

“The Digital *Enkyklios Paideia*: cMOOCs and the 21st Century Renaissance Cyborg.”

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[When visitors unexpectedly found Heraclitus warming himself by the cooking fire:]

Here, too, the gods are present. (Wt 74 p 75)

What were they expecting, a dignified wise man quietly contemplating the ways nature loves to hide? This presentation will be such an invitation to follow a particular line of flight concerning a possible future that is regarded in unequal measures with reluctance, enthusiasm, suspicion, and boredom: the Massive Open Online Course and the perhaps fantastic vision of a digital *enkyklios paideia* that has goaded proponents. We are all familiar with the commonplace meaning of the “encyclopedia,” but I am using *enkyklios paideia* to mean an arranged sequence of steps that when taken leave us educated into a way of being and acting correlative with the world embodied in a given encyclopedia—for instance, a MOOC, or a constellation of MOOCs—which in turn also brings us to understand ourselves within an ecological network that we disclose to ourselves as our “world.” In the case of MOOCs, especially connectivist MOOCs, participants become cyborgs as they disclose the world as digital, or as Gregory Ulmer might say, through avataring, they disclose a world given by electracy. More on this later.

In last years’ CCCCs address, Chris Anson provided a probable response from a fictional character stepping right up to MOOC plate:

“students are paying for a transformative experience, and they’re getting a pedagogy that hasn’t changed in hundreds of years. ... If we keep doing

the same old same old—the tired lectures, the boring assignments, the lack of attention to students’ development—we have no right to print out the hefty invoice. And we *will* be outcompeted by all these new forms of learning.” (337)

What is meant by “transformative experience”? And how might MOOCs serve as one of these new forms of learning?

Isn’t this precisely what has fueled our feverish, and perhaps immodest MOOC hype? Following the Gartner Hype Model, I could safely suggest that December of 2013 marked the entry into the “trough of disillusionment.” At the MOOC Research Initiative, in which George Siemens, a prominent innovator and proponent of the connectivist MOOC, played a significant role, several studies funded by the Gates Foundation dampened the MOOC hype. From revealing the devastating 4% completion rate of 17 Coursera MOOCs over a year’s time, to discovering that participants were often older, male, employed, and American—not to mention the acknowledgement from Sebastian Thrun that content driven MOOCs were a “lousy product”—Siemens seemed to open the door to a cornucopia of problems he had already seen with an enlightened eye early on. However, despite the issues, entrepreneurship marches on toward the plateau of productivity, for, after all, “The MOOC learning model provides a powerful means for organizations to educate and influence global audiences about products, services, and company-specific points of view.” But what is missing from these so-called xMOOCs the presence of which might deliver a transformative experience?

I believe that in his “What I Learned in MOOC,” Jeff Rice provides us with a pathway to follow. He explains that

My issue with Coursera was not just that its method of content delivery has nothing to do with how content is aggregated online, but that I cannot be aggregated as well in this particular setup. I am left as spectator.

Message board commenter. Watcher of videos. Writer of two paragraphs...

What Coursera lacks, many higher education courses taught via lecture and graduate student breakout discussion lack as well: emotional occasion. Coursera, despite its video delivery, is not digital. It is not avataristic. (702)

Until MOOCs can provide a world participants can care about, that envelops their concerns in such a way that they become aggregated within a complex ecological network that I am calling a digital *enkyklios paideia*, then a lousy product they will remain.

Connectivist MOOCs, in contrast, amplify the marginalized electorate set of practices that comprise what it means to be digital. Amplifying the participatory and elevating it to the level of primary content, cMOOCs suggest a rhetorical *enkyklios paideia* that evokes a response approaching what I refer to as the 21st century renaissance cyborg. Perhaps the connectivist future of MOOCs could be the vehicle for a kind of online education that is entirely self-reflexive. That is, it does what it's talking about, and what it's talking about is the electorate practices that grant avatar being through providing a series of emotional occasions. Does any model exist for such a MOOC?

Please bear with me as I sidestep to another actor in an emerging network: Human Potential icon Werner Erhard, whose genius was designing a weekend long course (and an educational business) that provides an emotional occasion for participants to become aggregated into a quasi-digital experience. Put simply, in what was called the *est* Training (which began in 1971), participants underwent an experience with language (that is, an extended dialogic inquiry) wherein the limit of human being was revealed. That is, participants paid a fee to get “nothing,” that there is no “is” in life, that there is no substantial inherent meaning to life and existence, that we are digital machines, blinking

on and off, responding mechanically to perceived threats with plays for dominance, and responding to failure with new strategies for success that at the same time constrained life. The result was for many a heightened sense of being alive and a new range of freedom to act boldly in their life projects.

This course has been delivered quite consistently almost every weekend across many locations in the US and several other countries since the first *est* Training in 1971. A company called Landmark Worldwide has been delivering this course, now called the Landmark Forum, for over two decades, and they claim that over 2.2 million people have taken this course, and that around 200,000 people participate in their various related courses in a given year.

