Principled/Digital: Composition's "Ethics of Attunement" and the Writing MOOC

Abstract
This essay argues that the primary goal of writing instruction should be the cultivation of an ethics of attunement. This is a habit of mind which allows a writer to adapt to the demands of context and therefore engage in successful rhetorical action. The ability to cultivate this habit of mind is the standard by which MOOCs, or any other writing instruction technology, should be judged. Working from this premise, the essay critiques MOOC-based instruction methods. It finds a deep tension between MOOC models and the theories of knowledge, learning and being which underlie contemporary writing pedagogy. This indicates that MOOCs, as they now exist, may be unable to satisfy composition's ethical imperative.

I. Wither the MOOC?

The recent history of massive open online courses or MOOCs is nicely encapsulated in a pair of quotes from Stanford professor and Udacity cofounder Sebastian Thrun. In March of 2012, presaging what the *New York Times* would christen "the year of the MOOC," Thrun, enthralled by visions of academic disruption, hypothesized that in ten years, "job applicants would tout their Udacity degrees…. In fifty years… there will be only ten institutions in the world delivering higher education and Udacity has a shot at being one of them" (as cited in Krauss, 2014, p. 223). Eighteen months later, after the high-profile failure of a project with San Jose State University to offer credit-bearing MOOCs, Thrun's expectations were notably deflated. "We were on the front pages of newspapers and magazines," he told *Wired* magazine, "and at the same time, I was realizing, we don't educate people as others wished, or as I wished. We have a lousy product" (as cited in Krauss, 2014, p. 224).

Thrun's comments indicate the extent to which MOOCs, after a period of high initial expectations, tumbled into what marketing theorists call the "trough of disillusionment." What happens next though? If the history of emergent technologies is any judge, the MOOC may soon rise again, expectations tempered. Indeed, at the time of this writing, it appears that such a transition may already be taking place. In the fall of 2015, Arizona State University, in partnership with MOOC-provider edX, began offering a wide range of credit-bearing MOOCs (Straumsheim, 2015). Soon ASU anticipates that students will be able to complete their entire freshman year via MOOCs. In other words, though "a lousy product," MOOCs aren't dead. But the form they will eventually assume, their relationship to traditional instruction, and their overall efficacy as a learning tool remain to be seen.

How will MOOCs change writing instruction? Some predict evolution rather than revolution. Arizona State, for example, promises that its new freshman writing MOOC, despite enrolling students in the thousands, will be "the same in all essential respects" as an offline writing course (Straumsheim, 2015). Perhaps it will be. For writing teachers though, the question remains: how will we know? By what standard should we judge future writing instruction technologies? The following will seek to answer this question. In particular, this essay will present the teaching of writing as a fundamentally ethical enterprise. According to this view, composition is both shaped by and responsible for cultivating a certain ethics. Any technology, institution or logic which impedes this mission must be resisted. In short, before we know what to make of MOOCs, we need to have a standard by which to judge them. The following will attempt to articulate the theoretical basis for such a standard.

II. Composition + Ethics

I am not the first scholar to suggest that at its core, composition is, and must remain, an ethical enterprise. John Duffy (2014), for example, argues that an understanding of the ethical, and the cultivation of what he calls "ethical dispositions" in our students, is composition's "prevailing disciplinary narrative and… teleological reason for being" (p. 226). This is a bold claim. Indeed, some may reject the idea that composition, which rightfully prides itself on drawing from a diverse array of theoretical traditions and

institutional sites, can even have a "prevailing disciplinary narrative." I believe, and I'm sure Duffy would agree, that the story of what we do can (and should) be sketched in myriad ways. Pursuant to the ever-practical, ever-contextual nature of rhetoric though, Duffy sees the current moment as demanding a certain degree of disciplinary self-consciousness. In response to present social conditions, we need to "get our story straight." This means articulating what we do and why as to provide a compass heading by which to guide our field's engagement with the world. I agree. If composition is to be socially relevant, we must know where we stand. This is especially true in regard to our relationship with technological innovations such as MOOCs.

