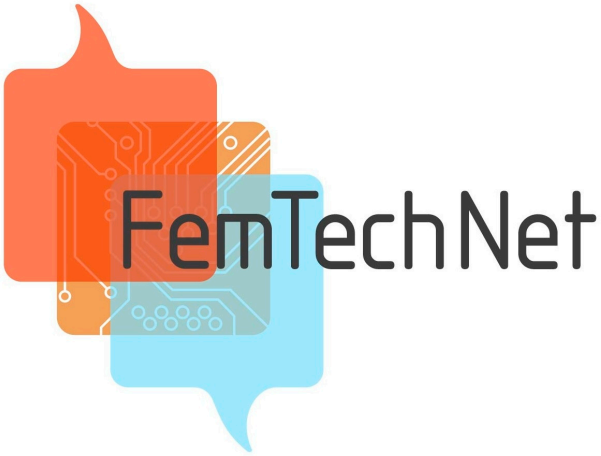

Transforming Higher Education with Distributed Open Collaborative Courses (DOCCs): Feminist Pedagogies and Networked Learning

FemTechNet White Paper Committee
femtechnet.org | September 30, 2013

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1) Effective pedagogy reflects feminist principles

For many decades, feminist teachers have been an influential force within higher education calling for the reform of classroom practices based on their assessment of how asymmetrical power dynamics in the classroom often inhibit learning. The key principles of feminist pedagogy rest on a foundation of "learner-centered instruction." This pedagogical approach embraces multiple techniques for engaging student attention and for acknowledging and understanding diverse learning styles and lived histories. Feminist teachers strive to create and support egalitarian relationships in the classroom by valuing students as individuals who make choices about what and how they learn. This approach pays particular attention to classroom communication structures and practices, especially in highly mediated digital environments. Instructors focus on the everyday experiences of students to create learning paths that enable students to make connections between the understandings they already have and new insights. In 2013, FemTechNet designed, developed, and launched an experiment in networked learning called a DOCC: a *distributed open collaborative course* on the topic of "Dialogues on Feminism and Technology." The DOCC is a large multi-campus initiative that employs feminist pedagogies to respond creatively both to recent changes in higher education in the United States and Canada, and to the opportunities presented by greater access to networked digital media.

Research indicates that many aspects of feminist pedagogy improve learning outcomes. Feminists often describe their classrooms as collaborative, engaged, and interdisciplinary. A key commitment of these classrooms is understanding tacit ways of knowing by paying attention to the multiple layers of human experience. Examples of feminist pedagogical strategies include: the design of learning communities, service learning projects, community learning initiatives, diversity education, education in transnational thinking, and curricula that incorporate collaborative assignments and projects. All of these efforts have been validated by the American Association of Colleges and Universities as "high-impact educational practices" (http://www.aacu.org/leap/hip.cfm). Task forces have argued that undergraduates need to be treated as researchers rather than spectators and play an active role in the making of new knowledge (http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED424840). The U.S. Department of Labor advocates teaching what are often referred to as "soft skills," including "communication," "teamwork," and "networking" to prepare students to work in professional environments (http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/). Philanthropic organizations have promoted effective new media literacy programs while confronting more directly the challenges of participatory culture (http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2713). Advocates for the public humanities and for engagement with visual culture have also urged the university to change

from a top-down model of pedagogy to a more horizontal, peer-engaged learning and teaching model. This shift from “sage on the stage” to “guide to the side,” celebrated in so-called “flipped” classrooms, has a long pre-history in feminist teaching and research which shows, however, that superficial flipping does little to deconstruct true power divisions.

Interaction and presence are important components of effective pedagogy; yet these components are often highly constrained in the use of networked technologies as learning platforms. The FemTechNet DOCC rests on a pedagogical framework that we identify as “cyberfeminist.” For the past twenty years, cyberfeminists have worked diligently on projects to provide broader access to technology for women in diverse global contexts. They have developed strategies to transform Web 2.0 environments into generative spaces for dialogue by drawing on feminist theories in the creation of new digital applications and web places, to focus explicitly on the quality of interaction among web users and the creation of infrastructures of synchronous learning. This cluster of courses draws on the experiences of cyberfeminist teachers, scholars and artists who have worked to develop skills and literacies of traditionally marginalized groups such as women and people of color and people working from the under-resourced majority world.

