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Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz
CUNY Graduate Center

Polly Thistlethwaite
CUNY Graduate Center

Jessie Daniels
CUNY Hunter College

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Opening Education, Linking to Communities: The #InQ13 Collective's Participatory Open Online Course (POOC) in East Harlem

JESSIE DANIELS, POLLY THISTLETHWAITE,
AND SHAWN(TA) SMITH-CRUZ

Introduction

Our institution, like many across the United States, is awash in discussion about the promise and perils of open education made possible through an array of digital technologies. Given the particular history of the City University of New York (CUNY), the public university system of New York City, whose mission is to “educate the children of the whole people” and whose history includes a fairly recent past of free tuition for students, we were particularly intrigued by the potential for creating a truly open, online course. With twenty-four institutions across New York City and about 270,000 degree-credit students and 273,000 continuing and professional education students, CUNY is the third largest university system in the United States and the nation’s largest public urban university. The Graduate Center is CUNY’s principal doctorate-granting institution offering more than thirty doctoral degrees in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences, with significant research on global and progressive policy issues.

A collective of approximately twenty members of the Graduate Center, funded by the Ford Foundation as part of the JustPublics@365 project, created a participatory open online course, or “POOC,” titled *Reassessing Inequality and Re-Imagining the 21st-Century: East Harlem Focus*. The course hashtag #InQ13 (inequality, 2013) became the name for the collective working to produce the course. The course was offered for credit as a graduate seminar through the Graduate Center and featured training in community-based

The #InQ13 POOC was part of the JustPublics@365 project, which was supported in part by a grant from the Ford Foundation. The #InQ13 Collective involved a large number of people, including CUNY faculty, guest faculty and activists, Graduate Center students, JustPublics@365 fellows, librarians, and tech consultants.

participatory research methods. CUNY students who sought credit for the course enrolled in the usual way by registering for the course. The course was also open to the nonacademic community for participation. About half the in-person sessions were held at a CUNY campus in East Harlem, which were open to the community. Anyone could watch videos of the course sessions online and could access the readings assigned for the course online. None of these modes of participation required registration, but those who registered and participated online experienced a greater level of engagement than those who did not enroll. In addition, we held a series of smaller meetings with community leaders about the course that increased awareness about the POOC and about CUNY's interest in East Harlem and potential for future collaboration.

Launching a POOC against the MOOC Moment

The historical moment in which the 2013 POOC emerged influenced its structure and character. The *New York Times* proclaimed 2012 “the year of the MOOC”—Massive Open Online Courses (Pappano 2012). There was no shortage of hyperbole about MOOCs during that time. In perhaps the most egregious example of this hype, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman extolled the revolutionary possibilities of MOOCs, suggesting that “[n]othing has more potential to enable us to reimagine higher education than the massive open online course, or MOOC” (Friedman 2013). Such claims are similar to those made about educational television in the middle of the twentieth century (Picciano 2014). The term “MOOC” was coined by educational technologists Dave Cormier and George Siemens in 2008 (Cormier and Siemens 2010). In fall 2011, Stanford University opened some of its computer science courses to the world through an online platform and found hundreds of thousands of students enrolling. As a result, MOOCs moved quickly from niche discussions among educational technologists to the forefront of conversation about higher education as sustained by the *New York Times* (Pappano 2012; Lewin 2013). These idealistic forecasts, however, were predicated on the condition that MOOCs can extend higher education, without payment or condition, to the people who might apply it to transform lives and society.

Premised on extending the experience of traditional university courses to massive audiences, MOOCs have provoked an array of responses. Commentators who believe that higher education is in need of reform argue that traditional educational practices have finally been subverted by a productively disruptive force (Shirky 2015). According to such arguments, the educational experiences offered at elite institutions can now be made available to students

across the world, for free, thus making higher education possible for students who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Critics of MOOCs often view them in the context of a higher-education system that is being defunded and worry that higher-education administrators see, in MOOCs, possibilities for revenue generation through increased enrollments and cost-cutting through reduced full-time faculty hires.

