
A COMPARISON OF SOCIAL LEARNING SYSTEMS: CROCHET ALONGS AND MOOCS

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Abstract

Essentially social learning is a system where the learning occurs with and from others. Internet-based technologies have provided environments within which social learning can take place among very large groups covering various topics, ranging from academic to leisure.

In general MOOCs are academic-related courses offered by educational institutions, following a model of formal education, however they also take advantage of the concept of social learning, encouraging participants to learn together and from each other.

Crochet Alongs (CALs) are non-formal courses offered outside educational institutions. CALs give crocheters the opportunity to learn more about their craft within an Internet-based social learning system, while working independently on their own instantiation of a pattern released at intervals. Participants offer support to each other via social media, sometimes seeking help in overcoming problems and other times just to share success.

There is a considerable body of research into the MOOC phenomena, there is no such body of research into CALs, or other Internet-based craft courses. There are a number of similarities between MOOCs and CALs with some CALs attracting thousands of participants to freely available online courses. Contrasting MOOCs and CALs offers educationalists to explore alternatives approaches to social learning.

Abstract in Spanish

El aprendizaje social es, esencialmente, un sistema donde el aprendizaje sucede con, y gracias a, los otros. Las tecnologías basadas en internet proporcionan marcos donde el aprendizaje social puede tener lugar entre grupos muy amplios cubriendo aspectos que van desde el académico al ocio.

En general MOOCs son cursos en el ámbito académico ofrecidos por instituciones educativas y dentro de un modelo de educación formal, pero donde hacen uso del concepto de aprendizaje social para motivar a los participantes a aprender juntos y de los demás.

Crochet Alongs (CALs) son, en cambio, cursos no formales ofrecidos fuera de las instituciones de educación. Los CALs dan a sus miembros la oportunidad de aprender más acerca de su oficio dentro de un sistema de aprendizaje social basado en Internet, mientras trabajan independientemente en su propio diseño de un patrón lanzado a intervalos. Los participantes se ofrecen apoyo mutuo a través de las redes sociales, a veces buscando ayuda para superar problemas y otras veces solo para compartir los logros.

Existe un considerable campo de investigación sobre los fenómenos relacionados con MOOC, sin embargo no existe tal cuerpo de investigación en el ámbito de los CALs u otros cursos similares basados en Internet. Hay una serie de similitudes entre los MOOC y CAL, con algunas CAL son

capaces de atraer a miles de participantes a cursos en línea de libre acceso. Los MOOC y CALs ofrecen educadores para explorar enfoques alternativos al aprendizaje social.

Keywords: MOOCs, CALs, crochet alongs, social learning, informal arenas of learning

Introduction

Over the last few years the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) phenomena has developed from a single course to a range of some ten thousand courses offered by universities (and others) around the world (Shah, 2018). There is a similar – but much older – concept to MOOCs in the arena of crafting, known as an *Along* in which a group of crafters are working, initially simultaneously, on their own realization of the same piece of work. The term Crochet Alongs (CALs) is used by crocheters (sometimes known as hookers) to describe Internet-based crochet projects whereby participants are working together on their own instantiation of an artefact (such as a blanket), following instructions available online and sharing their experiences across an Internet platform such as Facebook, many participations start as soon as a CAL is launched, but completion times vary.

There are a number of commonalities between MOOCs and CALs, and MOOC classification schemes are identified and a small convenience sample of CALs are categorised against one of these classifications, to determine if CALs can be classified as MOOCs. Aspects of the CALs that are not captured within these classifications are identified.

The concept of Alongs has not received attention in published literature, and it would appear that educationalists are largely unaware of this successful educational genre, and a number of suggestions are made for future work to identify synergies.

Literature Review

MOOCs

The acronym MOOC stands for Massive Open Online Course. The term was coined in 2008 by Cormier (2008) to describe the mode of delivery of a course: “Connectivism & Connective Knowledge” (CCK08) (Downes, 2008). Since then the subject of MOOCs has been widely studied in both the academic literature (Ebben & Murphy, 2014; Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013) and beyond (Bozkurt, Keskin, & de Waard, 2016; Jordan, 2015). One major problem that repeatedly receives attention in the literature is to do with the numbers on courses alongside definitions of completion and success (Liyanagunawardena, Lundqvist, & Williams, 2015).

