

Second Language Writing in a MOOC: Affordances and Missed Opportunities

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Abstract

MOOCs (massive open online courses) promise higher education to participants who cannot travel to or pay for face-to-face classes. In 2013, a new MOOC introduced second language (L2) learners to concepts of English language academic writing. The authors of this article participated in the course as students and kept a reflective diary, which we analyzed qualitatively from a perspective of multimodal design. We describe the instructional modes present in the course and discuss the ways the course utilized affordances of those modes. We argue that while the course design provided linguistic input and fostered interaction among participants, it missed opportunities to utilize some multimodal affordances of the MOOC platform for supporting peer response and developing a learner community, thus limiting students' potential to learn English academic writing.

Introduction

Writing, possibly the most difficult skill in a second language, is often neglected in English as a foreign language courses (Ruecker, Shapiro, Johnson, & Tardy, 2014) but is nevertheless essential to academic success, particularly at the university level. While American universities teach academic writing to local students, aspiring writers living far from a campus have limited opportunities to learn how to write for academic purposes. Many students for whom English is a second or foreign language want to learn more about these writing practices from their home countries (Sokolik, 2014).

MOOCs (massive open online courses) promise higher education to participants without the physical or financial means to attend face-to-face classes. MOOC course designs differ with respect to learner interaction with content, instructors, and each other. In connectivist cMOOCs, first offered in 2008, course organizers may initiate resource collection or facilitate discussion, but learners build the conceptual understandings and share further resources (Clara & Barbera, 2013). Most current MOOCs, however, are top-down xMOOCs run by university-corporate partnerships and intended to convey university-level content to mass audiences (Stevens, 2013). These courses provide instruction and information through pre-recorded video lectures, reading texts, and computer-scored assessments (Rodriguez, 2013). MOOC design generally assumes that participants can listen, read, and write competently enough in the language of delivery to succeed independently with university-level tasks. While these demands may challenge underprepared students already fluent in the language of the course, aspiring MOOC students still learning that language are further disadvantaged, as courses rarely provide support for students who have not yet learned how to write for academic purposes.

In 2013, one of the major MOOC providers launched a course series to introduce second language (L2) learners to basic concepts of English language academic writing, the first MOOC to explicitly focus on L2 writing instruction. The three 5-week sessions of Academic English-X [1] attracted on average 55,000 students from almost every country worldwide (course instructor, personal communication, November 21, 2015). The authors of this article participated in the course as students. With expertise in L2 writing pedagogy but not in online teaching and learning, we were curious about the course setup and student experience in such a MOOC. Our purpose here is to analyze the course design and reflect critically on its successes and challenges, with an interest in helping designers of future writing MOOCs for L2 learners. We argue that while the course design provided linguistic input and fostered interaction among participants, it also missed opportunities to utilize some multimodal affordances of the MOOC platform for supporting peer response and developing a learner community, thus limiting students' potential to learn English academic writing.

Theoretical Framework: Multimodality and Design

We frame our analysis through a lens of multimodality. Multimodality is the use of multiple modes in the presentation of a communicative message. *Modes* are the resources used for communicating meaning, such as speech, writing, or imagery, that “consist of bundles of (often deeply diverse) features” (Kress, 2010, p. 86). These features contribute to each mode's *affordances*, defined as the social possibilities and constraints a mode provides (Kress, 2010). In the MOOC environment, available modes include video, image, text, discussion boards, and auto-graded quizzes. Each has affordances that make it better than other modes for conveying particular types of information and concepts, supporting student-student interaction, or evaluating learning.

Multimodal entities—including websites, art exhibits, or online courses—convey meaning through the interaction of different modes, each of which carries a portion of the meaning of the whole (Kress, 2003, 2010). The success of multimodal texts depends on choices made by designers of those texts, who select the most apt tools to represent their intended meanings

and arrange them in a layout that best conveys these meanings (Kress, 2010). Not all choices are available to multimodal designers at all times, however. Wysocki (2005) suggested the label “unavailable designs” to describe material options that are inaccessible to designers and therefore constrain what messages can be conveyed. Modes and materials may be unavailable because of physical or temporal constraints (they do not exist within the context) or social norms (they are not used within a cultural context for a particular purpose). For example, Wysocki notes that while a college assignment could technically be written in colored crayon, convention dictates that such a mode of communication is inappropriate (and therefore unavailable) in most university contexts.

Technology enables access to new media, new modes of communication, and therefore, new possible designs. MOOC designers must consider the affordances offered by new media while maintaining best practices for online teaching of language and writing.

Online Language and Writing Instruction

In this section we briefly review previous research into online language and writing instruction and then summarize relevant research into the MOOC platform. Our purpose is not to debate the role of MOOCs in higher education, but rather to highlight design-related issues relevant to the present discussion of MOOCs for L2 writing instruction. Because no research published to date has analyzed the design of L2 writing-focused MOOCs, nor of language MOOCs more generally, we frame our discussion in theoretical considerations of online course design for language and writing instruction more generally, as well as implications for students like those for whom Academic English-X was developed: second language learners of English living in both center and periphery countries with varying levels of English proficiency and digital literacy.

MOOCs and Online Course Design

Regardless of the student population, online course design should allow students to apply new skills in different contexts, use multiple media to represent concepts, and assess students regularly to track their progress (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014). Unlike face-to-face classes, however, some instruction must be more carefully designed because teachers do not interact in real time with students and cannot make impromptu changes to instruction (Means, et al., 2014; Sokolik, 2016). A particular challenge in MOOC design relevant to our discussion is materials selection: while US copyright law’s fair use policy allows some use of copyrighted texts for educational purposes, for example, the commercial nature and massive enrollments of MOOC courses mean that instructors must either create their own materials or draw from the public domain (Bernstein, 2015).

xMOOC course design often ignores the affordances of web-enabled modalities, replicating instead face-to-face lecture courses. Teaching through video and text can create a culture where a professor delivers information to students (Portmess, 2013), rather than fostering critical thinking (Rodriguez, 2013). Sokolik (2015, 2016) acknowledges that current xMOOC platform design limits communicative processes in language MOOCs. One especially problematic area is the discussion board, learners’ primary means of communication.

Improved platform design might allow learners to interact more as they do on social media, creating groups and commenting on classmates' posts (Sokolik, 2015, 2016).