Connectivist MOOCs, or cMOOCs, are designed to foster community, connection, and peer-to-peer learning. cMOOCs are generally produced using locally designed, often open-source platforms. The open online course we created is more aligned with cMOOCs. The much-hyped and well-financed corporate xMOOCs on platforms by Udacity, Coursera, and edX can extend lecture videos (and sometimes reading materials) to those who register and view (Wiener 2013), but courses that restrict their course materials to enrolled, sometimes paying customers are not open (Otte 2012), except by significant redefinition of the word “open.”

Application of licensed content of any kind is arguably incongruent with the aim and purpose of a MOOC. Licensed access, even if freely available to course attendees, requires some form of registration. Such content is not “open and online.” Clay Shirky asserts that the real revolutionary benefit of new cultural and education technologies is openness (cited in Parry 2012), yet current xMOOC models that keep course materials behind registration walls, building potential for revenue generation, compromise this benefit. The recent partnerships between Elsevier and edX (Elsevier 2013) and between Coursera and Chegg, consolidating textbooks by Cengage Learning, Macmillan Higher Education, Oxford University Press, SAGE, and Wiley (Doyle 2013), point to educational enclosure rather than openness (Watters 2013). xMOOC models currently amount to a shaded variation on current higher-education models providing licensed academic content to a defined and regulated student audience.

Three major xMOOC service providers have entered the market: Udacity, Coursera, and edX. Udacity and Coursera are for-profit enterprises assembling “open” course content in commercial software. edX is a not-for-profit platform developed by Harvard and MIT with an initial investment of \$30 million and then offered to university partners to share the revenue they generate (Kolowich 2013). All these platforms are designed to extend the reach of higher education by delivering courses online to great numbers of students, including those in untapped, often far-flung markets, at lower, “affordable” costs. xMOOCs, subsidized by universities and their software providers, are intended to lower costs to student consumers, yet still return profits for uni-

versities and their xMOOC providers using traditional revenue-generating models.

MOOCs have been criticized for their paltry imagining of the educational experience. To date, most MOOCs have consisted of video lectures, sometimes accompanied by discussion forums or automated tests. Students are expected to absorb videos in ways consonant with what Paulo Freire described as the banking model of education, in which students are imagined as empty vessels into which the instructor deposits knowledge (Freire 1993). Within the mostly one-way communication structure of the truly massive MOOCs, the interaction between faculty members and students is necessarily constrained because of scale. While some MOOCs try to foster interaction between the professor and his (or her)¹ students, this has not met with much success (Bruff et al. 2013). There is little in the corporate MOOC model to recommend it as a vehicle for a graduate seminar, in which intimacy and sustained focused discussion, rather than massiveness and openness, are most prized.

Organizers of the POOC wanted to design the course to engage with New York City. We were also concerned with providing a focus for the breadth of disciplinary approaches featured in the course. Several faculty engaged in early discussions about the course suggested we create an educational experiment that resisted the “placelessness” of MOOCs by situating this course in a specific neighborhood.

East Harlem is a neighborhood that has simultaneously fostered a vibrant, multiethnic tradition of citizen activism and borne the brunt of urban policies that generate inequality. Several of the people in the #InQ13 collective had ties to East Harlem as residents, researchers, community activists, and workers, so the possibility of locating the course there was immediately tangible. In addition, CUNY recently located the new Silberman campus supporting public health and social work in this neighborhood. These factors taken together—the unique, vibrant history and present of East Harlem, the connection to the neighborhood from those in the #InQ13 collective, and the new CUNY East Harlem campus—provided a compelling case for situating the POOC there. So, the original questions that framed the course were joined by another set of questions. Could a course such as this one “open” the new CUNY campus to the East Harlem community in innovative ways? Given the troubled relationship of university campuses to urban neighborhoods, could we forge a healthy set of relationships? And, were there ways that the digital technologies used

1. Most high-profile MOOCs have featured men as instructors; the POOC was co-led by two women. For more on the gender imbalance in MOOCs, see Straumheim (2013).

in the course could offer a platform for community activists engaged in the struggle against the forces of inequality in East Harlem?

