

Student co-creation in an online university: successes, failures and how to move forward

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Abstract

I embarked on a Digital Collective project in 2018 to engage students and other stakeholders to co-create knowledge in a learning platform and tap the full potential of open educational practice at the University of the Philippines Open University. The project tried to co-create OERs with students and alumni to explore the idea of building an online learning community as the foundation over which co-creation was to be conducted. I recruited volunteers from UPOU's Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies (BAMS) program to join me in the project, which ran for much of 2018. The purpose of this autoethnographic study is to assess and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of how the project was conducted. These preliminary findings using autoethnography can hopefully help the university in drawing up a plan that can effectively build this online community.

Key themes were identified as factors for the project's success. Through self-reflection, review of project notes, and a group discussion with some participants with respect to these themes, participation, and output can be attributed to setting clear goals for participants, level of incorporation into the curriculum, institutional support, and adopting an appropriate method of organization. The data suggest a more defined approach following a community of practice model rather than that of a learning community, as these may lead to not just improved project management and productivity, but also less dependency on any formal ties with the curriculum.

Keywords: *Co-creation, distance education, open university, online communities, autoethnography*

Introduction

University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) has made it a mandate to adopt open educational resources (OERs) for teaching and research. However, much of the early work and exploration conducted are still understandably faculty-centric with students as consumers. While there are efforts to produce in-house content, the employment of OERs predominantly involves only the adoption of existing resources and making changes for either updating or localization. As we wanted the UPOU to tap into the full potential of open educational practice (OEP), I explored student co-creation in 2018 as a member of UPOU's Faculty of Information and Communication Studies (FICS).

I started the UPOU Digital Collective, a community-driven project comprised of students, alumni, and staff with the intention to co-create OERs. The initial goal was to build an initial set of multimedia materials, which include stock photography and graphic and audio content. Existing content, such as old projects, blogs, and assignments made openly available would also be considered for inclusion. The materials created and collected were to be released for the consumption of the greater learning community at UPOU.

Production is the core goal of the Digital Collective project (<http://www.digitalcollective.site>) but there are other aspects to it that required attention. Prior to starting the project, I had been working on and off with an idea to leverage technology and know-how learned in class to enhance student engagement and benefit different sectors in the university. The project was centered on the idea of students' co-creation of content that they can add to their portfolios, and at the same

time, share the content as OERs with the greater learning community in the university.

I hand-picked a group of students whom I believed would be deeply interested to lay the groundwork for the co-creation project. While recruitment posed no issues, getting those students to buy into the idea and then actually do work had proven to be more challenging than I had expected. This autoethnographic paper relates my experience in facilitating the project, from coming up with my initial ideas, mobilizing a group of students, ultimately putting the project on hold for assessment, and determining what adjustments to make to help ensure success when the project resumes.

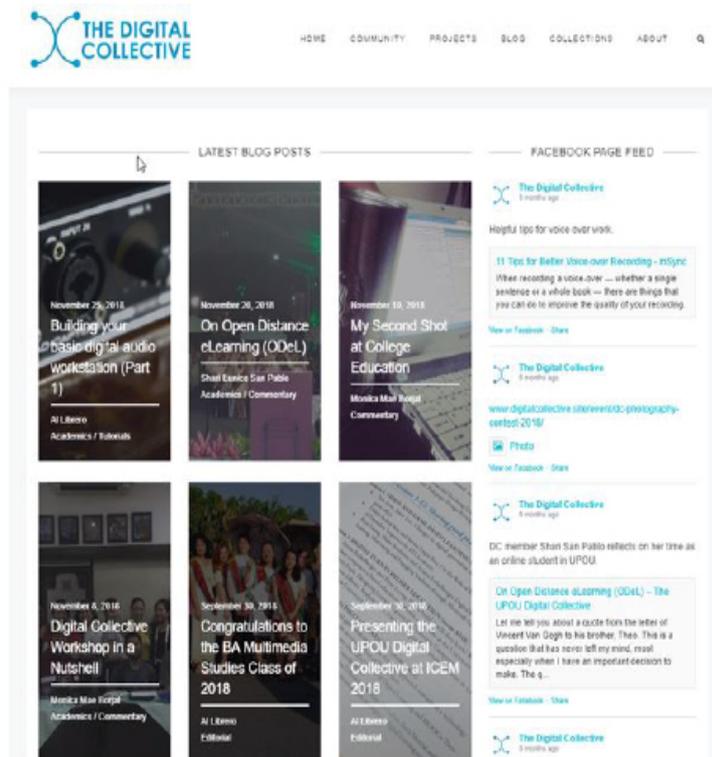


Figure 1. The Digital Collective front page (<https://www.digitalcollective.site>)

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed empirically to give credence to my narrative.