Our use of network technologies aspires to enable wide access to all interested participants. The course developed through the hands-on involvement and sustained attention of more than 30 instructors. Our approach to teaching, even when it is fully online and distributed, centers on the body and embodied skills. Moreover, we understand that the process of learning and teaching is a relational process, not only between teacher and student, but among students as peers. This explicit focus on access, not primarily technological access, but more importantly the access that is made possible through embodied practices and collaborative relationships, differentiates the DOCC approach from a typical Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) model. By paying close attention to embodied practice we learn to identify tacit practices of knowledge production to better understand how skills can be learned across varied contexts.

We seek to activate a learning process that recognizes and extends across global and cultural contexts. Engaging people from diverse backgrounds and working consciously to respect the richness of this diversity requires significant effort on everyone’s part. While the use of the world-wide-web and internet infrastructures enables communication among people at great geographic distances, it also strains the capacity for respect and the appreciation of the nuances of diverse backgrounds which increases the intensity of the work that must be done by teachers and organizers of the learning process. Our model of teaching is labor-intensive and depends on a great amount of invisible work that is often not recognized as part of the “teaching enterprise”: for example, the “back-channel” communication to coordinate activities and to enable collaborations, the provision of emotional care and the tending of relationships, the active facilitation of equal participation, and the creation of learning materials that demystify abstract concepts. Participating in this effort has required all DOCC instructors to learn new teaching skills, to develop new communication practices, and to engage more closely with the diverse processes of student learning.

Feminist pedagogy, therefore is not merely or only a set of practices for teaching women, but rather a pedagogical framework built on the analysis and exploration of visible and invisible modes of learning. We believe this is the necessary foundation for understanding how to best serve and engage all students, particularly those who are socially and materially underprivileged, so that they can acquire skills and knowledge to achieve their aspirations.

2) Several currently existing reform efforts do little to change the status quo

While we applaud the many past and current efforts to enhance access to and completion of quality education, there remains considerable room for improvement; excellence and inclusion are often uneven or completely unrealized for many students. Although courseware companies such as edX, Coursera, and Udacity promise to advance reform efforts, the assumed ability of the software to transmit information effectively is often the central feature of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and tends to ignore the importance of knowledge as embodied learning. The video coursecasts, interactive quizzes, and peer grading activities provided to hundreds of thousands of students from around the world largely reinforce the constraints of conventional education and promote outdated ideologies of scientific management. Crowd-sourcing and peer evaluation are used as a labor management techniques rather than as opportunities for educationally transformative collaborative engagement - both student to student and teacher to student.

Students in MOOCs may be eager to take advantage of seemingly lowered barriers to sign-up, thus providing numerical “evidence” of the effectiveness of access to MOOCs. Indeed, the courses themselves may promise to provide a quantum of social justice as well as valuable information and first-rate teachers, but as these promises have become more ambitious, they may be harder to fulfill through the portals themselves. For one thing, as these initiatives have proliferated, there is relatively little variety in strategies to recruit and retain students. Standardization of technical interfacing, while it organizes and makes manageable a top-down information flow and grading process, is not necessarily effective pedagogy. Further, the basic design of the educational software interface, and the assumption that “massive” numbers of students means better and broader access, remain largely untested with regard to equity issues and concrete student learning outcomes.

Massive Open Online Courses claim to be all things to all people— simultaneously. They project themselves as distance learning for the many, niche teaching to the masses, Silicon Valley versions of TED talks, Ivy League lectures for the ten thousand, online lessons for the overseas-living lifelong learner. They are pitched as entrepreneurial schemes, alternative revenue streams, or marketing devices promoting products to the “common folk”. MOOCs strive to be blind to borders, class systems, economics, gender, and race; although MOOCs have tried to defy the digital divide, they actually reinforce it. They place the burden of learning almost entirely on the lone learner. The teacher, it seems, only needs to transmit his information through digital distance technologies. And the masculine pronoun does dominate, because MOOC courses tend to have much poorer records on equity than embodied campuses and

provide less support to female faculty and instructors of color in promoting courses with star faculty, according to their own catalogs and listings of their highest enrollment courses.