MOOCs, Online Language Learning, and Writing

Although the course we studied was the first L2 writing-focused MOOC, previous work has addressed online language and writing instruction separately. Calling out MOOCs' potentially isolating nature of individuals working asynchronously on computers, Godwin-Jones (2014) suggests that the MOOC format is not conducive to language learning because students may acquire vocabulary, but not develop pragmatic or strategic competence, denying them real-world communication skills in the language. Countering Godwin-Jones' concern, Sokolik (2015) suggests that language MOOCs can do what traditional computer-based drills cannot: provide authentic, communicative language teaching. Stevens (2013) adds that MOOCs might be best for the chaotic, interactive aspects of language learning and not so good for learning grammar or other concrete structures. MOOCs for teaching foreign languages can use a range of tools including adaptive technology and social networks (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2015). Language MOOCs have potential to foster large communities of practice, collaborative learning, and increased peer interaction (Colpaert, 2015). Virtual language labs can become digitally mediated interactional spaces, where learners use language for authentic communication (Lotherington & Jensen, 2011). Language teaching in the MOOC environment, however, requires particular attention to course design because of the physical and temporal separation between teachers and students, as the teacher must plan both the course content (the grammatical, lexical, and cultural aspects of language) and the course interface (learning modules and assessment tools) (Castrillo de Larreta-Azelain, 2015).

Writing takes many forms in MOOCs, and because of the massive enrollment, courses rely primarily on peer response for feedback on student writing. Comer and White (2016) found that peer response worked somewhat well in the first-ever first-year composition MOOC, although they noted that even with rubrics explicitly aligned to course objectives, feedback varied widely in quality. In a report on their design of a first-year composition MOOC in which two-thirds of the enrolled students were L2 English users, McCorkle, Halasek, Clinnin, and Selfe (2016) addressed concerns about native-speakerism biased peer reviews; even though they added a module to the course specifically about World Englishes, they felt that students did not take those lessons to heart when providing and receiving peer feedback. Bloch's (2016) analysis of three university-level composition MOOCs included the courses that McCorkle et al. and Comer and White described. Bloch found that in all the courses, peer review was the only form of feedback and assessment, and that students felt like their peers did not give them fair evaluations.

Several studies have addressed writing-related issues in content-focused MOOCs. Examining interaction through writing in two MOOCs, Comer, Clark, and Canelas (2014) found that in peer response, students provided both positive feedback and constructive criticism, although the researchers also found evidence of unconstructive criticism in both courses. In reflections on his experiences participating in an xMOOC course, Krause (in Krause & Rice, 2013) suggests that peer response activities led to uneven, generally unhelpful feedback, as the criteria for the rubric were vague, and learners had no incentive to invest energy in providing

thorough responses. Bali (2014) identified the limited interaction around writing as a drawback of structured peer response systems, where writers cannot respond to anonymous reviewer comments or ask for clarification. Furthermore, Griffin and Minter (2013) noted that reliance on peer response can hurt at-risk students (including L2 writers) who need more individualized feedback from knowledgeable reviewers and may be embarrassed by errors in their own writing.

One solution to this problem is training students to provide better feedback during peer response. In a language course, carefully designed training is essential:

A peer assessment system for online language learning is likely to require a more formal mechanism than is used in the typical MOOC. That would include clear guidelines and rubrics for evaluating student work and assessments, as well as substantial user training and oversight. (Godwin-Jones, 2014, p. 8)

Yang and Meng (2013) found that an online training system allowed lower proficiency L2 writers to both provide better language feedback to peers and improve their own writing. Other analyses of MOOC peer response suggest that in addition to training, platform development should allow reviewer assignment based on cultural and linguistic background and past course performance, as well as incentives for careful review (Piech et al., 2013; Suen, 2014). Without such formal mechanisms for training reviewers, L2 writers may not receive necessary feedback.

MOOC Research

Research on MOOCs is limited but growing annually (Gašević, Kovanović, Joksimović, & Siemens, 2014), although as yet few empirical studies have examined language or writing MOOCs. Many researchers studying MOOCs have taken a case study approach as participants or observers (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013), with some participating as students as we did. Krause and Rice (2013) described their own experience as writing professors taking an introductory music appreciation xMOOC. They noted that vague writing assignments and peer response rubrics led to a wide range of effort by students. Bali (2014) similarly participated in four MOOCs; with respect to pedagogical principles for undergraduate teaching, she concluded that the courses neither offered college-level academic challenges nor required higher-order thinking. Bentley et al. (2014) wrote collaborative reflections on experiences in a project-based MOOC, finding that course structure, including instructor encouragement of varied participation levels, supported learners in meeting their own goals for the course. Most studies of researchers' experiences participating in a course (e.g., Bali, 2014; Krause & Rice, 2013) are casual reflections rather than systematic analyses. Bentley et al. (2014) conducted an auto-ethnography of their experiences, but did not write reflections until six months after the course ended. Language MOOCs, moreover, remain under-researched, with no empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals as of late 2014 (Bárcena & Martin-Monje, 2015; a search of Google Scholar in February 2018 reveals only a few more small-scale studies).

Gašević et al. identify a need to analyze course design from a multimodal perspective: “Given the scale of MOOCs, a wide spectrum of learners’ goals, differences in roles of learners, instructors and other stakeholders, and a broad scope of learning outcomes, research of the effects of affordances versus instruction requires much research attention” (2014, p. 165). Fuchs (2016) provides an anecdotal report of her teacher education students’ commentary about the design features of beginning-level language MOOCs in which they participated. The students noted that positive features included multimodal tools such as being able to click on a word and see the definition and video recordings of lectures that could be re-watched as the learner needed. Negative features included unclear or missing task instructions, inappropriate-level vocabulary, and a lack of interaction in the target language. The current study presents a systematic analysis of the researchers’ participation in a three-part MOOC course. Like the studies noted above, we focus on our own experiences in the course, but by applying a multimodal analysis to our reflective writing, we contribute a theoretically informed discussion of course design and affordances in a MOOC specifically developed to teach academic writing to L2 learners of English.

Methodology

Research Questions

With an interest in identifying and analyzing the affordances of the MOOC platform for second language writing instruction, our study addressed these questions:

- What modes are available to designers of a second language writing course in an xMOOC environment?
- In what ways does Academic English-X utilize the affordances of available modes in the xMOOC environment?
- In what ways does the course design of Academic English-X miss opportunities to use affordances available in the xMOOC environment?

Participants and Research Site

Participants. The participants in this study were the three authors. Betsy is a professor of applied linguistics. A native speaker of English, she conducts qualitative research on second language academic writing. Ai, a native speaker of Japanese, and Pamela, a native speaker of English, were MA students enrolled in the graduate program where Betsy was teaching second language writing when the study began. However, participation in this research study was voluntary, bearing no course credit or other consequences, and Ai and Pamela both participated out of their own interest. None of the authors had participated in a MOOC prior to beginning this study.