- RQ1. How did I conceptualize the OER project and motivate students and alumni to join the project?
- RQ2. How did I experience the project? (what were the challenges I faced and how did I address them)
- RQ3. How did other participants experience the project? (what were the challenges that they faced and how did they address them)
- RQ4. What were the important factors for the success of the project and how can I better support the project?

While this study primarily revolved around my understanding of what transpired, it also covered that of the participants in the project. It is also intended to shed light on the intricacies involving co-creation efforts in general, with respect to online academic institutions and their constituents.

Literature Review

OERs and student co-creation

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2012) defines open educational resources (OERs) as “teaching, learning, and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise,” that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permit no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions. Navarrete, Luján-Mora, and Peñafiel (2016) credit the adoption of OERs for enhancing access to knowledge and the improvement of learning materials through talented students and staff, subsequently increasing the quality of research and the reputation of academic institutions. On the other hand, while not necessarily in disagreement, Weller (2014, pp. 86-87) cautions that while there is a strong belief towards several positive impacts regarding OERs, it has not always been backed by evidence. While more proof can now be found through recent efforts, Weller asserts that continued experimentation is necessary for critical evaluation.

Stagg’s (2014) proposition of a continuum of open practice (Figure 2) laid out multiple stages of how a higher education institution (HEI) adopts OERs. Adoption culminates at the final stage, where a student or learner co-creation is established. By reaching this stage, learners are at a point where they have built enough self-confidence to work independently or they can work as full collaborators alongside teachers in working with content.



Figure 2. Continuum of open practice (Stagg, 2014)

This stage of empowerment among learners bears similarities with an observation of Librero, Vermeulen, and Maranan (2011) while running Biomodd[LBA2], a collaborative new media art project partially constituted by students from the BA Multimedia Studies program of UPOU. We observed that participants became active collaborators, as they openly shared their ideas and they were able to work more autonomously and productively after reaching a stage where they became confident with their level of know-how regarding the project.

Building Online Learning Communities

Online learning communities require the same building blocks that include clear goals, commitment, promotion, and administrative support (Smith, 2009). However, the lack of face-to-face interaction poses a challenge, particularly with regard to the sense of community. In a study among students at Regent University, Rovai and Jordan (2004) asserted that a higher level of connectedness in blended and traditional learning environments compared to online environments can be attributed to face-to-face interactions. Paloff and Pratt (2009, p.32-34) acknowledge the usefulness of face-to-face meetings. However, they also assert that ensuring steps are made to establish identity and code of conduct, also allowing certain freedoms to make

it possible for online communities to be built effectively and be given the potential to create stronger connections than in face-to-face groups. Paloff and Pratt focused on personal and practical considerations. They state that a virtual classroom must counteract the dehumanizing nature of such an environment to build a sense of community. Fostering the freedom to discuss a full range of topics and issues from high-level academics to the mundane is also recommended to promote openness which is necessary for a learning community. My observations in the past through an open-ended community-building project (Villanueva &Librero, 2010) corroborate this argument. Students in UPOU credited personal connections and social interactions as incentives to remain active in an online community.

Gaps in Literature

The gap identified as literature on student co-creation and community building. Timmons et al. (2010) wrote about collaboration, but on scale-spanning multiple institutions in the context of a community of practice. Tsipursky's (2013) work on his concept of class-sourcing, which is essentially crowd-sourcing within the confines of a classroom setting, is one of the main inspirations of my project. However, his concept was not community-driven and the process of content creation is strictly within the confines of his classroom. Furthermore, while the goal is also for consumption of the general public, Tsipursky makes no clear indication of his adoption of open educational practice or the release of class-sourced content as OER. My work in the past touched on both co-creation and online community building, but never both at the same time, prior to the Digital Collective project. My previous community-building project tried to establish extracurricular connectedness amongst them but did not mobilize students towards achieving any specific goals outside the class. What relevance Biomodd (Librero, Vermeulen &Maranan, 2011) had to this study is circumstantial.