MOOC Classifications

A number of authors have proposed classification schemes for MOOCs, in addition to that of the original acronym. In 2012 two sets of authors independently devised the term cMOOCs (Daniel, 2012; Rodriguez, 2012) to describe courses adopting a connectivist learning approach, using social learning, as opposed to more traditional instructor led courses labelled xMOOCs and *AI-Stanford like* respectively. Clark (2013) proposed an initial taxonomy from a pedagogic perspective based on learning functionality. While Conole (2014, 2015) presented a set of 12 dimensions illustrated by 5 sample MOOCs. Her dimensions were:

- Open,
- Massive,
- Use of multimedia,
- Degree of communication,

- Degree of collaboration,
- Learning pathway,
- Quality Assurance,
- Amount of reflection,
- Certification,
- Formal learning,
- Autonomy,
- Diversity.

Crochet and Inter-based Alongs

Crochet is a craft in which textured fabric is created from yarn, with similar roots to knitting (Highwood, & Williams, 2018). There is no worldwide standard for abbreviations of crochet terms and corresponding symbols (Hazell, 2013), for example the same term has different meanings between US and UK crochet.

Crafters were early adopters of the Internet, establishing and using Usenet groups in the early 1990s (Rheingold, 2000), and subsequently adopting other communications technologies as they became available, to create crafting communities. Many of these communities are examples of technology-enabled communities of practice (Le Deuff, 2010; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009) using varied Internet-based resources and products as the home for individual communities; these technologies have changed considerably over recent years and some of the products used by early communities are no longer available (Wenger, 2001; Wenger et al., 2009). In one of the few texts combining craft and the digital world, Gauntlett (2011) suggests both that: Web 2.0 offers a platform on which to share creative artefacts, and that creative projects are invaluable for human happiness.

The idea of the Internet-based Along can be dated to the 1990s, with their popularity growing over the following decades, currently thousands of Alongs available, a typical CAL – Crochet Along – with hundreds or a few thousand *guests* registered, at any one time people are working on both current CALs and those from several years ago (Highwood, & Williams, 2018).

Learning

There are three commonly used terms to describe types of learning: formal learning, informal learning and non-formal learning.

CEDEFOP (2011) defines these types of learning:

“Formal learning: Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.” (page 75)

“Informal learning: Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner’s.” (page 85)

“Non-formal learning: Learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view.” (page 113)

While UNESCO (2012) has differing definitions:

“Formal education is education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognised private bodies ... Institutionalised education occurs when an organization provides structured educational arrangements, such as student-teacher relationships and/or interactions, that are specially designed for education and learning.” (page 11)

“Like formal education (but unlike informal, incidental or random learning), non-formal education is education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or complement to formal education...” (page 11)

“Informal learning is defined as forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate, but are not institutionalised.” (page 12)

One of the key differences between the CEDFOP and UNESCO definitions is that the UNESCO one use of the term *institutionalised*. It should be noted that the two classifications interchange the meanings of informal and non-formal. Scanlon, McAndrew, and O’Shea (2015) point out that “the barriers between formal and informal learning are showing signs of falling away”, they also use the phrase “less formal” when referring to some online courses.

Technology-enabled Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice

Social learning theory has its roots in sociology, behaviour modification, and psychology with an early focus on learning appropriate social behaviour by imitating others (Bingham & Conner, 2015), while the concept of *community of practice* has its roots in anthropology and social theory (Wenger, 1998b; 2010). The latter term was coined in the late 1980s by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 2010), and is described as:

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Wenger (1998a) defines a community of practice across three dimensions:

- **“What it is about**—its *joint enterprise* as understood and continually renegotiated by its members
- **How it functions**—the relationships of *mutual engagement* that bind members together into a social entity
- **What capability it has produced**—the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.”

The essence of social learning is captured as:

“Social learning is what it sounds like—learning with and from others.” (Bingham & Conner, 2015; p.6).

Wenger (2000) identifies three structuring elements of social learning systems: “communities of practice, boundary processes amongst these communities, and identities as shaped by our participation in these communities.” Boundaries are important within social learning both because of the learning that takes place within the community, but also the learning that takes place at the boundaries of communities, with members of multiple communities bringing knowledge across

the boundaries. Identities are crucial to social learning as they combine participant's experiences and competences into knowledge.