Research site. The study was conducted during the 2013-14 academic year in the three-part Academic English-X MOOC course (we call the parts Course 1, Course 2, and Course 3, respectively) sponsored by a highly ranked American university and taught by an experienced ESL and writing instructor with a faculty position at that campus. This was the first offering of Academic English-X, which was promoted in the course description as being specifically

targeted to L2 English speakers: “This course is an introductory level university course designed for learners of English. It will cover issues of grammar, written structure, editing, revising, and paragraph development.” During this first year, the combined Academic English-X courses drew over 150,000 students (course instructor, personal communication). The courses were hosted by one of the largest xMOOC providers, which partners with universities and other institutions worldwide, offering courses in diverse fields, usually free of charge, to students from around the globe.

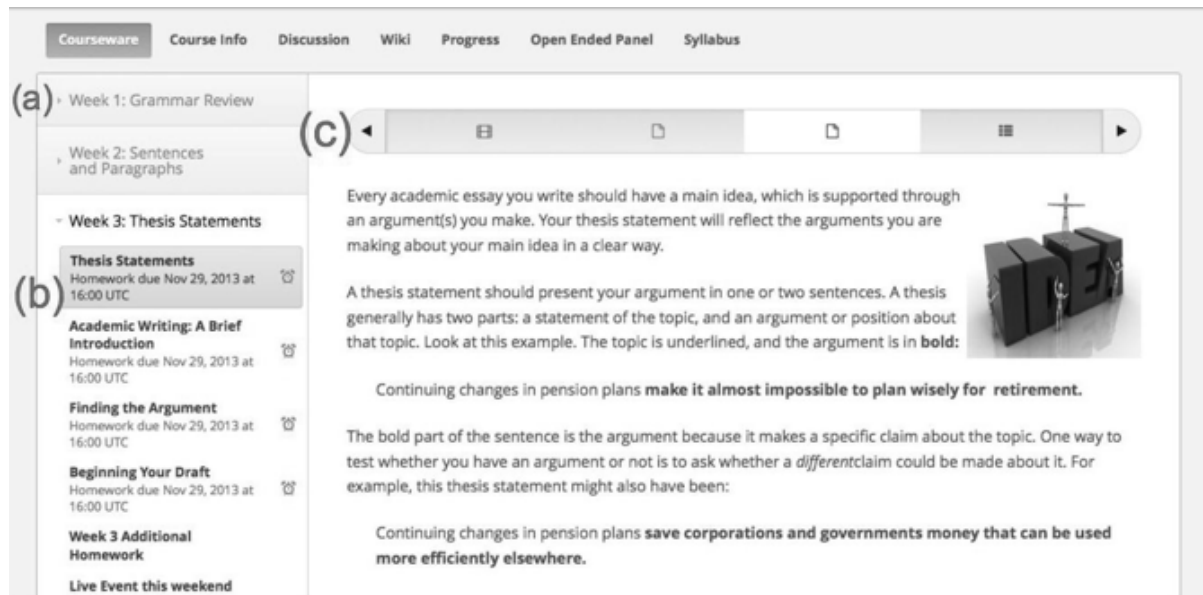


Figure 1: Academic English-X Course Platform

Taking a process approach to teaching writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014), Courses 1 and 2 were structured around prewriting, drafting, feedback, and revision of a single essay. Course 3, in contrast, took a genre-based approach, with each week addressing writing in a different academic discipline. Each week a set of modules were released, with exercises (discussion posts, quizzes, etc.) due at a given time at the end of that 7-day period. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the course platform. The weeks [marked (a) in Figure 1] were listed vertically on the left side under the Courseware menu. A *module* (b), listed as drop-down menus under each week’s title on the left-side menu, was a subset of that week’s instructional materials. When students clicked on a module title, tabs (c) appeared across the top of the main window, represented by icons. Each tab contained a set of instructional materials in multiple *modes*. As we describe in the findings, the modes in the course included text, video, images, auto-graded quizzes, and discussion boards.

Data Collection

The three researchers individually enrolled in the Academic English-X courses and participated as students, taking quizzes and contributing to discussion boards. We did not simplify our language nor deceive other participants about our identities. Because other teachers and native English speakers were participating in the course, few students remarked on our language proficiency.

We maintained a collaborative reflective diary in a single Google Document, shared among the three researchers, and wrote reflections after each class session, noting what we did and our impressions of the presentation, assignments, and interactions with other course participants. The order of diary entries varied, with each author finding time in her own schedule each week. Since all authors had studied L2 writing pedagogy and research, the perceptions of the course recorded in the diary were naturally influenced by what we understood about good teaching practice in the field (e.g., Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). The practice of keeping a collaborative diary was a deliberate choice, drawing on Borg's reminder that research should not be an isolating experience: "Research journals can play a central role in collaborative research contexts by providing all participants in the process with a means of expressing, recording, and sharing their experiences of the process" (2001, p. 165). In writing our initial reflections, we considered both what we had experienced and how those experiences made us feel. We also commented on one another's diary entries, noting common responses, different perceptions, and further thoughts (a process similar to that of Henderson Lee, McClure, Tanghe, & Park, 2017). After Course 3 ended, we individually reviewed all three archived courses and wrote summative reflections tying day-to-day experiences to the overall experience. At this point, we also examined our responses for evidence of where the MOOC platform and course design became prominent. [2]

Data Analysis

While the recursive, interactive writing in the collaborative diary began our analysis process, this article draws from additional systematic analysis of the diary to identify aspects of multimodality in the course design (Merriam, 1998). The reflective diary was first uploaded into Dedoose (<http://dedoose.com/>), and each researcher independently coded the entire diary (all authors' reflective writing and margin commentary), applying codes from a shared list derived through initial review of the data and creating new codes as needed. Codes were categorized under the following larger constructs:

- *Course design*: How the course was laid out within the MOOC environment, the ease of finding resources, and the general accessibility of instructional concepts.
- *Missed opportunities*: When the use of a particular mode did not clearly convey stated instructional goals, particularly when other available designs could have done so more effectively. Evidence of missed opportunities included other students' confusion and our own frustration as learners.
- *Modes*: The resources used for communicating meaning (Kress, 2010) within the MOOC environment, including video, text, images, discussion boards, and quiz tools.
- *Interaction*: How instructors and other participants communicated. We noted directives, questioning, collaboration, and other forms of interaction, particularly on the discussion boards.