This research explores the possibility of online community-driven co-creation. It is my hope that this study can provide information, insight, and empirical evidence on this initiative.

Methodology

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, &Bochner, 2011). Furthermore, Chang (2009) argues that autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation.

My role as the main proponent of the stalled project will make detaching myself impossible. I still intend to continue the project, so how it moves forward will still depend on me and my understanding of its workings and how I interact with the people involved. I will be dealing with matters of human perception, behavior, and interaction, of mine and the project participants, which might be best presented through narratives.

The Digital Collective project had turned out to be a deeply personal experience. On top of challenging my academic and technical proficiencies, it has led me to question my ability as a facilitator and motivator. The stalling of the project had caused feelings of disappointment

not just with me, but also with some of the participants, particularly those who had invested time and effort in it. These students may have had motivations that go beyond academic performance. Studying these motivations may become helpful in the operation of the project in the future.

Data collection

Being a project leader puts me in a position of being both the researcher and the researched – the primary participant in the project. The data from me as a participant came in the form of recollections, reflective commentary, notes from meetings, as well as informal discussions with other people.

I also collected data from those who volunteered to share their thoughts on the matter. Chang (2008) identifies this as a valid approach in autoethnography. Through email, social media, and face-to-face meetings, I personally invited over 30 students and alumni from UPOU's BA Multimedia Studies program to participate.

Further, a group discussion was conducted to gather data from the most active among nearly 60 participants in the project. This was meant to cover any grounds which I could have overlooked or did not consider at all. I sent out informal invitations through direct messaging in the social media platform (Facebook) to participants whom I believed had much to share due to their backgrounds and personal connections with the rest of the participants in the project. Five(5) of them responded positively and subsequently received formal invitations through their email. The original intention was to individually interview the invited participants. However, the participants, being personally close to each other, came to a consensus that a group discussion would be more amenable to them. The main questions posed in the discussion:

1. To the best of your understanding, what was the project about?
2. What were your motivations for joining the project?
3. How well did the project's goals coincided with your interests and agenda?
4. What do you think were the things that you appreciate the most during your time in the project?
5. In your opinion, why do you think the project stalled?
6. What are the things that need to be done by all parties involved to keep you interested in re-joining the project when it resumes?

These questions were devised to directly address RQ3, as well as widen my perspective towards RQ4. They were also framed to be open-ended to allow for follow up questions and further encourage the sharing of relevant insight which I may have not foreseen. The discussion was conducted online and yielded nearly two hours of recorded audio and video.

Data analysis

This study was conducted with respect to the methods prescribed by Creswell (2013) on the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, which involves six steps:

1. Prepare and organize the data for analysis;
2. Explore and code the data;

3. Code to build description and themes;
4. Represent and report qualitative findings;
5. Interpret the findings; and,
6. Validate the accuracy of the findings.

The results of my recollection and self-reflection, as well as the group discussion, were subjected through a process of identifying recurring topics and themes. I then proceeded to apply as many of the ten strategies for analysis and interpretation prescribed by Chang (p. 131), these strategies are:

- Search for recurring topics
- Look for cultural themes
- Identify exceptional occurrences
- Analyze inclusion and omission
- Connect the present with the past
- Analyze relationships between self and others
- Compare cases
- Contextualize broadly
- Compare with social science constructs
- Frame with theories

Findings and Discussion

Addressing the research questions

How did I conceptualize the OER project and motivate students and alumni to join the project?

The UPOU Digital Collective had been a project I began thinking seriously in 2017 when I was oriented with Open Educational Practices. I realized that student co-creation is a frontier that can be a growth area for UPOU. The basic idea of the project was to build a platform to facilitate student co-creation. However, implementing that idea required the consideration of multiple aspects, thus I imposed no restrictions on what content could be accepted. To be more realistic and in-line with the capacity of the students involved, I had elected to start with contents that can be considered as building blocks for more complex OERs. These included stock photography and graphics, original music, and sound effects. Podcasts and blogs, whether existing or created especially for the project, would also serve as additional contents.