Community engagement with East Harlem began before the course started, and relationships took on more focused energy as course development began. Edwin Mayorga led these efforts as the official community liaison for the course, coordinating with eighteen community partners (Daniels and Gold 2014, par. 17). There were also meetings held outside of the course in East Harlem among the instructors, developers, and community partners during the semester.

Different parts of the CUNY Graduate Center also had to join forces in unprecedented ways. With POOC organizers aiming to afford every course participant unfettered access to course materials, a strong collaboration with librarians was required to create open-access reading lists. The course offered lectures and discussions that were both streamed live and video recorded, assigned readings, and scheduled a series of assignments. Many of the guest lecturers were also authors of the assigned readings. This confluence provided a unique opportunity to begin discussions with faculty about sharing their work openly on digital platforms with global, nonacademic audiences.

CUNY centrally licenses Blackboard software supporting password-protected course readings for enrolled CUNY students. (C)opyright@CUNY, a CUNY-wide library committee, posts guidelines and resources for CUNY instructors managing course-reserve readings. Several CUNY libraries additionally offer Sirsi Dynix ERes software and scanning services for local course support. Some CUNY Graduate Center faculty use Blackboard for reserve reading support; others use the CUNY Academic Commons and Open-CUNY platforms, both of which provide password protection for licensed course documents. Still other Graduate Center instructors employ commercial password-protected file-sharing sites (e.g., Dropbox and Google Drive) to post course readings. A few instructors continue the analog practice of distributing photocopies, while others provide only assigned reading lists to students who must find readings on their own.

The #InQ13 course could not apply these licensed course delivery platforms to serve students and lecturer-participants without CUNY affiliation. Our library-licensed academic works—journal articles, books, book chapters, and other media—could not be extended to audiences other than Graduate Center-affiliated students without violating license agreements. Assigning licensed readings for the #InQ13 course accessible only to those with Graduate Center credentials was antithetical to the goals of the course. Organizers refused to adopt a tiered-access scenario that would fail to provide full access to course readings to invited non-CUNY course participants. From the outset,

there was little question that the readings assigned for the #InQ13 course had to be open access.

At the time the POOC was offered, CUNY did not yet support open-access publishing with an institutional repository. In November 2011, CUNY's University Faculty Senate passed a resolution calling for an open-access institutional repository. In response, the CUNY Office of Library Services with the University Faculty Senate convened a task force to develop a repository (Cirasella 2011). In October 2012 the task force forwarded specific recommendations to its conveners, outlining a plan for implementation of a CUNY-wide repository. In fall 2013, the CUNY Graduate Center licensed Digital Commons software to provide a platform for a Graduate Center repository called CUNY Academic Works, and in fall 2014 the CUNY-wide institutional repository was launched, built on Digital Commons software.

But CUNY librarians had to find a repository platform to support the POOC in spring 2013. Many of the #InQ13 authors unaffiliated with CUNY had posted works in their own university open-access repositories. And, we directed several CUNY and non-CUNY authors to deposit works in the Internet archive "Community Texts" section that we established for use with #InQ13.

Structure of the Course

Each session was both live-streamed for those who wanted to participate synchronously and then, several days later, a more polished video recording of the class session was released and posted to the #InQ13 course website for those who wanted to participate asynchronously. The assignments for the course were designed by the faculty and by educational technologists (Daniels and Gold 2014, par. 23 and 39). Students posted their completed assignments on the course blog at the #InQ13 website. To facilitate group work, students could use a "groups" feature on the site to collaborate around specific projects. These groups were intended to foster connection between online learners and CUNY-based learners, but the "group" feature was not heavily used. The faculty provided feedback and grades on assignments produced by CUNY-based learners, and the digital fellow provided feedback for online learners (Daniels and Gold 2014, par. 49) At the end of the semester, students were invited to present their projects at a community event at La Casa Azul Bookstore in East Harlem (this was in addition to the four regular sessions held in the neighborhood).