After independent coding, we met as a group to identify areas of overlap and disagreement. Areas of disagreement were reconciled through discussion among coders with reference to data excerpts. Using Dedoose's *Analyze* function, we next reviewed code co-occurrences in all three researchers' coding and noted excerpts representing our shared understanding of the

codes. Throughout the coding and review process, we wrote memos about the codes and course through a lens of multimodality theory (Kress, 2003, 2010). We organize the Findings section to answer each research question.

Findings

Available Modes

This section analyzes the course design to answer the question: What are the modes available to designers of a second language writing course in an xMOOC environment? Below we describe the modes, referencing both their potential uses (affordances) and the forms in which they were most frequently used in Academic English-X (course design). Our description considers how modes “change, through their affordances, the potentials for representational and communicational action by their users” (Kress, 2003, p. 5).

Video. The MOOC platform allowed for embedding videos; Academic English-X usually used YouTube screencasts of PowerPoint slideshows narrated by the instructor. Alongside the videos was a scrolling transcript, affording students the opportunity to read along while listening. Course designers also provided a “Download” option, making the videos more accessible for students with limited internet access. Figure 2 shows a screenshot of a typical video.



Figure 2: Screenshot of video mode

Text. The platform allowed for the use of both html text and downloadable pdfs, although the course design rarely used the latter. Text could be presented in paragraphs, with bullet points,

or as tables to illustrate grammar points. Text could also include hyperlinks to other resources. Figure 3 shows html text used to introduce a short story in Course 3.

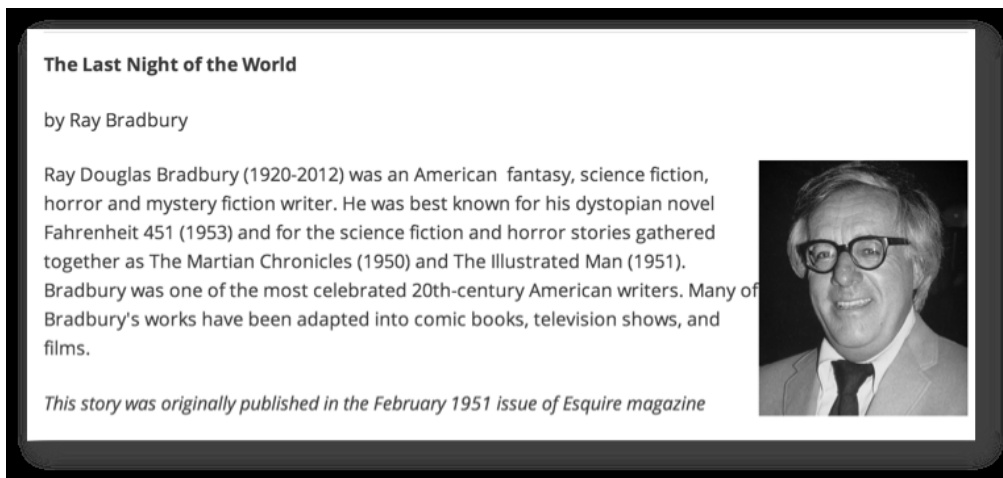


Figure 3: Screenshot of text mode

Images. The MOOC platform allowed for embedding of images. In Academic English-X, images were frequently embedded within texts. These images were mostly color photographs or drawings that were not central to the instruction (e.g. photos of authors whose texts were included in the instructional text, as shown in Figure 3, or pictures not directly related to the text). Images were also occasionally used for more central purposes such as illustrating vocabulary items.

Discussion board. A key interactive feature afforded by the MOOC environment, discussion boards allowed any participant to write text and comment on other participants' texts. In Academic English-X, the discussion board mode was used primarily for student-to-student interaction, although the instructor and assistants commented on some discussion threads. Students used the discussion boards to post self-introductions, share drafts of their own writing, and respond to their peers' writing. Individual discussion threads could also be ranked by participants voting "+" or "-" on a particular discussion topic, as shown in Figure 4.

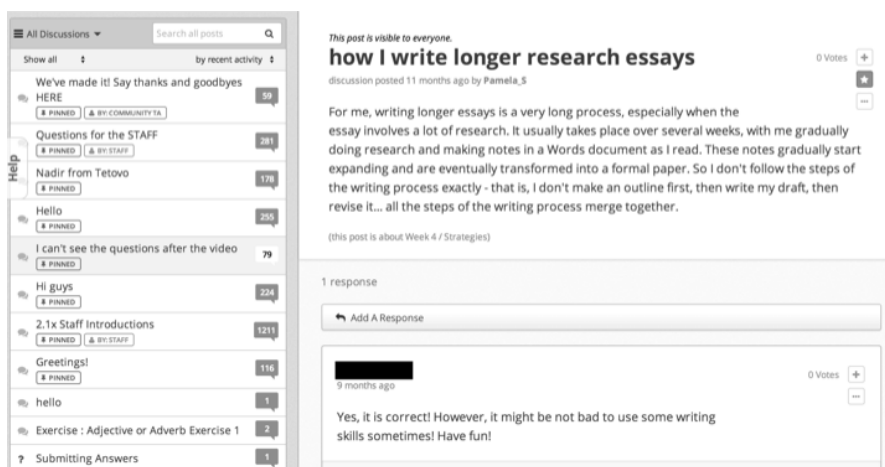


Figure 4: Screenshot of discussion board mode

Quizzes. The MOOC platform included the possibility for several types of quizzes. This course utilized auto-scored quizzes with multiple choice (single and multiple answer) and open-response tasks with preset correct answers, shown in Figures 5 and 6 below. Quizzes allowed students to verify correct responses immediately and permitted several attempts, so learners could change incorrect responses. In Academic English-X, quiz scores cumulatively counted for 60% of the total grade. One form of quiz linking the fixed responses of auto-scored items with free responses of the discussion boards was what we call the honor system, where students checked a box attesting that they had posted a text in the discussion board and responded to other students' texts (shown in Figure 7 and discussed in the next section).