As Duffy sees it, all writing instruction—no matter the pedagogy or institutional venue— involves the teaching of ethics. How can this be? Duffy ties it to the nature of the rhetorical act. Writing, and rhetoric in general, is a social activity, one which entails relations with others and therefore, requires judgment about the terms on which those relations will be conducted. The writer, Duffy argues, must make value-laden choices about occasion and audience, means and ends. Anytime we teach these choices we teach ethics.

James Porter (1993), in his seminal essay "Developing a Postmodern Ethics of Rhetoric and Composition," further explains. He writes that rhetorical action "always involves a negotiation between competing positions and perspectives, between abstract principles and theories and particular needs and circumstances" (p. 221). In other words, in the rhetorical act, the writer must hold abstract principles (what is true, good, possible) in tension with an array of contextual demands. This involves an on-going negotiation between multiple values and interests. For example, in composing an essay, a student may have to consider what she knows, what her teacher knows, what she wants, what her teacher wants, the statement of authority X, the statement of authority Y. Most likely, no particular site will exercise control. This means that every composing event entails *judgment*. As writing teachers, we show students how to make such choices, how to decide what is appropriate given certain variables and in turn, how to act in the world. It is this intimate connection between writing instruction, judgment and action which leads Duffy to claim that "the teaching of writing is 'always and already' the teaching of ethics" (p. 213).

When we teach "ethics," what exactly are we teaching? One way to parse this term is to draw a distinction between deontological and teleological ethics. A deontological ethical scheme emphasizes adherence to certain rules. The Christian Ten Commandants and Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative fall into this category (see Marshall, 2014). A teleological ethical system, on the other hand, focuses on the end to be achieved, privileging consequences over law. In reviewing the composition literature, Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter (1993) find that contemporary writing instruction is mainly influenced by this latter vision. Ethics in composition, they argue, can't be thought of as a "static body of foundational principles, laws, and procedures" (p. 4). Instead, it is a "mode of questioning" (p. 4). Though concerned with consequences, ethics in this sense doesn't seek predetermined outcomes. Instead it encourages consideration and reflection, the goal being for the thinker, for every thinker, "to see what may not have been seen before, to resist complacency and reconsider what had, heretofore, seemed acceptable" (p. 4). This is ethics as an open-ended process, as a critical, self-aware habit of mind.

So it can be said that to foreground ethics in composition is to pose questions rather than provide answers. Certainly this vision will be familiar to many writing teachers. A successful rhetorical act, as we all know, doesn't come about by blind adherence to prescription, but the inverse: knowledge of when to apply what rule and what may happen if you do. The good in such a scheme is not a pre-existing thing like a fountain or statue which is unveiled in the rhetorical act. Instead, the good is created on-the-fly per the affordances and constraints of a specific situation. In other words, *context* must be taken into account.

Of course, some may argue that a context-dependent notion of the good is "relative" and therefore of little instructional value. This does not have to be the case. As noted, every rhetorical act demands a negotiation between the abstract and the particular, between what the rhetor brings to the situation and what the situation provides. When one speaks or writes there's no escaping previous experience, present experience, individual ideals, communal ideals, audience demands and material reality. The key to a context-dependent ethical scheme is the recognition that it is from the convergence of these variables, rather than any a priori obligation, that duty arises. In the rhetorical act, the "drive to obligation and action,"

Porter writes, "derives from community… from a 'local we'" (217). Viewed as such, the inadequacy of any static ethical code becomes apparent. The human is always the situated. To work with (and through) situational variables, cognitive flexibly is required. Ethics as a critical, self-aware habit of mind allows for this flexibility.