Libraries have traditionally offered faculty copyright guidance, supporting courses with reserve software and scanning services, shepherding

extension of licensed-library content for exclusive use by a well-defined set of university-affiliated student users. Under current licensing models, this content cannot be extended to the massive, unaffiliated, undefined, and unregistered body of MOOC enrollees without tempting lawsuits. And, as we have seen in the Georgia State University case, publishers will sue universities providing traditionally enrolled students access to course-reserve readings, even if the published readings are password-protected and selected according to reasonable interpretations of fair use guidelines (Smith 2013). Though universities may open courses to anyone with an Internet connection and the will to participate, the vast majority of supporting course content—including academic books, book chapters, articles, and films—are not currently available to universities to redistribute openly. Course readings must either be published open access with copyright owner consent or licensed explicitly for open online course use (Fowler and Smith 2013).

Curtis Kendrick and Irene Gashurov discuss several potential models for MOOC enrollment and revenue generation that offer access to licensed textbooks and scholarly material. Licensed textbooks and journals inaccessible to nonpaying customers might be free or discounted for “premium”-paying MOOC customers, for example (Kendrick and Gashurov 2013; Courtney 2013). Coursera negotiated to license resources, just like libraries do, to expand access to textbooks and scholarly journals for their registered MOOC students. Access is supplied at a cost to the course provider, and it is limited to a pale fraction of scholarship available to university-affiliated students through traditional course-reserve systems and, increasingly, through open-access scholarship.² The Coursera and edX licensing models ask universities to subsidize registered MOOC students’ access to some licensed body of scholarly work, under defined terms, for some determined time. University-supported Coursera and edX are poised to expand MOOC student access to academic content, but only within regulated, publisher-imposed limits.

The moment licensed scholarly material is on the MOOC syllabus, the MOOC compromises one of its Os (“openness”). A course may be massive and may be online, but its content is no longer open if students are required to register for access or encouraged to pay to gain enhanced access to course content. Restricted access is antithetical to the project of open access and eviscerates the transformative potential of MOOCs.

2. See *The Dramatic Growth of Open Access Series* in *The Imaginary Journal of Poetic Economics*, a blog by Heather Morrison: <http://poeticeconomics.blogspot.ca/2006/08/dramatic-growth-of-open-access-series.html>.

Open-access scholarship, in contrast to licensed content, is available to a broad variety of readers and to any student with an Internet connection, online or on campus, in any economy. Scholarship published in “gold” or completely open-access journals or scholarship posted “green” open-access on author websites or in institutional repositories is accessible by anyone and can be included, free of charge, in any course. Only open-access publishing will expand the quality and variety of academic works available to the web-browsing worldwide public. A critical mass of open-access scholarship, currently estimated at no more than 25 percent of scholarly output (Gargouri et al. 2012), must form the backbone of the project for MOOCs to realize their much-touted potential to transform higher education. Securing scholarship in open-access contexts must go hand-in-hand with MOOC building. They are two logical, inseparable parts of the same project to enhance global public access to higher education. To achieve revolutionary potential, MOOCs require a transformed system of scholarly communication.

At the March 2013 University of Pennsylvania conference *MOOCs and Libraries: Massive Opportunity or Overwhelming Challenge?*, Jennifer Dorner, Head of Doe/Moffitt Library Instruction and User Services at University of California, Berkeley, recognized MOOCs as “a real opportunity to educate faculty about the need for owning the rights to their content and making it accessible to other people” (Howard 2013). Librarian-faculty collaboration in MOOC building also involves conversation with authors about transforming scholarly communication. Activists, artists, and academic authors who participated in our POOC were called on to make their work open access.

MOOCs offer authors a unique opportunity to widen readership and to raise the profile of their work. Prompted by authors’ potential to increase exposure to additional readers through MOOCs, book publishers proved to be willing, and even eager, to make traditionally published works open access, at least temporarily and in part, if they were assigned readings for our POOC. Several book publishers, when approached by librarians, with an author cc’d, made copyright-restricted books and book chapters openly available online, particularly when the author appeared in our open online presentation series.

Forging Open Access for Community Engagement

Making course readings open access required a great deal of work with divisions of labor and responsibility. These divisions of labor, fuzzy at first, became clearer as the course progressed and as librarians worked with instructors to review course readings. In a conventional course, one instructor

selects readings to teach a small group of students. In this unique participatory course, a twenty-member team was required to *produce* the course, with two instructors, for thousands of potential students, both enrolled at the Graduate Center and not enrolled, participating from geographically dispersed locations (Daniels and Gold 2014). While all embraced open access to scholarly and artistic works as a worthy goal, none were experienced in the mechanics of open-access discovery, identification, permissions seeking, and posting.