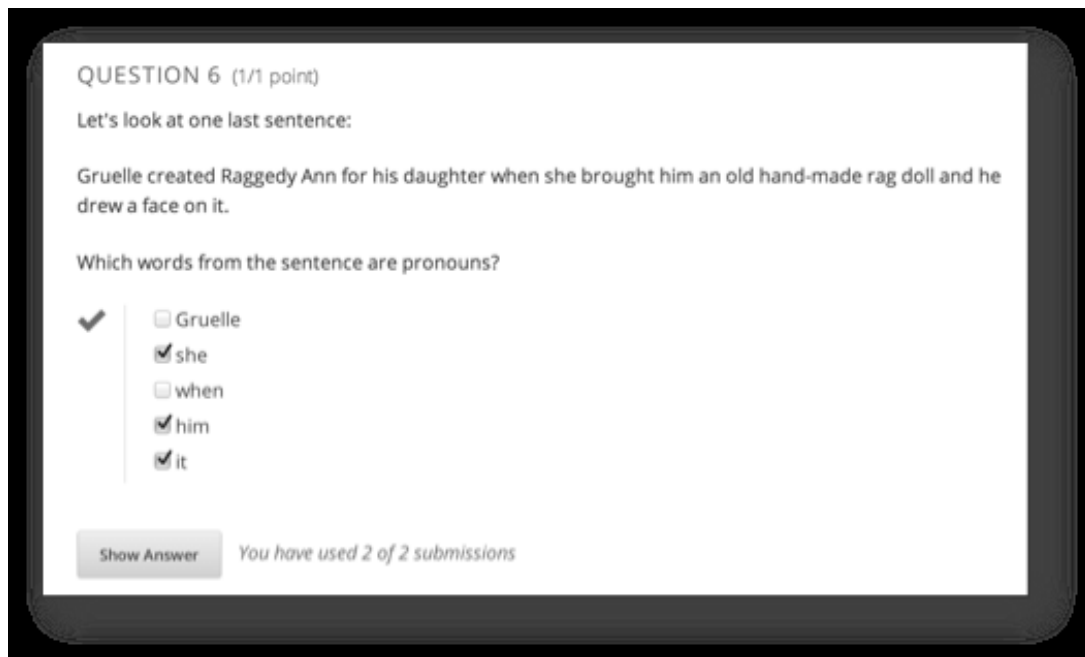


Figure 5: Screenshot of multiple choice quiz mode

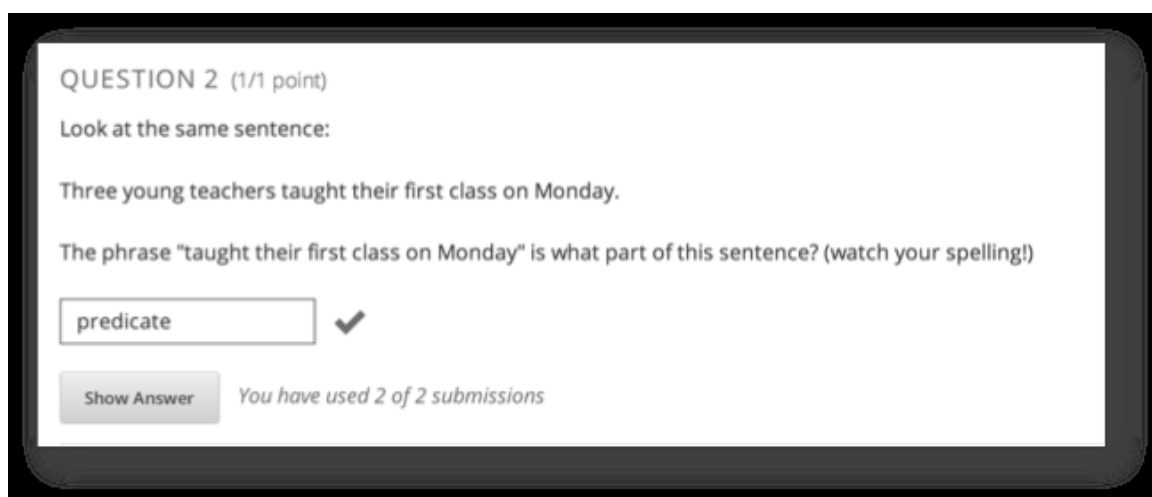


Figure 6: Screenshot of open-response quiz mode

Each mode had particular affordances that allowed it to present information and facilitate interaction in unique ways. The next section analyzes how the Academic English-X course design made use of these affordances.

Utilizing the Affordances of the MOOC Platform

In this section we examine the question: In what ways does Academic English-X utilize available modes in the xMOOC environment? We found that the course successfully employed several of the modes described above. Specifically designed as a MOOC and taught online to a massive student population, the course relied primarily on video and discussion board modes, both of which allowed students access to course concepts in different ways from a face-to-face class.

Input. The course used videos for instruction in most modules. As Figure 2 shows, many were screencasts of PowerPoint slideshows narrated by the instructor explaining key points for the module topic: the roles of sentences in a paragraph or revising an essay, for example. The course used the affordances of videos in beneficial ways for L2 learners.

The video design proved essential to its success as an instructional mode. Combining visual (slides with text and/or images) and audio explanations allowed learners with different learning styles to access the content. Video furthermore provided both visual and auditory input that students could review to increase comprehension, in contrast with face-to-face classes where students cannot review a lecture if they do not understand it the first time. Re-watching replaced the possibility of asking a live teacher questions. Downloading further allowed learners with limited internet access to re-watch the videos offline (a benefit noted by Liyanagunawardena, Williams, & Adams, 2013). Most videos also included the option to turn on a transcript, which scrolled on the right side of the screen. Viewers could click on a particular line and go directly to that point in the video.

The videos also benefited learners who did not have access to other English language courses. We noted students commenting in discussions about their interest in improving their English proficiency. In a reflection on the video design, Ai, herself an L2 English speaker, pointed out that some students may not have been taking the course just to improve their writing:

Anyways, if I were a “fresh off the airplane” kind of student and extremely insecure about my listening, I might find the video useful since even just listening to simple instructions used to be sometimes challenging to me and I was eager to practice listening by having audio sources with scripts.

The videos, she suggested, were not only instructional but also offered accessible listening input to support students’ overall language learning.

Interaction. The course also built on the affordances of various modes to encourage interaction among students. The discussion board allowed students to provide ongoing feedback to each other and to expand on course content. Some discussions were on general topics, including learners’ self-introductions and requests for help accessing resources.

Throughout the course, most discussion board topics were tied to specific modules, such as practice exercises or sharing ideas about a topic.

The discussion boards served as a way to crowdsource feedback (through peer comments on grammar, ideas, or phrasing) and to build students' resources. For example, a practice exercise in a module focused on reducing wordiness provided a brief narrative and directed students to revise the story and comment on others' revisions. We noted broad variations in the revised stories, each with comments from other students. Other exercises asked students to share sentences that they thought were well written or to post revisions to sentences with grammatical errors. Students were encouraged to share strategies for writing or editing.