So what are some hallmarks of the "ethical disposition" writing instruction seeks to cultivate? The work of Patricia Bizzell proves instructive. Like Porter, and Fontaine and Hunter, Bizzell believes that a willingness to question—both others and ourselves— is a key component of ethical thought. As Bizzell sees it, the writing classroom is a natural place for such interrogation. Writing, she explains, is unique among human activities in that it provides for critical distance: through symbolization ideas can be explicated and examined. In this regard, writing instruction and self-reflection run parallel. The ethical writing subject, as Bizzell envisions such a creature, is that individual who "has learned to think about even his own thoughts, to examine the way he orders his data and the assumptions he is making, and to compare these with other thoughts that other men might have."[1] As this indicates, knowledge of ourselves—of our assumptions and the way we "organize our data"—goes hand-in-hand with recognition of the other. And it is this sort of (ethical) education that writing instruction provides.

An emphasis on self-awareness is not to say, of course, that writing instructors don't also teach discursive genres or rules of usage. It does mean, however, that underlying successful instruction in such matters is always an understanding of the way in which higher-order concerns--the requirements of the rhetorical event, the position one is to assume in relation to that event—ultimately determine genre and rule. Each rhetorical situation, it can be said, issues a *calling-forth*. This calling-forth telegraphs proper means and ends, laying out what can be said, how it can be said and whether or not it will be understood. To write well is to be attuned to this call, to know "what kind of person" the situation is asking you to be (Bizzell, 1992, p. 35). This attunement is more than just an intellectual activity. As Bizzell makes clear, successful rhetorical action requires both an embrace of certain forms of conceptualization and a recognition that those conceptualizations are of value, that the problems and life experiences they address are of import. This requires affective as well as intellectual understanding. Attunement, in other words, is a full-bodied activity.

III. Teaching + Attunement

So far I've argued that rhetoric, and therefore rhetorical ethics, is thoroughly context-dependent. Each rhetorical situation sets the terms by which it should be addressed. Whether in the case of Barack Obama on the stump or a student writer in the classroom, attunement to these demands is key to successful rhetorical action. This attunement is a learned ability. Though rarely an explicit part of writing pedagogy, an *ethics of attunement* underlies all writing pedagogy. As displayed in the work of Porter, Fontaine and Hunter, and Bizzell, an ethics of attunement is a critical, constructive habit of mind involving a dual motion: inward, towards the self, and outward towards the dance of variables which constitute the rhetorical situation.[2] This habit of mind entails questioning and comparison, reflection and consideration. Rather than law, it privileges openness and cognitive flexibility, with the ultimate goal being to fully inhabit, in both body and mind, the context in which one speaks or writes. Below, I will make a case that the ability to cultivate this mode of being is the standard by which the writing MOOC, or any other instructional method, should be judged. First though, it is necessary to examine how said ethics emerges in a face-to-face writing classroom.

Speaking broadly, it can be said that the writing teacher is what Bizzell terms a "mature practitioner." This is an individual who has taken on the subjectivity demanded of the discourse community in which she operates. Such a figure helps cultivate composition's ethics of attunement in three equally important ways. First, she acts as an instructor. She works to demystify, organize and articulate the demands of the community. In this role, the teacher puts to the student, in terms the student can understand, "what kind of person the [work of writing] seems to be asking them to be" (Bizzell, 1992, p. 35). This entails instruction in both the intricacies of usage—the citation of sources, how to punctuate a quotation— and the more abstract requirements of the disciplinary ethos—the "impartiality" and "accountability" noted by John Duffy, for example. In this capacity the teacher is an explicator and explainer. It's an essential

role, for sure, but in some ways the most basic. When operating in this capacity the teacher is little more than a classroom accessory, a delivery device.

The second role of the teacher is that of respondent. In this role the teacher speaks not as herself, but as an embodiment of the values and investments of the discipline. Compared to the instructor role, the respondent role is less intellectualized, more intuitive. As a mature practitioner, the teacher has internalized a certain way of being. This entails a certain set of relations to text, theory and thing. In her praise or blame of student behavior, in the questions posed in response to student claims, in her willingness (or lack thereof) to accept student interpretations, the teacher enacts this being, this set of relations. On this level even the subtleties of body language—facial expressions, posture, hand motions—are instructive in that within the highly structured, highly ritualized world of the classroom, they indicate to the student his or her degree of alignment with the values of the community. With every action, it can be said, the teacher demands the enactment of a certain subjectivity. As this enactment is offered, the student shifts, ever so subtlety, towards alignment with the community's values and vision.

