A WORK OF FEMINIST TECHNOCULTURAL INNOVATION

Creating an Alternative Genre of MOOC

By Anne Balsamo

In early 2012, Alex Juhasz—a feminist professor of media art at Pitzer College—and I convened a small group of colleagues who were all accomplished scholars and artists working on topics of feminism and technology. That initial gathering inaugurated a process of what I refer to as feminist technocultural innovation focused on the activation of a global network of feminist technology scholars and media practitioners that is now called FemTechNet.

By late 2012, FemTechNet had initiated a “cyberlearning experiment” that engages experts in science and technology studies, media artists, online learning instructors, and media systems designers. The organizing infrastructure of this cyberlearning experiment is the creation of a new genre of online education that we call a Distributed Open Collaborative Course (DOCC) on the topic of “Dialogues in Feminism and Technology.”

The DOCC 2013 will involve the participation of instructors and students at 15 universities and colleges in the US and elsewhere from September – November 2013. The DOCC will be “open” to other types of learners: independent studies, self-directed learners, and drop-in learners. The primary aim of this project is to manifest a work of collaborative feminist technological innovation for the purposes of addressing the educational needs of students interested in advanced topics in feminist science-technology studies. DOCC’s are built on the recognition that expertise is distributed within networks. The organization of a DOCC addresses the collaborative nature of learning in a digital age.

We also seek to contribute to the digital archive of material on the history of women and technology and on the contribution of feminist STS scholarship to the histories of science and technology and to archived discussions of STS topics. And finally, we seek to engender a set of digital practices among women and girls, to teach and encourage their participation in writing the technocultural histories of the future by becoming active participants in the creation of global digital archives.

Open, distributed and participatory online learning and information exchange have existed in various ways since the mid 1990s when the Internet in the United States became more available to large numbers of people; teachers and businesses began to see the potential for pedagogic and training related uses of the Internet. With the wide scale emphasis on the development of the open-courseware movement in the early 2000s, online instructors (situated within diverse educational and training institutional contexts) have stepped up efforts to create a digital collection of learning materials to be freely shared and used by online participants. Models of online courses—that include protocols for the use of open courseware materials and techniques of communication among participants—serve as the infrastructure of the open-courseware movement.
These models, or what we might refer to as “genres” of online courses, are vitally important to the success or not of these open learning network aspirations. Genres of courses provide conventions for the use of digital learning materials and structure the participation of learners and teachers.

In 2007, the term “MOOC (massive open online course)” was coined to name a particular type of online educational experience. It builds on the naming conventions of a specific genre of game (MOOG—massively open online game), and extends the logic of “massively open” to the structure of online learning experiences. In November 2011, the idea of a MOOC spread wildly when two professors at Stanford University reported their success in attracting thousands of web-enabled students to their “Introduction to AI” online course. After the experience, the instructors went on to establish two distance education start-up projects: 1) Udacity and 2) Coursera. By the end of 2012, more than 1 million students had signed up for Coursera courses. With these “out-of-the-gate” enrollment numbers, the concept of a MOOC as the delivery infrastructure for a particular kind of online learning has taken hold in the broader popular imagination.

In the aftermath of the celebratory publicity for the Stanford experiment, many media pundits conflated MOOCs with online distance education, but in fact the two are not coterminous. With the emphasis on the term “massive,” MOOCs are an attempt to scale-up the online learning experience such that it is available to extremely large numbers of learners: in the tens of thousands. While it may have been an aspiration of some institutions that their distance education offerings would attract large numbers of off-site students, until that is “distributed” through online networks;

■ To learners who self-select to participate in an “open” course.

While the infrastructure of the course is actually rhizomatic—i.e., based on the rhizome nature of Internets—the course conventions of a MOOC have evolved to enact a centralized “tree” structure of participation. Expertise is located in one digital place (that takes the form of the brand-name university and its faculty avatars); this digital place is the central stalk of expertise; students, according to this model, are end nodes of distributed branches off the main stalk of expertise. In the best cases, networked connections among students are encouraged, but for the most part the branching of the network isn’t the main point of the course, rather, the objective remains the reproduction of a centralized and institutionally-sanctioned source of expertise that can be delivered more efficiently to greater numbers of learners by exploring the typical instructor-to-student ratios.

Since the early years of Internet availability, cyberfeminists have explored the use of the Internet for dialogue and participation across various socio-economic layers worldwide. Access and skills for women and various economically underprivileged communities of the world (such as populations from the developing world and inner cities of the U.S.) was a central concern for feminists in developing distributed and participatory environments for learning, training and information exchange. Since mid 1990s, cyberfeminists have spent a lot of time and energy in developing methods for inclusive teaching.

The project under development by FemTechNet proposes an alternative genre of MOCC that we call a DOCC: Distributed Open Collaborative Course. The FemTechNet

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The NCA 99th Annual Convention submission deadline is fast approaching.

For more information on the convention, to be held November 21–24, 2013, in Washington, DC, see www.natcom.org/convention. Click through on the link to NCA Submission Central to view all unit/affiliate calls and to begin your submission.