The discussion boards also fostered a sense of community in a setting where learners might otherwise feel isolated at their individual computers (Means et al., 2014). Even as experienced academic writers, we enjoyed receiving comments from other students. Ai noted her own contribution to the discussion board assignment asking students to post topic ideas for the final essay in the first course:

...participants are asked to choose an essay topic and write a paragraph in the discussion area. I wrote about Fukushima nuclear plant disaster and it seems like I got some comments from others! Yay! I'll read them later and fix my writing accordingly. Getting comments on my writing makes me really excited.

This sense of community provided support to writers wanting to know how readers understood their writing. In a face-to-face writing class, students could share knowledge and resources in oral discussions. In the asynchronous MOOC environment, these relationships must develop apart from the teacher; the community of learners allows for the development of both affective and academic resources without teacher intervention. Although all writers benefit from a community, L2 writers living in countries with few opportunities to share their English writing with others may benefit even more from such interaction as they can receive feedback on their language and rhetorical development.

Fostering this kind of interaction was a deliberate part of the course design. In a Google Hangout session with students in the course, the instructor mentioned the discussion boards as a key feature in designing a writing course for the MOOC platform. She stressed that an essential part of learning to write was practice, and the discussion board was intended to get students interacting with each other through writing.

The discussion board mode was initially (in Course 1) a challenge for us as learners, as its sorting led the oldest posts to receive hundreds of comments, and the newer ones none. In Course 2, however, the format changed so that posts appeared from newest to oldest, which we noted evened out the comments and allowed more students to interact with the community and receive feedback on their writing. Thinking about this design change, Pamela observed:

...today when I posted mine it showed up immediately at the top of the list, and I was able to scroll down and see people who had posted only a few minutes before me, rather than people who posted days ago. As might be expected, the more recent

posters didn't have any comments yet, so I was easily able to find a post without hundreds of comments (as was the case in Course 1). This seems like a better system, that may allow each posting to get a more equal number of responses.

The revised design of the discussion board also allowed students to follow posts and receive email notifications if posts they were following were updated or received feedback from other participants. Another addition was the option to vote for interesting or helpful posts. These features all afforded students greater opportunities to interact as they developed their writing in a community of learners. They further allowed more students to receive far more feedback on their writing than they would have if relying on the instructor alone.

Honor System. Connected to the discussion boards and related to feedback processes was a feature we termed the *honor system*, first introduced as a self-assessment of writing (in Course 1 on submission of final drafts) and changed to facilitate comments on other students' writing (in Courses 2 and 3). Figure 7 shows the format of a typical honor system exercise.

WORDINESS EXERCISE (5.0/5.0 points)

When you finish this exercise, check the boxes below.

- I revised the story for wordiness and posted it in the discussion forum.
- I commented on at least one other classmate's work.

Figure 7: Honor system

The honor system promoted student comments and responses to others, which in turn afforded more students an opportunity to receive feedback on their language and written texts. We counted the number of posts on the discussion boards in Course 3 and found that the honor system appeared to influence how many students posted (Figure 8); the number of threads in discussions with the honor system check was more than double the number in discussions not utilizing the honor system. Even though students could have just checked the box (to earn the points) without commenting, it appears that the honor system did inspire them to read and respond, thus further enhancing the interactive, community-building affordances of the discussion boards and allowing more writers to receive feedback on their texts.

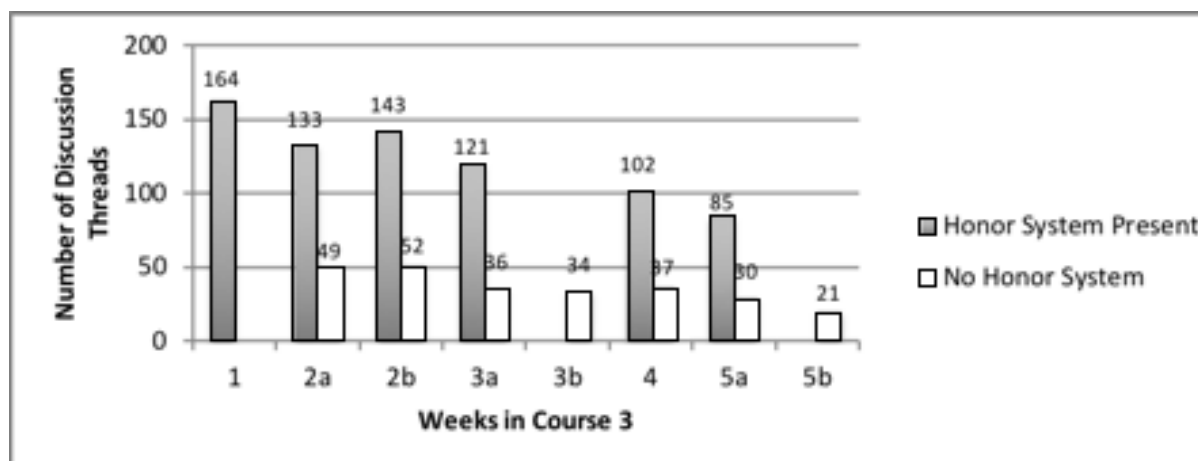


Figure 8: Effect of honor system on discussion threads

The video, discussion boards, and honor system modes worked together to afford students linguistic input and interaction throughout the Academic English-X series. Course design missed other opportunities, however, as we discuss in the next section.

Missed Opportunities in the Course Design

This section discusses ways that the course did not maximize its use of affordances in response to the question: In what ways does course design miss opportunities to use affordances available in the MOOC environment? We focus on issues of language level, peer response, and underutilized modes.

Language level. The language level of the course materials and quizzes was a major concern in our discussion of missed opportunities. Our expectation of the course design, based on its title and promotional materials, was that it would be for learners with some knowledge of English but not enough to participate in mainstream university-level courses. Frequently, however, we noticed language such as vocabulary and rhetorical structures that struck us as challenging even for advanced L2 learners. For example, Ai and Pamela discussed the focus of a lesson midway through Course 1, as well as the words used to explain that focus:

Pamela: The “beautiful sentences” video and the explanations of redundancy/wordiness/vagueness seem to be a jump to much more complicated concepts (as well as a bunch of new vocabulary for L2 students to memorize). How necessary is it for the students in this course to learn the word “redundancy”?

Ai: I looked up the word “redundancy” in a dictionary.

Pamela’s comment highlights her perception that the course focus had shifted to more complex stylistic concerns, while Ai confirms that even as an advanced L2 English speaker, the terminology was new to her. We further observed that the order of grammar point presentations in the course seemed to be haphazardly addressed, noting a disconnect between what was covered and what we thought the scope of grammar in Course 1 should have been:

Pamela: The grammar issues that were covered in the small number of questions were fairly high level, though – I’m not sure how useful they would be. They also don’t cover a broad range of issues/skill levels. I wish the grammar issues had started out very basic, and then progressed to more difficult editing issues...