The third role demanded of the teacher is the most difficult to quantify. And perhaps the most important. It is the role of model or exemplar. As noted, a mature practitioner is expected to have internalized a certain community-specific mode of being. Given the inherently social nature of the human animal, the physical proximity of the classroom, and the power dynamics of the teacher-student relationship, the student will inevitably imitate this mode of being. The student may mimic the teacher's bodily postures and mode of address, for example. He may adopt her linguistic habits, using the same terminology and speech patterns. On a more profound level, affective states—emotional responses to certain stimuli—are also shared. The ultimate result is a shift in the student's comportment towards the world, how he is, and in turn, how he writes and thinks. Of course, different students and different student populations vary in their ability (and desire) to mimic the model presented. Ultimately, in all cases though, imitation lies near the heart of writing instruction (see Bartholomae, 1986).

Integrally, imitation in the writing classroom always involves more than can be captured or quantified. Bizzell highlights this often-overlooked fact with reference to a student who complains that despite reading a text three times, she still doesn't "see anything in it." The student, Bizzell writes, is mistaken as to where the "thing" she is looking for is located: instead of being in the text, it's in the disciplinary approach that the class, under the teacher's guidance, uses to engage the text. This "disciplinary approach" entails an entire set of postures, postulates, beliefs and affective responses, many of which the teacher is not even aware. In short, it captures an entire mode of thinking and being. A focus on attunement—of student to community via teacher-- highlights the fact that to write well the student must adopt similar traits, a similar mode of being. Of course, there's no formula for such a transfer. Much of the knowledge at play can only be passed indirectly, through modeling and imitation, or as Bizzell writes, through student exposure to the "teacher's example as practitioner of the discipline" (p. 146).

At its core, the model sketched above presents humans as social creatures and writing instruction as an inherently social activity. Like all social activities it is facilitated by a wide range of both verbal and nonverbal, conscious and unconscious signals. Of course, it must be noted that the teacher and student are rarely alone in the classroom. Classmates and other peers inevitably contribute to the student's development as instructors, respondents and exemplars. In fact, some scholars have argued that peer interaction is more important than teacher-student interaction in facilitating initiation into a writing community (see Bruffee, 1984). Bill Hart-Davidson (2014), in summarizing Lev Vygotsky's "stunningly obvious but also counterintuitive" theory of peer-learning, writes that, simply put, "humans are amazing at learning from one another" (p. 215). Composition, he notes, was the first area of higher education to capitalize on this insight, swapping lectures for feedback-intensive workshops. So composition has long been recognized as inherently imitative, inherently communal. This focus, I would argue, has been sustained by, and works to support, what I have identified as the field's ethics of attunement. The question now becomes, can a MOOC, or any other mode of scaled-up writing instruction, cultivate such an ethics?

IV. The Ecology of MOOCs

Online writing instruction is certainly not new. Universities have offered fully online courses since the 1990s. These include writing courses, with as of 2011, a "significant minority" of first-year composition courses taking place online (Rendahl & Breuch, 2013, p. 297). Overall, the literature suggests that a fully online environment can indeed be an effective way to teach writing. June Griffin and Deborah Minter (2014), upon surveying the field, claim that a successful online learning experience is "certainly possible," provided "careful planning, pedagogical expertise and good institutional support" are all in place (p. 145). James Porter (2014) seconds this claim. He writes that, judging from his experience teaching online, "students can learn writing and develop as writers just as effectively in an online composition class as in a traditional composition class…. *Depending on context*" (p. 22). As the author's emphasis indicates, context is key to this claim. The course of which Porter writes, for example, had a thirteen-to-one student-teacher ratio, was staffed by composition specialists and presented to "highly motivated" students taking the course as an elective (p. 22). So online writing instruction can work, with certain students, under certain conditions. Can a MOOC work though? Can a writing class be both "massive" and ethical?