But around 1980, after over a hundred thousand people had taken the *est* Training, Werner Erhard worked directly with a trio of Heidegger scholars: Michael Zimmerman, Hubert Dreyfus, and a student of Dreyfus (and of John Searle) Fernando Flores. Both Zimmerman and Dreyfus, took and observed the *est* training and wrote manuscripts revealing qualities of the training that seemed to carry out, to some degree, the kind of questions Heidegger had inquired after in *Being and Time*: what is the being of human being? And what is possible for the being of human being?

These collaborations led to Erhard retiring the *est* Training and in 1985 beginning the Forum: an event that promised participants the generation of a new realm of possibility for themselves and their lives. While the new course employed some elements of the *est* Training (in terms of basic structure and delivery), the language of the Forum, or what Erhard called the “technology,” was decidedly Heideggerian.

The “technology” is comprised of a series of “distinctions,” presented dialogically

throughout the course, and as participants “tried on” these distinctions, they revealed everyday life circumstances in ways that allowed for participants to act in unexpected, but favorable ways. For instance, distinguishing between “what happened” and the “story” constructed about what happened allowed participants to relate to past events and the people tied up with those events in such a way that permitted withheld but important speech acts, including apologies, expressions of forgiveness, love and gratitude, requests, promises, etc. The signature speech act, however, calls for participants to own up to a host of pretenses held up in a variety of relationships. Essentially, they are to bring authenticity to inauthentic, un-owned ways of being.

At the heart of this pedagogy is a rhetorical inquiry that seeks to produce a new kind of being: a digital being for whom the world is eventful and open to rhetorical transformations rather than filled with unalterable objects; an object “is,” but an event both “is” and “is not.” With their arrival, events are already always withdrawing, and I suggest this as a way *to think* what Gregory Ulmer calls “electracy.” We are always already electrated, that is, digital, both on and off, but we are beholden to the tendency to forget the “off”; we have omitted “withdrawal” and so live mostly in an “is” world rather than an “occurring” world. “Objects” are a reflex of our inherited metaphysics of presence brought to us by the grammatical forms patterned in practices of orality and literacy. In contrast to the practices of orality and literacy and the correlative subjectivities evoked, electracy is marked by “flash reason” (flashing on and off) the *Augenblick*—the moment of vision—that discloses (or better yet, unmask) the world of objects as occurring events that both are and are not. You can’t get more digital than that. In fact, I would suggest that in those moments of anxiety, when we come face to face

with the possibility of our own non-existence, the off to our on, we awaken to—we remember—our digitality. When we practice electracy, when we avatar electracy, electracy avatars us.

Pedagogically speaking, what electracy implies is the possibility of evoking an experience in another that no amount of talking about, or reading about seems to allow for: that is, a transformative experience. And yet, as Anson suggested, that is precisely our pedagogical hope: we hope to provide a rhetorical structure, a digital *enkyklios paideia* that makes possible transformative experiences of electracy flash reason. For instance, if the world were disclosed to us as an occurring world rather than an “is” world, we might be granted rhetorical agency to alter the ways in which the world occurs for us, which in turn alters how we understand ourselves, others, and the world.

And so, you might be asking, what does this have to do with MOOCs, which have come to us like a snake oil salesman on a carnival caravan, or perhaps like a purple-robed sophist from Sicily, or a car salesman from Philadelphia?

I argue that the “technology of transformation,” as embodied and practiced within the rhetorical pedagogy of Werner Erhard, is a rhetorical instrument, an “abstract machine” that itself discloses the limits of our being human as technological: *to be human is to be a machine*, that is, the being of human being is digital, “turtles all the way down.” The rhetorical maneuver is at its root, self-reflexive and utterly contradictory. The instruments of *techne* are not making us more and more technological. Rather, the technological way of being that we always already are provides the clearing in which machines show up as inextricably linked to our being human. Thus, Erhard’s “technology of transformation” calls for its participants to inquire into the technological way of being

at the heart of the being a human being, disclose its limits (and its limiting demands thrust onto the being of human being), and at the same time occasion a release. Such a release is not *away from* being technological, but rather more fully *towards* being technological. And how this insight only emerges within moments of engaged participation with questions that are themselves turned toward digital ends, and not merely in distant reflection.

I am proposing for us as a field to entertain what it would mean to design and deliver a MOOC informed by the abstract machine of the Forum, where the content is comprised of “distinctions” that are applied to individual contexts and situations participants are coping with in everyday life, from the personal, to the professional, and to the civic, with the intention to reveal the basic rhetorical practices of transformation, and then undergo experiences of transformation at the level of group and community. Here the inquiry normally contained within four walls is completely opened up to occur within the larger space provided by our technological way of being, extending from the virtual to the actual and back in a digital dance of on and off.

Currently I am working on a co-written book length project that will provide a script of an entire Forum led by Werner Erhard in 1989, for which over 700 participants were present. My co-writer, Bruce Hyde of St. Cloud St. University and I are also providing extended Heideggerian commentary of Erhard’s dialogic exchanges with participants. I foresee this book, to be published in 2016, as providing source material for a kind of hybrid MOOC that is both content driven and yet entirely connectivist, where a company in the business of selling transformative experiences meets traditional modes of

content delivery, where critical conversations from a variety of fields may meet with complex networks of avataristic performances. Stay tuned.