In the above reflections, Ai and Pamela drew on our shared understanding of what we thought was the purpose of the course, given the original course description: to introduce university-level academic writing to students still learning English linguistic structures. A focus on redundancy and advanced grammar suggests the course designers may instead have seen it as an overview of first year composition, where style more than error is a focus (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). This reflects Bloch’s observation that since MOOCs attract more heterogeneous groups of students than traditional writing classrooms, the course goals must be “continually renegotiated... both within the constraints of the platform and in response to the goals of the participants” (2016, p. 167).

Our concern with language level also related to the course designers’ choice of source texts, which in Course 1 were almost entirely from 19th and early 20th century literature. We noted frequently how the antiquated word choice, sentence structure, and content of these sources, presented as models for writing, seemed irrelevant to a course focused on writing arguments. Ai commented on an exercise in Course 1 asking students to identify thesis statements in passages from literary works:

...Finding the argument exercise was difficult. Why did they choose texts from literature? It would be much easier and make sense if they had used essays written by college students, because this course is “college writing” course...

We speculated that designers may have chosen these texts because they were out of copyright and therefore legal to share (Bernstein, 2015), but we nevertheless felt that better text selection could have given students accessible models for their own writing.

Throughout the courses we also noticed missed opportunities for differentiating instruction for the wider range of language proficiencies in the student population. We realized that course design should have considered the participants’ varied English proficiency, which we had noticed in the grammatical and lexical range of both students’ draft texts and their comments on others’ writing.

Peer response. Another missed opportunity that we identified were peer response activities without clear guidelines for responding nor structure in the response system, both of which are essential to supporting L2 writers who would otherwise be unsure how to provide useful feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). We found places where the quality and specificity of peer response could have been improved by clearer instructions. For instance, Betsy reflected on the unhelpful comments she had received from other students on an assignment directing students to share their introduction paragraphs to a longer essay on the discussion board:

I’ve gotten some positive comments on my paragraph about garbage as a community problem in Hawai‘i, although some of the commenters are unclear on the concept of a

thesis statement being at the end of the introduction, and others clearly aren't sure if this is supposed to be my entire essay or just my introduction paragraph. One comment said something about how my paragraph doesn't have a conclusion. This seems to be related to the overall problem of not having clear directions for what we are supposed to do where in this course.

Peer response in Course 1 was conducted entirely in the discussion board mode. Students posted ideas and drafts of their essays for others to review and comment on. There was almost no structure (in the form of explicit instructions or guidelines) in the early peer response exercises in Course 1. Later, while responding to other students' final essays was encouraged, we observed many students were unable to utilize questions listed in the assignment description. Betsy noted about the discussion board where Course 1 final essays were posted for peer response:

Some of the comments I've noticed on the drafts and final essays students have posted on the discussion boards seem to be taking these pointers into account, but quite often the comments are random or vague. Being able to use an 8-point checklist like this one (and getting numerous reviews on your essay) would really give more structure to the evaluation.

Although the list of questions did provide some structure, its location in the assignment instructions meant that students might not have referred back to it while reading others' draft essays in the discussion boards. The vague comments indicated that they were unsure what to say about our drafts as they were reading them.

Initially, we thought these problems with peer response were due to unavailable designs (Wysocki, 2005), as Course 1 did not have a formal peer response mode. The design of Course 2, however, introduced a formal peer response system, creating a multi-step process through which students first uploaded their own essays and then responded to yes/no and scaled questions about other students' essays randomly assigned to them. This formal structure was not used in Course 3, returning to the previous use of the discussion boards for response to others' posts.

Underutilized affordances of available modes. We occasionally saw course designs where the chosen modes' affordances were not fully utilized, even though the instructional contents were appropriate.

Despite the abundant use of video for introducing new concepts, we reflected that the course often did not maximize its use of the affordances of the video mode in ways that could enhance students' learning. We identified multiple situations when videos included information such as terminology and step-by-step instructions that could have been better presented in different modes. For example, an embedded video in Course 1 introduced grammar terminology with a narration directing students to watch with the sound turned off, pausing the video to read the example sentences. Betsy commented:

This is another case of choosing the wrong mode for presentation—why use a video for something that is essentially a series of text examples? In this case it seems like the examples would have made more sense if they were presented as a web page where students could skim through the list, pay closer attention to the parts they didn't know as well, and then maybe even hyperlink to explanations of each term. In the video format, you have to stop the video if you want to look closely and then do your own search for an explanation. You can't easily look back at the examples as you are doing your own writing, either.

The excerpt above suggests that the learning materials for the course frequently missed opportunities to use available designs on the MOOC platform. As Betsy notes, multimodal design allows designers to draw on affordances from multiple modes in order to best convey intended messages (Kress, 2003, 2010). The affordances of the text mode would have allowed the instructor not only to display the model sentences, but also to provide commentary through hyperlinks to explain *why* each sentence was desirable.

In another missed opportunity, we observed that some assignments seemed to have been forced into a format that could be auto-graded by the computer, reducing students' opportunities to practice the course language and writing objectives. For example, one Course 1 assignment was a multiple-choice quiz of sentences that students should evaluate for both meaning and grammar. We discussed how this activity limited students' productive writing opportunities.

Pamela: Instead of having three choices and picking the “correct” one, it might have been more useful to give an “incorrect” sentence and have students rewrite a correct version. Of course, this would be harder for the computer to grade, but it would be more realistic to what students will actually have to do in the editing process.

Betsy: I think they could make it work if ...participants could submit a series of questions and then reviewers would give feedback on the accuracy and style—as long as three or four people reviewed each submission, I would hope that the majority would be able to recognize correct forms.

In this exchange, we noticed missed opportunities to use the affordances of the modes that were available in the course platform: instead of fixed response multiple choice quizzes, open-ended exercises and the peer review system could allow students to practice in more realistic or applied ways.

Finally, the course design did include modes that allowed for synchronous student-to-student interaction, but course designers were unable to maximize use of their affordances. During Course 1, in response to a student initiative, the course offered a Google Hangout at a fixed time where students could ask the instructor questions. We do not know how many students watched it live, but we noted from the recording that every time one logged out, another entered. In Course 2, links to Google Hangout rooms appeared at the end of each module, but we never found a time when they were active nor a way to see which students were online.