First, some definitional work is needed. "MOOC" is of course a fluid term, with the exact meaning, as well as the underlying features, continuing to evolve.[3] For purposes of this essay, writing MOOCs are understood to be online writing courses which are much larger than traditional, face-to-face writing classes, enrolling potentially thousands of students. They are also assumed to be more "open" than the traditional university course. Anyone can join the next-generation MOOCs offered by edX and Arizona State, for example.[4]

This essay will also maintain a distinction between cMOOCs and xMOOCs. According to Glenna Decker (2014), the cMOOC, or "connectivist" MOOC, is based on ideals of distributed learning, mass connection and student autonomy, whereas xMOOCs, "use more conventional instructor-centered delivery methods" (p. 4). The former are exemplified by the utopian, community-based designs of early MOOC adopters; the latter are represented by the offerings of big-name, venture capital-fueled MOOC providers such as edX, Udacity and Coursera. Certainly, the cMOOC, as detailed by digital learning enthusiasts seems to offer great promise as a learning tool (see Downes, 2007). Porter (2014), for example, envisions a writing-focused cMOOC "designed to make use of the communal aspects of social media and to maximize student interaction, remixing, and social dialogue" (p. 18). Under this collective, connectivist model, students would work to create new knowledge and course content—a mode of learning, as Porter notes, very similar to the social constructivist model long used in composition classrooms (p. 18).

Unfortunately, the literature suggests that the full potential of the hyper-connected cMOOC has yet to be realized. In arguing for connectivist, "many-to-many" learning programs, Hart-Davidson, for example, writes that in this regard "writing programs have not adequately used digital technology to anything like their full potential" (p. 215). Indeed Arizona State and edX's "Global Freshman Academy," which promises a "new model for the American Research University," seems to consist entirely of xMOOCs (Global Freshman Academy, 2015). Though, as noted above, the program's English composition course claims to be "the same in all essential respects" as an offline writing course, it largely forgoes workshopping in favor of the "one-to-many" learning model of the xMOOC (see Global Freshman Academy). Such a model entails video lectures, discussion boards and short writing assignments. In light of this, the following discussion, while recognizing the potential of the cMOOC, will center on the xMOOC.

Earlier we saw that the teaching of writing inevitably entails the teaching of ethics. Ethics in this sense is a process: a critical, constructive habit of mind which allows for attunement to the demands of context. I believe that the ability to cultivate this habit of mind is the standard by which the efficacy of the MOOC, or any other form of writing instruction, must be judged. To make such a judgment though, one must evaluate not just a single MOOC, but the entire ecology out of which the MOOC as an ethical project emerges. A good place to start is with an examination of the theory of knowledge which underlies the MOOC model. Robert Rhoads, Jennifer Berdan and Brit Toven-Lindsey (2013), in critiquing the open courseware movement of which MOOCs are a part, note that online learning generally favors, and is in turn shaped by, a positivist epistemology. This view equates knowledge with information, "sets of facts, pieces

of data, or concrete bits of a larger process" (p. 92). Intelligence, from this perspective, involves the ability to retrieve and apply these bits of information.

That a positivist and info-centric definition of knowledge would underpin the MOOC is perhaps not surprising. As tech critics have noted, such an understanding underpins the business logic, and general worldview, of digital culture. Google co-founder Sergey Brin has stated, for example, that the pinnacle of human intelligence could be achieved by "upgrading" the human mind with a digital fact-retrieval mechanism (as cited in Carr, 2007). Such a statement, Nicholas Carr (2007) argues, belies the widespread belief within the tech community that "intelligence is the output of a mechanical process, a series of discrete steps that can be isolated, measured, and optimized." Carr rails against such a vision, as undoubtedly, would many writing teachers. As the above analysis of composition's ethical tradition demonstrates, knowledge in the writing classroom is always localized, always contextual. In such a world, unlimited access to disparate, decontextualized facts—such as that provided by Brin's upgraded mind— would represent a merger form of intelligence. Instead, true intelligence must be defined by application, by attunement to the needs of the local. This sort of knowledge, as we've seen, cannot be isolated or quantified. It is cultivated not through the transfer of streaming bits of data, but through a holistic, embodied process, much of which lies outside the realm of intelligibility. Seen in this way, a tension between composition's ethics of attunement and the MOOC seems to exist at the most basic level.