The development of Internet-based technologies and in particular social media provides unprecedented opportunities for social learning amongst groups of people including crafters (Bingham & Conner, 2015; Chen & Bryer, 2012; Dickie, 2003; Gauntlett, 2011; Mayne, 2016; Wenger et al., 2009).

There is a considerable body of research literature in learning sciences and technology enabled learning, and its application to MOOCs (Siemens, Gašević, & Dawson, 2015), the most widely used terms used for the learning styles in MOOCs remains cMOOCs and xMOOCs (see above). There is no such body of research for Alongs, although related work with quilting guilds (Dickie, 2003) have identified social learning occurring within groups of crafters. Alongs can be seen as social learning systems in which participants reify their learning by the production of a physical artefact (Le Deuff, 2010; Wenger, 2010), Ivan Illich presented education as a lively chosen activity that occurs naturally across learning webs of people (Gauntlett, 2011) and this is an appropriate description for Alongs and cMOOCs (Daniel, 2012); however Alongs cannot be classified as Digital Learning Hubs (DLH) (Kucirkova & Littleton, 2015) because there are community leaders who have defined the outcome, the artefact produced and the processes to be followed to produce it.

Methodology

There is a lack of published literature on Alongs and so an autoethnographic (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) approach was taken, informed by the authors experience as crocheters, participants in CALs, alongside their experiences in designing, running and participating in MOOCs.

Four CALs, in which the authors have participated, were selected for consideration. This convenience sample does have its limitation, but is illustrative in the same manner as the sample courses Conole (2014) used to demonstrate her classification.

The four CALs are considered to show that they can be described in terms of Wenger (2000) three structuring elements of social learning. They are then classified along the dimensions proposed by Conole (2014; 2015)

Aspects of CALs that are not captured in these classifications are identified, and proposals made for additional classification criteria proposed.

Analysis

Below the four CALs selected are described, then it is shown they can be considered examples of social learning, analyses of these CALs is then presented against the original definition of the MOOC acronym and in Table 1 using the classifications from the MOOC schemes, identified in the Methodology section.

Barkham Hookers 2015 CAL

The Barkham Hookers CAL (White, 2015) was produced by the leader of a local crochet group (with some 350 members) aimed primarily at group members, and ran from January to August 2015. Participants worked on a blanket utilising a wide range of stitches presented in words and pictures on a blog, with occasional video tutorials. There was no requirement to use a particular yarn, and it was suggested the project could be a stash buster (the term stash is used by crafters to refer to materials, such as yarn already in the participant's possession (Stalp & Winge, 2008)). All stages of the CAL were posted as blog posts (in English), support was offered via comments on

the blog, the group's Facebook group and at physical meetings, the initial video has had over 200 views. The blog posts remained freely available after the CAL had finished. UK crochet terminology was used throughout, and patterns were available diagrammatically using symbols as well as in written form.

Last Dance on the Beach

This CAL was the 2016 offering from the yarn company Scheepjes (n.d.); they have previously offered CALs in 2014 and 2015. The CAL was designed to use Scheepjes yarn and hosted on the yarn producers' website, support was by two closed Facebook groups, participants worked on a blanket. The 2016 CAL was massive, the English speaking group had 17,000 members and the Dutch, 22,000. Even if some individuals belonged to both, and noting that the same group was used for 2014 and 2015 CALs, this is a very large CAL group. This CAL was designed in memory of a popular Internet crochet figure, Marinke Slump, (aka Wink) who was noted for her colourful designs, and her blog. Having worked with Scheepjes before, she approached them with an idea for a CAL but before it was completed she passed away as a result of a mental health condition. Subsequently, Scheepjes involved 12 designers to bring Wink's idea to fruition. Last Dance on the Beach was offered in 3 colourways called "Dances on the Beach", "Dances in the Rain" and "Dances under the Stars", as well as utilising two types of yarn, one more expensive than the other. For each CAL yarn pack purchased a donation was made to a mental health charity. There is some evidence of the CAL leading to physical meet-ups.

Carousel

The Carousel CAL (Stylecraft, n.d.) ran for three months from September 2016. The CAL blanket pattern was from the designer Sue Pinner, but the CAL was hosted and promoted by Stylecraft Yarns and the recommended yarn for the project was from the Stylecraft brand. The pattern for the blanket was released at regular intervals on the Stylecraft website, with versions in English (UK and American crochet terms), Dutch and German. A closed Facebook group supported participants, and other resources were available across blogs, downloads and videos. The Facebook group had at the start of the CAL some 5000 members, by the end of the CAL there were over 7500 members. The patterns and other resources remained available after the end of the CAL.