I agree with Smith's (2009) assertion that administrative support is crucial, hence, I started the project in 2018 after securing some funding, access to university facilities, and the next program chair's commitment (my tenure as the chair for the BAMS program ended this year). Still, the major hurdle of not having the means to integrate the project into the BAMS curriculum during that time remained. From an academic standpoint, what I felt was the best I could offer to students, particularly the ones who were nearing graduation, was that they can use my project to build their capstones on. However, there were very few students who were at that level and actually took advantage of this. It would be reasonable to surmise that not having the opportunity of being credited directly by the BAMS curriculum for their efforts in the project gave more junior students, which make up the majority of the participants less motivation, to actively participate.

An important epiphany brought about by my findings is a possible fundamental flaw in my approach to community building. As an academic in an online university, I have experience in dealing with learning communities, and that is the default basis of my approach. However, upon further study and consideration, what I had set out to foster for the Digital Collective project is more akin to a community of practice. In Blankenship and Ruona's (2007) comparative study of learning community and community of practice models, the latter is more associated with voluntary participation, with a definite but more distributed leadership and value for the improvement of practice, while not necessarily dropping priority for academic improvement. Adopting a community of practice model may be a prudent move, especially if the project cannot be effectively incorporated into the BAMS curriculum.

How did I experience the project? (what were the challenges I faced and how did I address them)

The long-term over-arching goal of a sustained community-driven co-creation movement was lofty, by my estimation. However, I made a conscious decision to start with realistic immediate goals within the second half of 2018. I only set two. First, a web-based platform in which to upload and publish multimedia artifacts and blogs has to be set up and go live. The second goal was to make the actual content available, either by creating new ones or sharing existing ones. So, I immediately moved to set up the machinery to achieve these two goals.

Getting people to join at the beginning turned out to be easier than anticipated. I believe it helped that I was directly asking people whom I have had meaningful interactions with in the past. I consciously knew that each participant would have at least one aspect of the project which he or she would be interested in. As mentioned, 59 people joined the closed Facebook Group. This was made up of not just students, but also alumni who were willing to join and presumably give back to UPOU. While it is hard to give a precise number, I would approximate that most of these 59 people would have the potential to contribute. It would be a matter of being an effective facilitator to harness that potential.

The immediate goal for the participants was made clear: to submit a multimedia content for consideration and can be included as a learning resource in our repository to be shared under Creative Commons licensing. Blogs and articles were also solicited. All of these can either be new or already existing. It is important to note that all of the participants have been students in at least two of my classes. My course requirements were meant to be for public viewing, thereby assuring that each participant potentially had something to share already.

While there was never a lack of interest, actual progress in achieving this immediate goal proved challenging early on. Although there were well over fifty Facebook Group members, the majority of them were 'passive' participants, meaning that while I can assume they are reading, they would almost never contribute to discussions, ask questions, or answer my questions. They could click on the Like button, but that was it. Only a handful could be considered analogous to what active participants would be (Mohd et al., 2011), responding in discussions and even fewer would make good on their commitment to work on creating content. In retrospect, the dynamics were very much akin to that of my online classes but this was not expected, as I hand-picked the participants to invite based on my recollection of their performance and behavior in my classes, and very few of them are what I would consider historically as being passive in class.

Output came far in between. It is understandable to an extent, due to participants having higher priorities, with my being unable to secure incorporation in the curriculum. Full-time students have studies to worry about. Working students don't even have their studies as their top priority. Work in the project is at or near the bottom of their list. What I failed to understand is how other priorities can prevent participants from sharing their existing content. It is important to point out that all of the participants have been students in my classes, all of which require them to produce multimedia products. While difficult to quantify, considering the potentially available content already existing from each participant, the amount that was shared was highly disproportionate.

As we were approaching the end of the timeframe that I had allotted, with no indication of significant progress, I suspended the project indefinitely and notified the participants. I decided to not proceed until I have a better understanding of how to run the project and how to build and grow a community that can serve the project well.

While the passiveness of participants seemed to have contributed to not satisfactorily meeting the immediate project goal, this may also reflect on me as the head of this group, or this budding community. I did not set up any clear organization or hierarchy among members. While such a setup apparently made for a looser environment, this increased the challenge for not just me, but also other active participants to attempt to collaborate with passive participants.