Some critics have also noted an unegalitarian impulse at the heart of the MOOC movement. For example, Karen Head (2014), an early designer of a writing MOOC, argues that the use of a one-to-many teaching model promotes the idea that someone, at some institution, "has the knowledge" and is the best person to deliver it. She sees this as fundamentally elitist. When understood in light of the MOOC movement's positivist epistemology, the crux of Head's complaint becomes clear: the very design of the MOOC implies that the world "is" a certain way and that some subject (usually associated with an elite educational institution) has access to this "real" reality.

Undoubtedly, many writing teachers would take issue with any claim to objective access. As we've seen, in the writing classroom knowledge is never something that is "out there." Instead it is something that is created, by a community of knowledge makers, out of the affordances and constrains of a specific, delimited time and space. It is this sort of engagement, shaped and sustained by an ethics of attunement, which lies at the heart of writing instruction. On a practical level, this means that composition is an enterprise which revels in differing interpretations, in the fractal-like spread of complexity. MOOCs, on the other hand, work to simplify. As Rhoads et al. (2013) argue, the "dominant logic and technologies" of the open courseware movement act to reduce intellectual complexity by excluding forms of understanding not "easily framed in black and white terms" (p. 93). Integrally, this simplification is a result not only of ideological predisposition, but also material constraints. Simply put, MOOCs, like all mass-market goods, in order to achieve economies of scale, must homogenize that in which they traffic. The result, according to Rhoads and his collaborators, is a dangerous reduction in cognitive diversity. Here again, I believe, we see a deep-seeded tension between the effects of MOOC-ed modes of learning and the effects sought by progressive writing pedagogies.

V. MOOCed Minds

Related to the above epistemological issues are questions regarding the habits of mind MOOCs work to cultivate. Within the open courseware movement, for example, Rhoads, et al. (2013) see a focus on technological engagement at the expense of critical reflection. In such a world, they write, "there are only producers and users of information…. How one comes to be in the position of producer or user… seems largely irrelevant" (p. 96). Is this lack of reflection inevitable? Rhoads, et al. suggest that it is. As a result of technological and market constraints, within MOOCed modes of learning questions of ideology, identity and value—being difficult to quantify or sell as "skills"—must be disregarded. Instead, an increased level of technological engagement, and the broader and broader distribution of knowledge-information, is promoted as the paramount good. The result, Rhoads and his collaborators find, are claims and interpretations on the part of MOOC advocates which, when viewed from a position which emphasizes questioning and critique, seem to "betray a naiveté that in the end undermines credibility" (p. 96).

In a recent essay, Tony Scott and Nancy Welch (2014) detail the very real consequences of such digital naiveté. Using the infamous Kony 2012 viral video phenomena as an example, they show how a fascination with the scale or pace of change can work to discourage critical engagement with on-the-ground human affairs. In the theories of knowledge and learning which underlie the MOOC there are indications of a similar dynamic. In short, there is a profound focus on innovation itself rather than the consequences of innovation, on pure action rather than critically informed praxis. This directly contradicts the critical, constructive habit of mind which guides composition pedagogy. As shown, an "ongoing scrutiny of one's motivations and methods" lies at the core of all successful writing instruction. The epistemology, ideology and material nature of the MOOC seems to oppose such a vision.

