

Exploring the nature of cultural communication between learners in a multicultural MOOC

Rana Shahini¹, Hugh C. Davis², Kate Borthwick³, and Will Baker⁴

Abstract. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) attract worldwide learners from diverse backgrounds and cultures. When learners communicate directly in this multicultural space, there is potential for new cultural practices to be articulated or transcended into a new form of knowledge that blurs cultural boundaries. Our research is attempting to identify methods of facilitating such behaviour in MOOCs. This paper presents a case study to investigate existing cultural communicative practices between MOOC learners through their online discussions. Learners' comments were coded and analysed against the practice-oriented Intercultural Communication Awareness (ICA) model. Results show that a very limited number of interactions had elements of transcultural awareness and that the interaction and peer communication decreased as the course proceeded. These observations suggest that a collaborative pedagogical approach may interconnect learners well in the MOOC community.

Keywords: MOOC, culture, communication, ICA model.

1. Introduction

MOOCs have been associated with potentials for education democratisation, scalability, and globalisation. They have been reported to attract more than one hundred million learners from around the globe (Andersen et al., 2018), and create opportunities for fluid, complex, and dynamic cultural practices in these virtual spaces. When learners communicate directly and interact, there is the potential for

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1. University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom; rs3c16@soton.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7998-2304>
 2. University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom; hcd@soton.ac.uk; <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1182-1459>
 3. University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom; k.borthwick@soton.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2251-7898>
 4. University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom; w.baker@soton.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0533-2795>

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cultural forms and practices to be articulated or transcended into a new form of knowledge that blurs cultural boundaries within the online discourse.

However, the literature suggests that in reality there is little direct interaction between MOOC learners, and not much engagement in collective activities (Håklev, Sharma, Slotta, & Dillenbourg, 2017; Verstegen et al., 2018). Moreover, MOOC content is static in that it includes knowledge, but not collective experiences of or perspectives on that knowledge.

In this paper, we investigate different cultural communicative representations and practices between multicultural MOOC learners through their online discussions, and follow the cultural changes that occur.

2. Background

In the literature, there are several terms used to describe cultural communication, such as *multicultural*, which refers to fixed bands and entities where named cultures can be distinct and compared (cross-cultural). Another term is *intercultural*, which is used for describing cultural practices as dynamic and hybrid, where these practices are located in between specific cultures, blurring their boundaries (Monceri, 2019; Smith & Segbers, 2018). The term *transcultural* describes the continuous process of culture reformation. It is an extension to interculturality in a dynamic action which means ‘going beyond Culture’ (Baker, 2018; Welsch, 1999).

Digital information and network technologies boost the movement of cultural flows beyond national borders (Kim, 2016), ensuring fluidity and circulation of transition, creating the possibility of transforming new cultural practices in virtual spaces (Schachtner, 2015). Therefore, when exploring cultural communication in MOOCs, it is essential to consider these issues in practice.

3. Method

A total of 3,821 learners’ posted comments were our collected data from the MOOC ‘English as a Medium of Instruction for Academics’. The MOOC was run by the University of Southampton through the FutureLearn platform, and the course was designed to support academics, build upon their professional experiences and respond to their real challenges, providing examples and approaches that could

be applied within their settings. The MOOC was delivered via 81 ‘steps’ (units of learning objects or lessons), with each step allowing learners to contribute within the comment field. Within this course, discussion leading to interesting new perspectives and knowledge between participants was expected.

MOOC learners’ comments were coded manually by the first author and analysed qualitatively using a content analysis scheme based on the adopted version of the practice-oriented ICA model (Baker, 2011). Baker (2011) reconceptualised and produced dynamic conceptions of cultural competences and put them into practice to better suit the globalised nature beyond national scale. It is believed that the ICA model is ideal for the analysis of online discussions in relation to cultural practices, as it focuses on examining these practices as a whole set of flexible and adaptable knowledge, skills, and attitudes in real-time instances within the context.

Additionally, incidences of non-communicative cultural practices were excluded from the analysis and labelled ‘zero’, as well as adverts, duplicates and other languages, and any comment of less than five words. Thus, three levels with five components were used to code interactions and measure the level of cultural communication (Table 1).

In order to secure validity of the codes, data which were captured that were assigned and fit into more than one category of the above components or were on borderline were reviewed by an expert (the original developer of the ICA model), who provided suggestions for adjustments in case of discordance.