The deadline for submissions is Wednesday, March 27, 2013 at 11:59 p.m. Pacific.
DOCC seeks to engage a wide network of feminist teachers, scholars and practitioners who have been working (as individuals and as members of various communities and networks) to provide distributed and participatory access to learning, educational materials, and technology more broadly. What we term “feminist pedagogy” in technological environments shares some of the basic principles that underlie the historical development of MOOCs. Yet because women non-profit workers, advocacy groups and cyber-feminist teachers and scholars have spent almost two decades or more centrally focused on issues of access and strategies for inclusive and distributed teaching in online environments, we have well-developed plans and strategies that speak to the criticisms leveled against several existing MOOC models. The fundamental difference is that a DOCC recognizes and is built on the understanding that expertise is distributed throughout a network, among participants situated in diverse institutional contexts, within diverse material, geographic, and national settings, and who embody and perform diverse identities (as teachers, as students, as media-makers, as activists, as trainers, as members of various publics, for example).

The DOCC 2013: “Dialogues in Feminism and Technology” will involve participants from around the globe who teach “NODAL courses” configured within a particular educational institutional setting. There is no single credit granting institution. Credit is offered to students through mechanisms that are already established within particular/situated institutions. As of January 1, 2013, instructors at fifteen universities and colleges have indicated interest in participating the DOCC 2013. Learning activities are being collaboratively developed among FemTechNet participants, some of who will teach NODAL courses, and others who are providing specific topic expertise.

Each instructor of a NODAL course will create a course that is best suited to her or his students, institution, locale, and discipline. A core group of DOCC 2013 facilitators (led by Anne Balsamo and Alex Juhasz) will provide support for the instructors of nodal courses and maintain a web-based course site where learning materials can be uploaded and archived. Participants will be encouraged to share materials, assignments, activities, comments, and observations so as to link learners across disciplines, institutions and national boundaries. These efforts will then become part of an extended archive, database and dialogue on the topics of feminism and technology. There are multiple channels of collaboration: among instructors of nodal courses, among students in those courses, among those who “drop-in” to the course, and among those who are temporarily shifted: those who participate and those who will use the archive of learning materials in the future. People can participate through independent studies arranged by students and teachers in other learning contexts, as self-directed learners who aren’t necessarily interested in institutional learning credit, and as drop-in learners who tune in for a particular discussion or topic.

The DOCC 2013: “Dialogues in Feminism and Technology” will address both the histories and cutting edge scholarship on feminism and technology produced through art, science and visual studies. An online space (currently under construction) provides key infrastructural elements for the DOCC:

- A 10-week series of online “Video Dialogues” that feature prominent feminist scholars of science and technology in paired discussions on a specific topic.
- An asynchronous online discussion forum for cross-network exchange and dialogue.
- Instructions and prompts for a shared pedagogical exercise called “Storming Wikipedia” that can be tailored for different learning levels.
- Instructions for creating and disseminating “Keyword Videos” on topics relating to feminism and technology.

The “Video Dialogues” online se-
ries will include 6-10 recorded conversations between experts in feminist science and technology studies produced in advance of the course. For each of ten weeks, one video dialogue will be uploaded for viewing and discussion. The list of speakers to be invited to participate in the video dialogues include 20 experts in various aspects of technology and society that have been identified by broad and basic set of themes. The list of themes—developed in conversation among FemTechNet participants in an ad-hoc distributed discussions during 2012—address key topics in the histories of feminism, science, and technology: archive, bodies, differences, discipline, ethics, labor, machine, place, race, sexualities, systems.

The shared pedagogical activity called “Storming Wikipedia” is designed to write women and feminist scholarship of science and technology back into our web-based cultural archives. The broader impact of this effort is to address and support the interest of women and girls in STE(A)M topics by revisiting the (often forgotten) histories of the engagements among women, technological innovation, scientific practice and knowledge making, and the imagination. By engaging in the practices of editing and revising Wikipedia pages, we seek to address the gendered division of labor of online encyclopedia authoring and editing which is skewed now toward male participation. Through the “Storming Wikipedia” activities we also seek to engage a wider group of participants in the effort of writing and maintaining a digital archive of feminist work in science, technology and media so that the histories of the future will be well populated by the ideas and people that took feminism seriously as a source of inspiration and innovation in the creation of new technocultures.

To join the FemTechNet effort or to learn more about it, please visit the recently launched platform for feminism, new media, science and technology called FEMBOT at http://fembotcollective.org. Or contact me at: annebalsamo@gmail.com.

Anne Balsamo was recently appointed the Dean of the School of Media Studies at the New School for Public Engagement in New York. Previously she was a full professor at the University of Southern California (USC) in the Annenberg School of Communication and the Interactive Media Division of the School of Cinematic Arts. From 2004-2007, she served as the Director of the Institute for Multimedia Literacy at USC where she created one of the first academic programs in multimedia literacy across the curriculum. In 2002, she co-founded Olymics Labs, Inc., a Silicon Valley technology design and fabrication company that builds cultural technologies. From 1999-2002, she was a member of RED (Research on Experimental Documents), a collaborative research-design group at Xerox PARC who created experimental reading devices and new media genres. Balsamo served as project manager and new media designer for the development of RED’s interactive museum exhibit, XFR: Experiments in the Future of Reading that toured Science/Technology Museums in the U.S. from 2000-2003. In her recent book, Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work (Duke, 2011), Balsamo offers a manifesto for rethinking the role of culture in the process of technological innovation in the 20th Century. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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