How did other participants experience the project? (what were the challenges that they faced and how did they address them)

The group discussion indicates that I was able to effectively convey what the Digital Collective was about – a space for students to practice what they have learned in the BAMS program and to showcase the products of their practice. The prospect of building a community of learners as a foundation for the project also appealed to them. However, the participants did not necessarily have the same order of value of the different aspects of the project.

It is worth noting that with the discussants having different backgrounds is how they value each goal or aspect differently. One discussant, being a working student in another country value the chance to showcase works in an ePortfolio. Additionally, with no face-to-face contact with other students, the community aspect of the project was also appealing. Even the mere act of spending more time with co-participants outside the online classrooms was a significant motivation for joining. Other discussants were deeply interested in taking interactions a step further by exploring the idea of running the project as an academic organization. I also discovered an indication that participants also have found other reasons to join. For example, one of the older discussants saw the project as a means of leaving a legacy in UPOU. This alludes to the value of being credited for authoring content for the benefit of the greater learning community at large in the university.

The group offered a number of reasons for the low rate of content submission. The obvious overarching reason would be the presence of other, possibly more important commitments on the side of the participants. It would again be important to note that participation in the project is not the top priority for any participant, including myself. Without any integration with formal coursework, participation in the project would be of lower priority than studies, by default. And as I perceive it, in the case of the majority of the participants, studying is not the top priority of their lives, either. Work, family, and health often take precedence. This often leaves little time to do meaningful volunteer work for the project. Some of the discussants also brought up their

observation that some of the participants had underestimated the amount of work needed to be done and there was a lack of will or motivation to actively meet the actual expectations.

The above reasons apply to the task of creating new content but there was also the task of sharing what they already have on hand, such as artifacts from projects and blogs. I know first hand of the relative abundance of such artifacts since I required them as projects and assignments in my courses, and all of the participants were former students. Submitting would be a matter as simple as copying and pasting. However, very few blogs and practically no other artifacts were made available on the project website.

Interestingly, a discussant offered the possibility that it is a display of the participants' "hiya," a Filipino term which often translates directly to shame. Lasquety-Reyes (2016, p.66) asserts that it also refers to sacrificial self-control of one's individual wants for the sake of other people. Lasquety-Reyes argues for hiya as a positive virtue – a sign of sensitivity and respect towards the needs of others. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges how it is often rooted in a fear of disgrace or embarrassment. "Hiya" can also be a sign of self-sensitivity from criticism and disgrace. I give emphasis to this particular term because of its prevalence in Filipino culture, and by extension, the online Filipino classroom. It is possible that participants did not have the confidence to put their work out in public side by side with his or her peers. While there were participants who craved for interaction, it would have been likely that there were those who were not comfortable working within a group. The discussant who brought this up remarked at how some students harbored a certain amount of fear or shame at the prospect of disappointing me personally.

However, I think the more important point that can be made is that it is possible that some participants would rather not submit than possibly get scrutinized by me, their peers, and the greater community of the university. These are interesting culture-related assertions that I had not previously considered.

Much of the discussion, nonetheless, covered how the project was managed. According to the discussion group, while they understood my unwillingness to impose any obligations over the participants, it may have led to certain drawbacks. First, the lessening of pressure to produce, while making for an amicable environment, may have undermined the necessity of doing the work expected of them. Another important point raised was that my reluctance to impose authority and establish a more formal organization of the group also created hesitation among the more active participants to attempt to mobilize the passive participants directly.

A lot of adjustments were made. Passive participants remained passive, while the active participants proceeded to exert effort to co-create content. Much of the active participants' products are either archived or made available on the project website. They also remain on standby for the resumption of the project.

What were the important factors for the success of the project and how can I better support the project?

The themes in the literature, as well as the findings, identified the following themes:

- Clarity of goals – laying out the project's goals and objectives and the roles of participants
- Incorporation into the curriculum – crediting of work done in the project as part of the requirements of courses in the BA Multimedia Studies program

- Organization – establishing a clear structure or hierarchy with participants having defined roles for a more systematic operation, as opposed to a more egalitarian approach with all participants having equal footing.
- Capacity building and support – the need for the university’s administration and faculty to lend assistance with regards not just to funding and facilities, but also skills development.
- Sense of community – establishing connectedness among participants to foster connectedness and help build a viable community around the co-creation project in the long-term.