Table 1. The adopted analytical framework components

The adopted practice-oriented ICA levels	Components description
Level 1 Basic Cultural Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate one’s cultural perspective. • Compare cultures at a general level.
Level 2 Intercultural Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move beyond cultural generalisations and stereotypes. • Compare and mediate (common ground between specific cultures) between cultures at a specific level, and awareness of possibilities for mismatch and miscommunication between specific cultures.
Level 3 Transcultural Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiate and mediate between different emergent sociocultural communication modes and frames of reference.

4. Results and discussion

With 3,156 enrolments from 148 countries, more than 3,821 comments were generated. The majority of comments were at basic level of cultural awareness (Level 1), and a few were at the intercultural level of awareness (Level 2). A very limited number of comments (7) had elements of transcultural awareness (Level 3). Figure 1 displays comments' level of awareness upon each step in the course.

Figure 1. The analysis of comments level of cultural communication

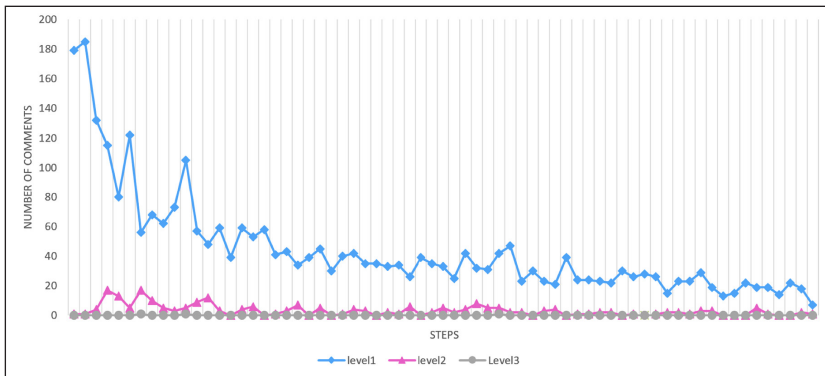
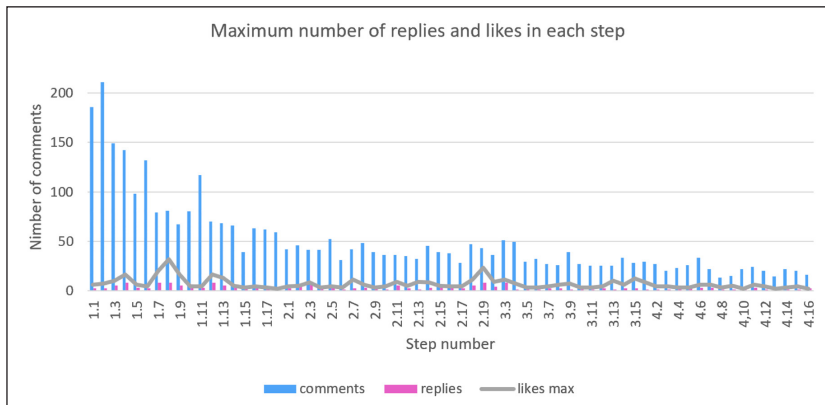


Figure 2. Maximum number of likes and replies per step



It was observed that participants were moving forwards and backwards between levels. As claimed by Baker (2011), movement and development of awareness were not sequential. Yet, the appearance of comments with levels two and three

were declining generally as the course proceeded. That is in line with a decrease of the number of comments and replies, as shown in (Figure 2). It indicates that less interaction and less peer communication occurred. In addition, from the start of the course, the percentage of replies were minimum (an average of 7% of comments per step). As stated by Håklev, Sharma, Slotta, and Dillenbourg (2018), the asynchronous nature of the MOOC (with a massive number of comments) makes social presence difficult to achieve.

Although only seven comments presented transcultural communication, their occurrence validates the appearance of transculturality in MOOC contexts. Transculturality promotes collaboration between people and welcomes diversity, maintaining individual and national identity (Smith & Segbers, 2018).

5. Conclusion and future work

We have shown that the adopted ICA framework from a transcultural perspective can be applied to and functions in a MOOC context, taking advantage of learners' diversity. In this study, we traced the development of different levels of cultural practices, observing how these cultural practices were articulated, negotiated, in instances, were transcended. The study showed the complexity of cultural communicative practices in the context of a multicultural MOOC with the appearance of transculturality as an advanced level of cultural communication.

While we hope to improve learners' direct communication in future MOOC cycles, we suggest that transcultural perspective be further integrated. We propose a computer supported collaborative learning pedagogical approach for connecting different social levels of interaction (individual, small group and the whole MOOC community) (Stahl, 2013). We believe that transcultural communication may be promoted through multilevel pedagogical activities where different social levels are interconnected. Accordingly, collective global and transcultural knowledge can be produced as an extended learning experience, benefitting learners and reflecting the reality of diverse and global contexts.

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