positioning gender disparity as a teaching tool rather than a barrier to learning. This model may provide insight on ways to invite more female teachers and students to populate MOOCs.

BACKGROUND

While MOOCs and other fully online educational spaces and tools continue to proliferate and seem integral to any number of institutions, areas of study, and student populations, some worry over a persistent gender gap in online learning (Paul, 2014; Straumsheim, 2013). Political science professors Lisa Martin and Barbara Walter (2013) lament the “gender disparity” in MOOCs designed and taught primarily by men and fear this imbalance has an impact on course content and student populations. Martin and Walter (2013), in an *LA Times* op-ed, explain, “Our nation has an abundance of successful, talented female academics who could lead the way in exporting equality as well as education” by being more present in online learning and MOOCs. This apparent disparity is hardly surprising as research traces out the computing gender divide revealing a trajectory of increased male confidence, access, and experience with computers, while women enjoyed less frequent use of the Internet, as well as marked gendered differences in access, usage, and purpose for computing (Huang, Hood, & Yoo, 2008, p. 59). Though female presence in online space long ago surpassed that of males, according to Rickert and Sacharow (2000), the goals for Web presence appear different according to genders. Huang, Hood, and Yoo (2008) argue that “even though students already utilize a variety of Web 2.0 applications on a daily basis, females may not utilize them efficiently for gaining new knowledge or developing new skills” (p. 56). Interestingly, a 2009 study of U.S. college students’ Internet use found that “one-fourth (25%) of female college students said their most frequent use of the Internet was for academic work, whereas less than one-fifth (17%) of male college students reported academics to be their most frequent use of the Internet” (Jones, Johnson-Yale, & Millermaier, 2009, p. 254). This seems counterintuitive when we think of the absence of women in MOOCs, particularly in xMOOCs that adopt structures for learning based on traditional university courses. But perhaps this absence is explained in data suggesting “that women are more likely ... to report using mainstream information sources than men” (Jones, Johnson-Yale, & Millermaier, 2009, p. 259). Female users’ reluctance or resistance to free courseware tools for learning in favor of school-sanctioned course management sites may also contribute to gender disparity when it comes to MOOCs in education.

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