Hygge

The Hygge CAL was the 2017 offering from the yarn company Scheepjes (n.d.), as with Last Dance on the Beach (above) it was designed to use Scheepjes yarn and hosted on the yarn producers' website, and supported by two closed Facebook groups. The English language group had approaching 30,000 members, while the Dutch group had over 30,000 members. The shawl pattern by designer Kirsten Ballering incorporated crochet and cross stitch, which proved challenging to some crocheters who were unused to embroidery and led to a lot of online discussion on how to achieve the best results. Initially the pattern was said to be available in English with UK and US terminology; and in Dutch and Swedish. Subsequently nine more language versions of the pattern became available.

Alongs as Social Learning

Here the Alongs will be described in terms of the three structuring elements of social learning, described by Wenger (2000):

Communities of Practice

All four CALs can be defined as communities of practice using the three dimensions from Wenger (1998a):

- *Joint enterprise* – the community members are bound together on the *joint enterprise* of practising their craft, and learning new skills.
- *Mutual engagement* – the community starts to come together with the announcement of the CAL, initially focusing on procuring the necessary supplies (with many pictures posted of these), once the pattern starts to be released the community is bound by that.
- *Shared repertoire* – central to each of these communities is the *shared repertoire* of understanding the pattern, mastering the techniques and producing an individual reification of this in the form of an artefact (a blanket).

Boundary Processes

Within Alongs much of the learning takes place within the community, with resources created especially for this Along. But with each of the sample CALs there are examples with learning take place at the boundaries, with participants linking to resources from other communities (for example advice for left-handed participants, suggestions of alternative techniques). As the Along reaches the final stages there are links to other communities to offer follow-ons. With Dance on the Beach and Hygge there are two language based communities (Dutch and English) and there are examples of some participants acting as a bridge between these two communities, sharing from one to the other. Also with Dance having links to mental health issues there are examples of learning taking place at the boundary of crochet and wellbeing.

Identity

Within each CAL participants identify themselves as people who crochet – often referring to themselves as *hookers*. The amount of experience individual participants vary from *newbies* just learning to those with decades of experience. Competences also vary, some may only know a limited number of stitches, while others may have a wide repertoire.

These three structuring elements create an environment in which participants are able to learn with and from others, which is at the heart of definitions of social learning (Bingham & Conner, 2015).

Alongs as MOOCs

Each CAL can be considered against the four terms in the original acronym:

- Massive – each of the four CALs attracted large numbers, ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands of participants.
- Open – all the CALs are freely available, with no charges applicable.
- Online – all the CALs are offered online.
- Course – none of the CALs are referred to as a *course*, they are not offered by an academic institution and as such cannot be referred to as a formal course. However, each provides an educational opportunity with a start date and an expected duration and so can be considered a course.