Clarity of goals

The goals of the project were clear to me. However, they may require more orders for others to understand more clearly. I had pitched a number of goals to the participants. Although the group discussion suggested that the goals were understood well-enough by the participants, they may not have been laid out enough to distinguish short-term (collection of an initial set of content) and long-term (online community building and development) goals.

A more concrete set of proofs of concept, namely sample content, may help in giving prospect participants a clearer perspective on whether or not there are incentives for them to join and what would be expected of them if they did. While providing a proof of concept was my intention in the first place, circumstances did not permit my doing so. I, as well as the core, must ensure that there will be a good amount of sample content available before resuming with the project.

Incorporation into the curriculum

The project’s incorporation into the curriculum is a major factor in motivating students to participate. Failure to do so has led to lower engagement. At the very least, this led to the project go further down among the students’ list of priorities. The good news is that incorporation does not necessarily require making formal revisions to the BAMS or any other curriculum under UPOU. However, it will require the participation, or at least permission of my colleagues teaching pertinent courses.

Organization

If the project resumes, the discussants recommended starting with a smaller group that would comprise a core. They cited the size of 5-10 people. However, deciding on a final number may require further thought. It is also apparent that I underestimated the need for a better organization. The creation of an actual duly recognized academic organization in UPOU continues to not be an option as of this writing, but the participants may have to be structured as such. With students and alumni accounting for themselves within a group with a clear organizational structure, I, as well as any other teacher who joins, can focus less on the students and more on the other aspects of the project, such as research, quality assurance, and of course, additional co-creation ideas.

Capacity building and support

Capacity building of participants, while of some value, should not necessarily place high in the project’s priority list. While not intentionally discriminatory, this project would typically be

more attractive to students and alumni who already have a significant amount of experience in multimedia production and writing. They would no longer need the type of seminars and workshops I had conducted during the project's initial run. However, such things would be more appreciated as extension work for the more junior students who may potentially join the project in the future.

Instead of the act of co-creation being done on the side, incorporating the work done in the project to be credited somewhere in the BAMS curriculum may also help in providing additional motivation for students to join and actively participate in the project. This, however, would require the consent and even participation of faculty involved in the pertinent courses.

Community building

Community building remains an important long-term goal and a means to attract participants. But this requires further study, which this run of the project, and by extension, this paper, was not able to fully explore. Certain concerns must also be addressed. For one, the feeling of *hiya* and other personal mental and emotional barriers must be addressed to help foster higher levels of interaction. Securing continued support from the university will also be important

It is interesting to note that while much of the interaction was conducted online, no issues relating to distance and lack of interaction, face to face or online, were cited with regards to conducting the activities in the project either by me or the discussants. Interestingly enough, this can be seen as a contradiction to Rovai and Jordan's argument that the lack of face to face interaction may be detrimental towards online community building. Since that argument was posited in 2004, I hypothesize that today's online students, or at the very least, the project participants find the current means of online interaction sufficient in establishing connectedness with one another. However, given the sparse content produced, I believe there is not enough evidence to prove the effectiveness of the group of participants to work and coordinate themselves online to meet the project goals.

Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

I embarked on a Digital Collective project in 2018 intending to engage students and other stakeholders in the community to co-create knowledge in a learning platform and tap the full potential of open educational practice. These preliminary findings using autoethnography can hopefully help the university drawing up a plan that can effectively build this online community.

My idea of community with respect to the project was loosely grounded on the concept of learning communities. However, after much thought and study, community-driven production of materials, OER or otherwise, even if within the bounds of an academic learning community, may be better served by following a community of practice model, especially with the possible involvement of members who are no longer students. However, testing this hypothesis will require more time than time allotted at this stage. Doing so as part of any continuation of the project would be highly recommended.

Juxtaposing my thoughts with that of project participants has painted an even wider perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the project and how it was handled. Hopefully, this learning

experience in this study will lead to the project's future success and more meaningful interactions with students and alumni in other endeavors. For the greater community at large, while there are certain cultural and administrative considerations in this study which may or may not apply in other locales, the continued proliferation of online learning and open educational practice will make research along these lines more valuable for academic, as well as professional institutions.

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