Pamela: ...every time I opened [the hangout] I seemed to be the only person there. Maybe it would have been helpful to have a live chat room or discussion board in this section so that students could chat and arrange a common time to meet in the Google Hangout? This is definitely an attempt by the facilitators to make the course more interactive, but it seems to be an “affordance” that was not fully taken advantage of, unless other students had more success than I.

As this section has examined, we noted several areas where course design in Academic English-X was unable to maximize the affordances available in the MOOC platform.

Discussion: Affordances of the MOOC Platform for L2 Writing Instruction

As the above analysis of the affordances and missed opportunities of Academic English-X has shown, multimodal design plays an important role in student experiences with MOOC courses. Academic English-X billed itself as being designed for L2 writers, but did not specify a particular language proficiency needed for successful participation in the course. With a truly massive enrollment and worldwide reach, it most likely attracted learners at many different proficiency levels. Even as advanced academic writers (therefore not the primary student audience), we struggled to understand some instructional uses of the MOOC platform modes, and we observed (for example in Betsy’s comment about peer response) how other students similarly misunderstood some aspects of the course due in part to missed opportunities in course design.

In analyzing Academic English-X for its multimodal potential as an L2 writing course, we found that peer response was a recurrent concern. MOOCs have potential for much more peer feedback than in face-to-face courses, but structure is essential. Because of their limited experience with English language academic writing, L2 writers do not necessarily know how to provide good feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). In the discussion board posts, for example, we observed students providing grammar correction when assignment instructions called for commentary on ideas or structure. Using the discussion boards for sharing ideas and short writing maximizes the opportunity to get feedback from fellow students and occasionally from facilitators. The drawbacks of this setup are that feedback can be unevenly distributed and potentially unhelpful.

Many MOOCs use a randomized peer assessment tool (as Academic English-X did in Course 2). Reviewers score several student texts using a rubric established by the course instructors, adding comments that are provided to the writer when reviews are finished. The instructor of Academic English-X explained to Betsy, however, that the constraints of the formal peer response system, including strict due dates for students to submit essays and complete reviews, limited the number of students in Course 2 who completed the entire process. She commented that students seemed to get bored reviewing others’ essays and quit without completing their allotted tasks, leaving many writers without feedback. The instructor feels that the honor system, as we noted earlier, has worked better for both writers and responders. Research on later course offerings should consider whether the honor system affords L2 learners enough structure to provide constructive peer feedback.

In addition to the concerns noted in our analysis, the formal system also prevents reviewers and writers from interacting; the entire process is conducted anonymously. The course instructor reflected that this process means that reviewers cannot determine if writers understood what they intended, nor can writers question the feedback they receive. An ideal solution would be to allow writers and reviewers to exchange views and negotiate meanings. Unfortunately, at this point in time, such a system is an “unavailable design” (Wysocki, 2005) in the MOOC platform used for Academic English-X. An available mode in some MOOCs is structuring students into smaller groups where students could provide feedback to the same peers on a regular basis, noting improvement and being already aware of their group members’ writing topics.

Several authors have noted the limitations inherent to the name “MOOC” itself, namely that “massive open online courses” are by definition limited by the difficulty of providing expert feedback to such huge numbers of students, the wide diversity of participants, problems with access to technology, narrow understandings of participants through their online identities, and the closed structure of learning led by an “expert” instructor and taking place over a set number of weeks (Colby, 2016; Hewett & Warnock, 2016). Other issues with MOOCs replicate problems inherent in all poorly designed teaching situations, such as bored students or ineffective instruction.

Nevertheless, we agree with the instructor that Academic English-X should be given credit for what it did do: allow students from around the world who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to experience any kind of American college writing course. She said that in the first two years, the courses reached students from countries as varied as Iraq, Honduras, Vietnam, and Somalia.

Limitations of the Study

Because we initiated this study out of curiosity about the course just days before it started, we did not apply for human subjects research approval. We therefore limited data collection to documenting our own participation and other publicly accessible information and did not record other students’ discussion board posts. This reduced our access to that which we ourselves could perceive, through our own lenses as highly proficient English speakers with extensive postgraduate writing experience. We inferred from our previous language learning histories, our wide experiences teaching English to speakers of other languages, and our knowledge of language teaching and learning about how the other students might be experiencing the course. While we cannot say for certain what individual students felt about the course, we believe we are justified in making claims about areas that were confusing to us or that would have been confusing had we been learners at the course’s stated student proficiency level.

Implications

This study has revealed the potential of the MOOC platform for expanding access to academic language and writing instruction to students living far from world-class universities. As our discussion of missed opportunities suggests, course designers must attend carefully to

the affordances of each available mode on the platform and to course content. Factors we noted as essential to course design were the language level and appropriateness of texts and activities, the structure of the peer review sessions and discussion boards, and the production of instructional videos. While affordances of the existing MOOC platform should certainly be maximized based on what each mode does best (Kress, 2003), new modes may also be needed: “Language MOOCs might require a platform with ... a richer, more nuanced set of communication tools suitable for the task of language learning ... and assessment tools that are sensitive to the range of abilities and goals of students” (Sokolik, 2015, p. 27). In addition, courses like Academic English-X might draw more on connectivist principles, giving students a voice in sharing resources. Because MOOC instructors cannot respond to every student concern or question, building on thousands of students’ shared knowledge base can fill this gap. In this vein, Colby (2016) imagines a platform he refers to as an “iMOOC,” in which participants are rewarded for high levels of engagement by increased course access and responsibility, enabling highly active learners to become leaders of feedback communities and potentially improving on the current available modes for peer feedback. Likewise, Hewett and Warnock (2016) suggest MOOEEs (massive open online educational experiences) as a way to steer away from traditional course models and better utilize the affordances of this type of platform.

Suggestions for Further Research

We echo the call of Comer and White (2016) for more research into the learning experiences of second language writers enrolled in writing MOOCs. Future research on MOOC courses for second language writers, including repeat offerings of Academic English-X, should consider 1) surveying students at the beginning of each course to learn their expectations for the course and at the end for what they feel they learned from the course and their plans for using new knowledge or skills, and 2) using course analytics and student contributions (to the discussion boards and final assignments) to determine change in students’ writing and language use across each course and across all three courses. We also need insight into the language MOOC design process and designers’ specific choices.

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Notes

1. Pseudonym. All references to the course, instructor, and host institution have been masked for privacy at the instructor's request. [[back](#)]

2. The study design has been discussed with the Director of the Institutional Review Board Committee on Human Subjects at the University of Hawai'i; the Director confirmed that the research did not warrant IRB review. Screenshots were approved for use in this article by the course instructor. [[back](#)]

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