Table 1: MOOC Categories Applied to CALs

Classification category	Barkham Hookers 2015 CAL	Last Dance on the Beach	Carousel	Hygge
Open	High – open and online	High – open and online, although the yarn recommended was relatively expensive.	High – open and online	High – open and online
Massive	Low – the CAL appears to be followed by hundreds of participants. Blog comments indicate not all participants are from the UK.	High – the English speaking Facebook group had 17k members and the Dutch Group 22k, although it is possible some of these are the same individuals, and some participated in previous CALS by the same company and not Dances specifically. There is no compulsion to join the Facebook group, so some participants may not be represented in these figures.	Medium – the CAL has thousands of participants on the Facebook group, there may be others following the CAL who do not join the Facebook group.	High – some 60k members across two Facebook groups, although there maybe some overlap (see Last Dance on the Beach)
Use of multimedia	Low – uses small amount of video	Medium – very high quality videos for each square.	Medium – all steps are supported by video.	Medium – videos on a companion site. High quality diagrams for the cross stitch.
Degree of communication	Low – online some discussion on a Facebook group, there is also support face to face.	All Medium/high with active communities from the announcement of the CALs. A lot of participants posted pictures related to work, ranging from photographs of their yarn before the start date, through progress images to completed artefacts. Participants in need of help often post a photograph and others will annotate the image to indicate where changes are needed.		
Degree of collaboration	Low	Medium – some variations to the original design were adopted widely	Low – individuals are working on their own blankets, but may offer advice or suggestions.	Medium – a number of participants adapted the cross stitch to personalise their work. A small number reported turning the shawl into another artefact (e.g. a bag).
Learning pathway	Low – there are some choices but essentially only one route in each CAL			
Quality Assurance	Not visible from a participants’ perspective. The CAL is designed by an individual. A small number of errors are clearly corrected in the blog posts.	Not visible to the participant. In all these CALs materials developed and hosted in conjunction with an experienced yarn companies.		
Amount of reflection	None mandated.	None mandated but because of connection of this CAL to a particular cause, some overall reflection on crafting and crochet and mental health from some of the designers and many of the participants.	None mandated, but evidence of it taking place.	None mandated, but evidence of it taking place.
Certification	None			
Formal learning	Low – the course is not specifically designed for education and learning, the course is offered by a private individual. The course is designed to initially use basic stitches and in later weeks introduce new stitches.	Low/none – course designed by 12 individuals, not offered by a conventional educational institution.	Low – the course is offered by a yarn manufacturer, not a conventional educational institution. The course aims to improve participants skills.	Low – not a conventional course.
Autonomy				Medium – the participants are expected to take control of their learning. Some choices relating to colours and other aspects of pattern.
Diversity	Low – the course is in English and uses UK crochet term. The introduction does offer a translation from the UK terms to US ones.	Medium – patterns available for UK and US terminology and for right/left-handed crocheters. Patterns were available in Dutch, English and Swedish. Support was available via English speaking and Dutch speaking Facebook groups. Videos were also available in English and Dutch.	Medium – the pattern is available in 3 languages (Dutch, English and German), the English versions are available in UK and US terminology. Support was via an English-language Facebook group.	Medium/High – Pattern available in a range of languages (English, Dutch, Swedish, Spanish, German, Norwegian, Hebrew, Icelandic, Italian, French, Finnish and Portugese). The English language was offered in two versions: one for UK terminology and one for US. There were support via and English and a Dutch Facebook group, plus some unofficial groups.

Additional classification terms

The four CALs studied were classified as MOOCs using dimensions proposed by Conole (2014; 2015). However, there are aspects of these CALs that are not readily presented within these schema, and here additional categorisations are proposed that will help differentiate between the types and styles of offerings.

MOOCs are mostly offered by academic institutions or other training establishments via an Internet-based platform, these platforms are often owned by MOOC providers, whereas none of the CALs studied were offered by an academic institution and none used a dedicated platform. Conole's *Formal learning* category partially captured this concept of provider, however in her case study courses only two of the five are classed as high in the Formal learning category, although all the MOOCs studies are linked to academic institutions. Likewise, some MOOCs are sponsored in some way, as are some CALs but this is not captured in the dimensions.

Some MOOC providers offer to sell certificates to participants who have successfully taken summative assessments, statements of participation are also available for sale for some MOOCs for participants who achieve a certain threshold in participation. On completing a CAL successful participants each have a crocheted artefact that demonstrates the skills learned. In some MOOCs participants also have evidence of their work in the form for example of a story written or a mobile app developed. The *Certification* dimension partially captures evidence of learning, but does not allow for creation of artefacts.

So these additional categories inspired by CALs but useful for MOOC classifications, are proposed:

- Platform: possible values: large MOOC provider (e.g. Coursera), other platform providers (e.g. Blackboard), social media (e.g. Facebook), other web presence.
- Offerer: possible values: University, other academic/research/professional bodies, training organisation, individual, other
- Sponsorship: possible values: commercial, charity, government.

In addition, it is proposed the *Certification* dimension be extended to:

- Evidence of learning: possible values: Certificate, detailed marks break down, statement of participation, production of an artefact.

Discussion and conclusions

The dearth of published work related to CALs and Alongs in general indicate that this is an under-researched phenomenon, especially in comparison to the area of MOOCs where there is a substantial body of research documented. The first Internet-based Alongs took place several years before the term MOOC was coined but there does not appear to be any study of Alongs that has informed the development of MOOCs.

One of the key aspects of the success of CALs and other Alongs is the social context within which leaning takes place, in an environment that can be considered as less formal than conventional education, many MOOCs aim to similarly inhabit a less formal structure supported by social learning.