While admittedly harsh, the above analysis does not mean to suggest that those who design and promote MOOCs are ill-intentioned. Though there are certainly economic interests at play, by most accounts, many of those pushing MOOCs do seek positive educational outcomes. Of course, purity of motive does not mean that MOOCs can achieve the ethical cultivation which defines composition pedagogy. Cultural studies scholar Aaron Barlow (2014) illustrates this point when he compares his experience taking an xMOOC with the failure of a rural development project he witnessed as a Fulbright scholar in Africa. In both cases he finds that the intention of the creators was benign, even altruistic; ultimately though, the design of both the MOOC and the rural agricultural project were flawed. Why? Barlow views both initiatives as being too top-down, as arising not from the needs of the people to be served, but from "the metropole and its fantasies" (p. 81). In the case of the MOOC, the fantasies at play involve disruption, autodidactism and instant access to information. Enthralled by these fantasies, MOOC designers move towards systems of "centralized control and away from individual initiative and exploration"—exactly what is needed in the writing classroom (p. 78). This top-down tendency is not incidental. It arises out of a system which understands knowledge as discrete, decontextualized bits of information, which posits an accessible, objectively decipherable "real" and which eschews critical reflection. Because of these cognitive shortcomings, "structural paternalism," as Barlow calls it, goes unrecognized by the MOOC designers/colonizers (p. 80). It betrays itself though in what many writing teachers would call their "naiveté."

Close examination of the assumptions underlying the MOOC is important because, as we've seen, every learning environment asks the student to assume a certain type of being. In the progressive writing classroom the student is expected to be an individual who interrogates methods and motives, who questions, creates and cultivates diversity of all sorts. The above critique indicates that the very nature of MOOCs, at least in their current iteration, may impede this sort of development. It also reminds us to be wary of those aspects of the classroom experience which may be eliminated when courses scale up or move online. As we've seen, MOOCs are based upon, and in turn promote, a rather narrow vision of knowledge. In the process of scaling up, human experience is radically simplified. Can the same be said for the teacher-student relationship? In short, when a writing class gets MOOCed, how does the lived experience of teaching and learning change?

According to the tradition traced in the first half of this essay, writing instruction can be seen as initiation into a community's unique mode of being. This may be a tightly circumscribed community (a "writing for actuarial sciences" course, for example) or the broad community of liberally educated bourgeois subjects. In all cases though, much of what is learned is never taught directly. The writing teacher, by enacting a community-specific subjectivity, operates as instructor, respondent and exemplar. Now certainly, within a MOOC, writing instruction can be given. Via video lectures or course transcripts information about punctuation and genre can be imparted to a large number of students.

As we've seen though, content delivery is just a small sliver of what the teaching of writing entails. A MOOC which allows a teacher to perform her role as respondent and exemplar of disciplinary practice is harder to imagine. As noted, in a face-to-face classroom, subtle bodily, linguistic and emotional cues are used to guide the student into alignment with the community's way of being. Much of this guidance takes place outside the realm of intelligibility. It can't be quantified or pre-packaged. It also, almost certainly, can't be actualized via a screen. This is especially true of the "one to many" learning model which characterizes the xMOOC. In such an environment, the teacher, appearing only via pre-recorded video

lectures, remains at an impersonal, digitized distance. Classmates, likewise, remain (virtually) anonymous. The shared resonance of bodies in space is absent, and with it, the opportunity for attunement.

The above critique does not intend to deny the obvious—that writing is the primary medium of instruction in a writing class. Indeed, it is possible to imagine a fully online course, even a MOOC, designed in such a way as to give each student large amounts of instructor and peer feedback. Even within such an communication-rich environment though, the specific affordances and constrains of the digital medium must be taken into account. Griffin and Minter (2013) illustrate this point when they write that the "literacy load" of a student (the amount of reading expected for a course) increases nearly three times when that course moves online (p. 153). This jump works to highlight how much information in a standard face-to-face class goes unwritten and even unsaid. When viewed in light of research that suggests that screen reading is both more stressful and less cognitively efficient than other forms of information consumption, it becomes clear that Griffin and Minter are right to be concerned about online courses over-taxing students (see Hayles, 2012). The result of "too much information," in many cases, may be withdrawal from engagement with teachers and peers. This is of course the opposite response an initiation model of writing instruction would hope to encourage.