Course instructors provided initial “wish list” sets of readings for course modules selected for content only, without considering licensing restrictions that amounted to 117 total requested articles, book chapters, websites, blogs, films, and entire books. Daniels and her production team reviewed the syllabus, and in conjunction with instructors, found or forged open-access equivalents for 47 titles, or about 40 percent of the traditionally licensed required readings. Librarians then reviewed the team’s remaining list to examine the licensing status of the readings and to determine what steps the team might take to obtain key readings in open-access formats. Librarians reviewed electronic journal articles for author self-archiving possibilities. Books and films required publisher (or other rights holder) permissions and cooperation. A more thorough report of our pursuits has been published elsewhere (Smith-Cruz, Thistlethwaite, and Daniels 2014).

COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS COPYRIGHT OWNERS

Librarians contacted book publishers, cc’ing authors, lecturers, and course organizers on all correspondence. This librarian-author collaboration proved to be compelling to publishers. Many authors were honored to have their work included and volunteered to contact publishers via personal correspondence. Three of the nineteen publishers contacted understood the nature of our request and seized the opportunity to offer open, unlimited distribution of materials for the duration of the course. Publishers provided free online access for a defined time with course traffic directed to and access governed by their websites. Some publishers were unable to be contacted, whereas others declined our invitation to participate.

Early in the term, #InQ13 course coordinators approached filmmaker Ed Morales about his 2008 documentary film, *Whose Barrio?: The Gentrification of East Harlem*, requesting that he post it free online for the course’s second module. Morales retains the copyright for his work, and he was also a guest for the course. He readily complied, posting his film to be viewed free, open,

and online via the Internet Movie Database. Morales's eager participation was early inspiration to organizers who went forward to convince other authors and publishers to make their work openly available.

Another early instance produced a thornier result. One course lecturer believed she retained copyright of her forthcoming book. She assured course organizers that publisher's correspondence confirmed permission to post chapters on the course website. However, librarians' end-of-course review of the email correspondence revealed a misinterpretation of the publisher's correspondence. The publisher had in fact withheld permission to post the work. The posted chapters were removed from the temporary course repository when we discovered the error. A different book publisher responded with a course-pack license agreement requesting a fee to permit fifty-seven pages to be copied no more than twenty times. While Daniels's letter to the publisher had been clear about the nature of the "open, online" course and the author's appearance as a guest lecturer, the publisher either misunderstood the request or was at a loss about how to respond. Upon clarifying this issue, this publisher of left-leaning academic texts described the book as a bestseller. The publisher was willing to negotiate a license and fee to allow online distribution of two requested chapters, but only if distribution could be limited to a specified number of students. A subsequent attempt to clarify went unanswered.

Three academic publishers allowed temporary open online posting for the #InQ13 course: University of California (UC) Press, New York University (NYU) Press, and University of Minnesota (UMN) Press. UC posted the introduction and chapter 3 of Arlene Dávila's 2004 *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City*. Before our request, the press featured the book's introduction on its website, as a teaser. UC also posted two chapters of Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng's 2012 *A People's Guide to Los Angeles* and chapter 5 of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's 2007 *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. NYU Press provided Johana Londoño's chapter "Aesthetic Belonging: The Latinization and Renewal of Union City, New Jersey" from the 2012 anthology *Latino Urbanism: The Politics of Planning, Policy, and Redevelopment* edited by David Diaz and Rodolfo Torres. UMN offered the biggest win as measured by pagination, posting the entirety of Cindi Katz's 2004 *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives* in downloadable PDF format, which was available through a link on the press's website. Publishers kept all links live from the time we reached agreement through the end of the semester-long course.