A second key aspect of CALs is that participants produce an artefact that evidences their learning, within the CALs studied many participants shared pictures of their completed work which can be linked to happiness (Gauntlett, 2011).

Each of the CALS studied can be classed as working as a Community of Practice operating in a social learning system, they can be considered to be a sample of a social learning communities. The environment within which learning takes place is less formal than conventional education, but most certainly learning takes place with participants gaining new skills and proudly displaying the artefacts they have produced using their newly acquired knowledge. There are interesting interactions at the boundary of these communities and these offer future areas for research particularly in relation to aspects of wellbeing. The numbers participating in the largest example is in the tens of thousands, the community is split into two based on the English and Dutch languages, but still leaving tens of thousands in each group, the scale of the community would suggest to work effectively it would need to spawn further sub-groups but this did not happen and there does not appear to be any difficulties for members in taking part in such a large social community.

Each of these social learning communities can also be classed as MOOCs, although the first Internet-based Alongs took place several years before the term MOOC was coined, there does not appear to be any study of such social learning communities that has informed the development of academic MOOCs. The number of participants in each of the social learning communities studied is considerable, with the smallest example attracting hundreds and largest tens of thousands, these figures are comparable to the numbers attracted to academic MOOCs, and so the communities studied can be classed as Massive. All of the materials for these communities was freely available on the Internet and so meet the definitions of Open and Online, a number of participants' express gratitude to the suppliers for giving away their work. Some participants found the online part challenging but there was always support from other participants when for example someone could not find a particular additional resource. None of the sample are presented as Courses, but to the observer they can be seen as courses, with a start date and staged release of the materials. Unlike traditional academic courses the end date is not strictly adhered to, participants continue engaging as long as they need and newcomers joining as convenient, possibly because of this "never closing" there is only one instance of the community while traditional academic courses are usually offered multiple times, with later start dates.

There is no published data available on the participation and completion rates in these social learning communities, in this study numbers were gathered from membership numbers of groups and view numbers of resources. It is noticeable from participant names that the membership of these communities is largely female. At the start of the company sponsored Alongs there were a number of posts asking how participants could source the yarn in their location, this suggests that participation is global. From posted pictures of completed artefacts it can be seen that some people complete their work in the shortest time possible, while others are completing much later, there is no indication of the numbers who do not complete the project within a timescale, nor whether they still intend to complete. An analysis of detailed data could give a deeper understanding of the operation of these communities in comparison to academic MOOCs. Similarly, there is no study into the economics of these communities, although it could be assumed that a yarn manufacturer may wish to support a community using their products so as to increase sales.

In this study four sample social learning communities were successfully classified as MOOCs using Conole's schema. Three additional categories were identified that would be useful for extending the existing schemes to classify learning communities and potentially academic MOOCs; Platform, Supplier and Sponsor. In addition, it is proposed that the class *Certification* should be extended to *Evidence of Learning*.

This study is limited in that a convenience sample of social learning communities from one craft discipline were selected, and so the conclusions must be limited to: that at least some Internet-based Craft Alongs can be seen as examples of communities of practice in which social learning takes place, and these Alongs can be defined and classified as MOOCs. Further study is needed to

determine if there are lessons that the designers and providers of academic MOOCs can learn from Alongs, and vice versa.

Future Work

The purpose of this study was to introduce the social learning systems Alongs to educationalists and to compare a sample of CALs with MOOCs. The area of Alongs offers much potential for research studies.

All the CALs were an autoethnographic study from the perspective of participants, future work could look to work with the providers of Alongs to understand the perspective of the educators and to gain access to data about patterns of participation.

The discussion boards associated with each CAL were lively and there is potential to undertake analysis of these discussions to understand issues including: the sentiments of the participants, the roles different participants are taking within the community, examples of collaboration.

Surveys and interviews can be designed and undertaken with all stakeholders to understand how the social learning is reified. These will also reveal if there are, as yet, unidentified, limitations in the using structured learning in the context of CALs. They could also be used to explore similarities and differences between Alongs and a variety of online social learning contexts.

It would also be useful for designers of MOOCs to explore if using some of the features of Alongs can benefit some of the problems of MOOCs, particularly to do with issues of completions and success. In particular designers could explore: keeping MOOCs open in the manner of CALs to encourage learners who need more time; ways in which learning can be reified in the manner of producing a blanket or other artefact.

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