MOOC efforts often represent a step backwards, by promulgating a standardization of format rather than a focus on processes that support global access to learning and the reciprocity of teaching and learning. Interaction is recorded in terms of data "hits" and downloads rather than as engagement between teacher and learner and within communities of learners. Frequently there is little common ground between the autonomous, anonymous, and isolated skill-and-drill exercises of the solo student and the flame wars breaking out in student forums where feelings overflow in such a large scale arena that course managers have largely given up on moderation. Early efforts in the open learning movement have become overshadowed by Coursera~Harvard/MIT~Stanford edX models, some of which may have developed through social media but are now primarily focused on information transfer with the burden of actual learning placed fully on the learner. This learner isolation disenfranchises students, most of whom need context to succeed. Current MOOCs do not use the interactive potential of social media but rather are rooted in older broadcast media and emphasize the transmission of visuals, video, and discussion forums. Their main innovation is that they do this on a massive scale and use the latest technological bells and whistles. Unfortunately, they continue to be asocial learning management systems anchored in the narrowest forms of "content."

We acknowledge that MOOCs today do fulfill needs that might otherwise go unmet - within limits. Content provided by MOOCs can indeed be valuable. For instance, MOOCs may effectively and economically expand offerings for less-commonly-spoken languages. And live specialist lectures can be disseminated internationally rather than limited to a single campus audience. But what MOOCs obviously and inherently lack is good old-fashioned student-teacher contact. Furthermore, except for The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's MOOC Research Hub, there has been very little empirical MOOC study, intensive ethnographic research, or analysis or formal critique beyond blog-based declarations of like and dislike. In promoting the DOCC model we are not advocating a complete dismantling of the MOOC model - rather we are asking for a critical engagement with and focus on the learning process. Our goal is not to attack all teachers who offer MOOCs; rather it is to point to the flaws in the model that come from its lack of emphasis on teacher-student engagement and the relational nature of learning.

Academic personnel are often cash-poor and strapped for resources, despite rising tuition costs. Nonetheless, the educator must do her work as teacher, nurturer, collaborator, team-member, peer, mentor, facilitator, partner, problem-solver, and challenger. MOOCs and Google hangouts cannot replace the teacher's work. A growing number of engaged educators (including feminist educators) want to respond to the sudden ubiquity of massive online courses that apparently have minimal accountability. Institutions of higher learning -- including community colleges -- and other centers for lifelong learning can provide safe spaces for learning and affirm that ideas need time to gestate and mature. Impatience and get-rich-quick schemes are at odds with the hard work of critical thinking and respectful dialogue.

3) Access to technology does not guarantee access to knowledge, and respecting the investment of labor is critical to facilitating real learning

The most compelling thing about MOOCs, and the main companies that facilitate them (Coursera, Udacity, Edx), is the promise of "free" and therefore accessible education. This promise is particularly striking for feminist scholars who have been advocating for and innovating accessible education for decades. We can think back to the early 20th century settlement work of Victoria Earle Matthews in New York City and of Jane Addams in Chicago, to provide free basic and advanced education for African-American and immigrant populations; or to the Cambridge Women's School which taught hundreds of free feminist courses to thousands of students in Boston from 1971-1992; to feminist 'bridging programs' throughout the US, offering courses and university resources to encourage low-income students to start and continue their higher education; as well as the ongoing practices of transformative feminist pedagogies, which have developed as critical correctives to the economic, social, political and physical barriers which continue to haunt higher education in the US. Indeed, the promise of free and accessible education appeals to no one more than feminist educators and scholars, who have been working towards precisely these goals for well over a century.

However, feminist scholarship has also taught us that technological innovations alone do not make structural changes – just as new cleaning technologies have not reduced the average amount of time that women spend on unpaid domestic labor. The "freedom" of cyberspace is not free of racism or sexism; the portable computers, smartphones and tablets that liberate us from the office do not free us (particularly women) from unremunerated overtime work. The celebration of MOOCs discounts the financial and affective costs that they in fact require.

Researchers studying other techno-missionary projects, such as the One-Laptop-Per-Child initiative, have observed that focusing only on delivery systems obscures how learning functions in a larger media ecology, and that "solutions" that privilege personalized consumer electronics as supposedly friction-free commodities are often doomed to fail. Studies of users of informal social computing, the role of infomediaries in the majority world, and the creative appropriation strategies of inner city residents in the United States -- who may in fact be the "early adopters" of certain tactics of technology use -- indicate that technology companies often fail to predict behavior or to understand participants' desires.

While MOOC courses may be free to non-tuition-paying students, they are not free to the universities or the people developing and teaching them. The 2010 "Choices Report," created by the University of California Systemwide Academic Senate, outlines the escalating costs of administering such massive courses, as well as the many millions of institutional dollars wasted on online teaching experiments in the 1990s and early 2000s. Beyond these costs, or even the price of institutional subscription to these software and support resources, we are concerned by the cost in professors, instructional teams (often consisting of graduate students), and tuition-paying students.