Choosing Articles Everyone Can Access

The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ; doaj.org) and the SHERPA/RoMEO tool (www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo) were essential for reviewing course readings. The DOAJ hosted by Lund University lists over ten thousand peer-reviewed scholarly journals that are entirely open access, or “gold” open access. The SHERPA/RoMEO database, hosted by the University of Nottingham, lists academic journals that are not “gold” open access, but that allow another sort of author self-archiving. SHERPA/RoMEO lists the so-called “green” open-access policies, covering over twenty-two thousand academic journals. Of the titles covered in 2011, 94 percent offered some form of author self-archiving after embargoes, ranging from zero to twenty-four months (Millington 2011). Publishers offer wildly varying terms for self-archiving. Some allow pre-peer-reviewed versions only; others allow self-archiving only in peer-reviewed versions, as long as the publisher’s final PDF is not used; and still others require any self-archiving to feature only the publisher’s PDF. SHERPA/RoMEO also notes when publishers limit the type of repositories authors may employ for self-archiving. For example, some restrict postings to temporary repositories; others to author websites or institutional repositories; and others to nonprofit repositories.

Over thirty-two thousand scholarly periodicals are included in these two tools. Applying these tools to review the course lists we learned that scholarship is sometimes posted openly, without regard for publishers’ restrictions. Posting policies are not at all immediately obvious to authors or to faculty forming syllabi. We also learned that, while author self-archiving is allowed by hundreds of traditional academic publishers, the opportunity to self-archive is not ubiquitously understood or enacted by authors. In conversation with librarians, though, the authors inevitably became at least aware of and in some cases, expert in, publisher’s policies as it applied to their published work.

Evaluating the POOC

It is challenging to assess the impact of an experiment in education that took as its chief goal to be “participatory.” When the goal is for a course to be “massive,” the primary metric of evaluation is how many people registered for the course. We did not measure the massiveness of the POOC because participants were not required to register at the course website. Instead we opened the course to as many varieties of learners as possible. We measured a broader spectrum of factors meant to gauge the participatory quality of the course.

The #InQ13 POOC was an alternative to MOOCs, emphasizing openness and participatory action above massiveness of scale. While our model sometimes resulted in messy struggles with the complex social, political, and economic issues related to inequality, not the least of which is the inequality between academics and community partners, the POOC was nevertheless a bold reimagination of what it is to take seriously the idea of opening higher education. Graduate education can and should engage learners outside the traditional academy, but it must do so through thoughtful models, conceptualized with wide participation and equitable practice in mind. We offer the #InQ13 model in particular, and the idea of the POOC more generally, as one possible path for others considering future experiments in open graduate education.

Traditional measures of learning assessment are valuable, yet they often overlook the variety of learners and the wide range of their goals in engaging with such a course. One of the most relevant metrics is the number of people who attended the open events in East Harlem, participating in person, which was nearly five hundred. And, as further testimony to the global potential of online learning, we found that people from twenty-six countries visited the course website or watched the videos.

Conclusion: Opening Education, Linking to Communities

We began the POOC with an emphasis on participatory pedagogy, on concrete interactions between a student community and a geographically specific urban community, which necessitated a model far removed from the sage-on-a-stage, broadcast teaching environments employed in most MOOCs. While MOOCs have spurred discussions about online courses extending the reach of higher-education institutions (and, in the process, proffering new, more profitable business models for them), our experiences with the #InQ13 POOC suggest that online courses that emphasize interaction among faculty, students, and broader communities are accompanied by significant institutional and economic costs. On the #InQ13 course website, our credits page lists nineteen different individuals who played a role in creating the course experience. If MOOCs are sometimes imagined by administrators and businesses as a labor-saving, cost-cutting device for higher education, then the POOC model offers another model; it was, in fact, a job-creation program. It modeled higher education with the potential to enliven academic-community partnerships in interesting ways. It required a significant investment of time, money, and labor to succeed, and heavily relied on libraries and librarians to navigate the often daunting terrain of open access.

One of the key lessons learned from our POOC is that engaging with communities means making scholarly materials available to people who do not hold academic credentials. While MOOCs claim openness, what they offer is restricted or tiered access to licensed scholarship, and thus little potential to transform higher education. A successful opening of higher education to communities requires a robust academic infrastructure of open-access scholarship. Libraries become the bridge between scholars and communities for this more open future.

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