Unfortunately, research indicates that a lack of substantive engagement is indeed a problem in online writing courses. A recent study by Merry Rendahl and Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch (2013), for example, indicates that students in a small fully online course spent much, much more time engaging with "course content" (I.E., reading) than interacting with teachers or peers. Though these students were pleased with the communications technology, and appreciative of peer review, the authors find that "they did not seem to value or seek out any other interaction with peers" (p. 309). One student describes the experience bluntly, when he states of the course, "I think that it was easier because it was online. I didn't have to go to class, deal with stupid group work or getting to know peoples' names" (p. 309). For a tradition which values peer-interaction, and in fact sees it as essential to its pedagogical mission, such a statement is troubling. It indicates that online writing instruction, even in a non-MOOC setting, may not be allowing for the sort of affective engagement necessary to fulfill composition's ethical mission. This in turn hints at the challenges faced by any writing MOOC. There may be writing in a writing MOOC, but even with the opportunity for extensive human interaction, the shared context which gives writing its life, and composition its teleological reason for being, may be difficult to establish.

VI. Conclusion

This essay does not claim to provide the final word on the feasibility of writing MOOCs or any other mode of instruction. Instead, it has sought simply to identify composition's ethical imperative and see to what degree the MOOC, in its current, popular form, meets this imperative. My goal in doing this is to provide a model by which future, undoubtedly more technologically and pedagogically sophisticated, modes of online writing instruction can be judged. As pedagogical tools first, and technological innovations second, every learning technology must be judged by its fruits. In tracing composition's ethics of attunement, and the pedagogical methods which embody and enact this ethics, the above has sought to provide a vision—however incomplete—of what, in the writing classroom, these fruits may be.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

cMOOC: Massive open online course built around the idea of connectivity among a group of peer-learners. Knowledge creation/distribution is decentralized, with each participant acting as both teacher and student.

Context: The all-encompassing tissue in which a rhetorical event occurs. It includes both the material and immaterial, the subjective and the shared.

Ethics: Any line of thinking which investigates questions of right or wrong, better or worse in regard to human affairs.

Ethics of Attunement: A habit of mind emphasizing questioning, reflection and consideration. This way of being privileges attunement to the demands of context over abstract ideals or a prior rules. Its cultivation is the *sine qua non* of writing instruction.

Exemplar: One of the three roles of the writing teacher. In this capacity, the teacher, through imitation on the part of the student, imparts values and investments of which she herself may be unaware.

Instructor: One of the three roles of the writing teacher. In this capacity, the teacher acts as a translator, rendering the values and investments of a specific community visible to the student.

Respondent: One of the three roles of the writing teacher. In this capacity, the teacher acts as an embodiment of community values, guiding the student towards alignment with those values.

Rhetoric: A social process through which abstract concepts are made real; inevitably implicates judgment and therefore ethics.

Writing MOOC: A massive open online course, the stated purpose of which is to provide writing

instruction. Such a course is likely larger than a traditional online writing course and more "open," in that barriers to participation are reduced or eliminated.

xMOOC: The current, popular form of massive open online course. Defined by a "one to many" model in which information is distributed to learners from a centralized source.

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[1] Here Bizzell is approvingly quoting William Perry's description of the "liberally educated" individual. Like myself, Bizzell sees a connection between composition and the tradition of liberal education.

[2] I have borrowed this phrase from Lisbeth Lipari's work, which (rightfully) foregrounds the role of listening in the attunement process (See Lipari, 2014).

[3] Historically, MOOCs arise out of the open courseware movement; the term itself was coined in 2008 by education activist and early MOOC designer Dave Cormier (see Decker, 2014).

[4] Though the school's "Global Freshman Academy" is free to join, receipt of college credit entails paying a fee to have one's identity verified, plus the cost of the credit (see Straumsheim, 2015).