Given that all of the high-impact educational practices identified by the AAC&U rely on small class sizes and regular face-to-face contact hours with faculty and instructional teams, it seems that the resources going to the development, maintenance, and teaching of massive online courses could be better used to increase the number of faculty and graduate students (i.e. teaching assistants) working with smaller groups of students, and to support the development of existing feminist instructional infrastructures, like the network of DOCC professors, students and instructional technology designers.

The promise of low- or no-cost MOOCs also dovetails with the increasing institutional reliance on low- or no-cost academic labor (in our era of unprecedented increases in tuition costs). Given that seventy-six percent of university and college courses are taught by underpaid and insecurely employed contingent (adjunct) and non-tenure-track faculty who earn an average of $2,700 per course, our universities and colleges are already dependent for a vast majority of their instructional services on uncompensated or poorly-compensated labor. This faculty majority join their tenure-track and tenured colleagues in an industry of "sacrificial labor" where the catch-all category of "service" effectively obscures the amount of unpaid work inherent in required career activities like journal publishing, policy writing, student advising and course development. Indeed, research on academic labor conditions shows that with dramatically less institutional and monetary support for faculty, this is an industry that demands and obscures dramatically more work from all faculty, contingent or not. Further, it remunerates its male workers at a much higher rate than its female workers: tenure-track or tenured men make an average of $18,000 more than equally positioned women and non-tenure-track men make an average of $2,650 more, despite there being many more women working in these positions.

Moreover, with the presumed ubiquity of smartphones and personal laptops, all faculty are subject to the pressure of 24-hour service – the expectation that faculty will be digitally available for work at every hour every day, responding to emails, updating shared (google) documents, posting on academic blogs, joining video meetings – but when the domestic division of labor by gender remains stubbornly unchanged by technological innovation, this pressure has proven particularly hazardous for female faculty. As a network of feminist researchers and instructors working with various non-academic organizations and academic institutions and in various conditions of unpaid, contingent, non-tenure-track, tenure-track and tenured employment, the DOCC participants build on existing feminist pedagogical methods, technology studies, and labor studies to develop a feminist "disruptive innovation" within current academic labor conditions.

4) Technoscientific choices are not values neutral, and building infrastructure is not simply about choosing components among corporate, consumer products

Choosing to invest resources, including faculty time, in MOOC initiatives is not a neutral proposition. These decisions inevitably involve discounting other forms of articulation that oblige institutions of higher education to relate meaningfully to their surrounding communities. These

priorities devalue teacher-student relationships, embodiment, labor, difference, and diverse hands-on skills and tacit practices across contexts, as well as rhetorical engagement of multiple participants. Although justification of MOOCs often appeals to claims of bringing rationality to higher education, to divert so much attention from core responsibilities to educate, and to expend so much energy on branding efforts, undermine relationship-building processes and efforts to increase access. Such divergent priorities may pose a public relations disaster too. If universities commit to partnerships with inexperienced start-ups lacking a sustainable business plan or funding model, this disaster is compounded, and public trust in scholarly institutions deteriorates further.

Although universities often make large investments in hardware, building the infrastructure that we need in higher education actually involves rethinking traditional notions of ownership of property. Many cyberfeminist educators, therefore, continue to be interested in performing what might be called an “infrastructural inversion” to express resistance to the fact that infrastructure is so behind-the-scenes as to be invisible. Indeed we see that sometimes even the need for the presence of such an infrastructure is made manifest only through its absence. In other words, infrastructure goes unnoticed unless it is broken. By recognizing the politics of knowledge production that contributes to systems of standards, we can begin to see infrastructure, make it an object of study, and analyze support structures that provide the basic framework of a postsecondary institution. As feminist scholars and computer scientists note, infrastructure can be both abstract and concrete. It can be composed of inanimate material objects and human actors. In addition to being a “what,” infrastructure can be a “how” and a “who” . . . and even a “when.” Thus many of these researchers express considerable skepticism about distance education that promises to strip higher education down to its “essentials”, because the false efficiencies of standardization often ignore the importance of low status aspects of the traditional campus -- such as services delivered by libraries, advising offices, and learning centers -- and weaken necessary infrastructures in the process.

5) DOCC design recognizes complexity

The use of online teaching and communication platforms is important to the DOCC innovation but, unlike with the MOOCs, we do not assume that the online platforms, tools and content transmission will solve the problem of access to education world-wide, or even within the U.S. and Canada. As noted earlier, our central focus remains on the pedagogic engagement - which requires much invisible work/labor on the part of the designers and teachers before, during and after the course content creation through online formats.

Having said that, the careful selection and design of online tools is essential to the success of our collaborative efforts. We have yet to find a single platform that accommodates and supports our pedagogical principles or our commitment to accessibility and collaboration. Indeed, existing platforms and tools such as Blackboard, Google Hang-out, Skype, Canvas, and Coursera are be optimized to enact a transmission model of teaching (what is often referred to as the “sage from the stage” approach) that is not only ineffective in stimulating engaged learning, but also antithetical to feminist pedagogy. For example, if a platform includes the capacity for video calls,

it accommodates a very limited number of participants and only one speaker – group conversation overwhelms the video and audio capacities of the software, forcing even small group discussions into the hierarchical structure of the lecture hall. With institutionally subscribed platforms (like Blackboard or Coursera) that might allow resource building and sharing (ie. videos, written assignments, teaching exercises, etc.), all course content is administered and organized by the few people authorized by the host institution (ie. professor and teaching assistants) and this content finally 'lives' within just that one institution – restricting the sort of open-access, collaborative and distributed user-generated growth for which we aim. Alternatively, when the platform is open-access and theoretically capable of being designed – through plug-ins and custom coding – for the accessible content-building, -sharing and -archiving that we need, our home organizations and/or institutions have dedicated their IT resources (human and monetary) to supporting the closed platforms to which they subscribe, leaving us with limited support for the design, development and maintenance of our online feminist pedagogical space. Without pre-existing platforms, our online teaching and learning architecture for the DOCC is itself an experimental research-creation site, through which we hope to enable and foreground these processes and to encourage multiple pathways for this work to emerge.

6) The FemTechNet DOCC is an innovative experiment from which many stakeholders will learn

The DOCC project by FemTechNet is an innovative experiment in the use of networked technologies that engage multiple communities and will yield important lessons for many stakeholders: learning institutions, teachers, students, members of the public, learning faciltiators, feminist researchers. The DOCC 2013 engages many institutions, disciplines, modes of media production, and types of learners to generate multiple points of comparison and contribute to a constructive dialogue about improving learning. This project also engages seriously with the possibility of failure as part of the process of the spirit of thoughtful and nuanced experimentation. We understand that the analysis of why things failed offers opportunities to build new knowledge and refine understandings.

Many corporate-run MOOCs often minimize failure in order to please shareholders and promote public relations rather than study it in the name of better iterative course design. MOOC faculty are also often woefully naive about the instructional technologies that they use, and many are very new users of online video. Thus MOOC media production efforts progress without the critical expertise of those in media studies, who consider how the gaze, the apparatus, and other components of the situation of reception function to shape how "content" is processed.

In recent years, scholars in feminist critical sci-art and feminist science and technology studies have investigated emergent modes of citizen science that enable people to test hypotheses and experiment. The FemTechNet DOCC brings to the learning situation this participatory spirit of inquiry-based scholarship. In contrast, MOOCs remain largely untested and disengaged from the accountability of learner-centered assessment, as the recent MOOC research initiative indicates. They often depend on the directives of venture capitalists rather than experienced

curriculum designers. Frequently the justifications upon which they rely lack references to a scholarly literature of peer-reviewed research. They also do not take into consideration years of research about student to student interaction in perceived anonymous spaces where instances of harassment and bullying occur sometimes unknown or un-monitored by the instructor.

The DOCC draws on the collective intelligence of many scholars working with each other and in partnership with their students in a model that is open to critique and open to participation. In assessing the results of this experiment, we plan to focus on achieving the outcomes for students that are most meaningful over time rather than just the results that are easiest to numerically quantify. We are also committed to using multiple measures of assessment. Fortunately, our cohort has a strong commitment to peer-reviewed research on best practices and can speak from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Perhaps the most tangible outcome of this project will be the large pedagogical archive of curated materials generated by teachers and students that will be available for reuse.

This is a pragmatic initiative of dedicated feminist educators who are interested in the use of new technologies and emerging platforms of networked knowledge creation. This initiative was built from the formal networks of our professional associations at professional meetings and the informal networks of mentorship, co-teaching, collegiality, and friendship nourished over the years. To date hundreds of participants have invested thousands of hours and, with this white paper, we hope to attract more collaborators.

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