

An Interactive Multimedia Model for a “Big Questions” Course: Innovations in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This paper presents a course design model created in response to the pedagogical challenges inherent in a ‘Big Questions’ course in the humanities. We conceptualize the model as an Open Dynamic Educational Project (ODEP), namely, a carefully designed learning environment—physical, intellectual, and digital—which comprises *both* a collection of growing multimedia resources *and* a dynamic community of learners who contribute to this collection and to the learning process as a whole. Methodologically, an ODEP aims at the ideals of “significant learning” and “deep learning” and makes use of digital technologies—in our case a website and a computer game—in order to enhance a student-oriented course design. As we discuss the role of digital aids we also touch on the new educational trend of “gameful learning”, its potentials and possible shortcomings. Based on theoretical findings in conjunction with our practice of transforming a Big Questions course into an Open Dynamic Educational Project, we suggest a number of future trajectories.

Keywords: Big questions; digital humanities; educational technology; open educational resource; serious games; course design models; significant learning; gameful learning; open dynamic educational project.

In the educational-cultural context, the term ‘Big Questions’ or ‘Enduring Questions’ refers to a deep, sustained exploration of a fundamental problem facing humanity. Thus, the *Big Questions Online* initiative features popular essays by leading scientists, philosophers, and writers who explore “questions of human purpose and ultimate reality” (“Big Questions Online,” 2015), The Big Questions BBC series presents a wide variety of moral, ethical, and religious debates (“The Big Questions,” 2015), The National Endowment for Humanities “Enduring Questions” program funds new college courses which “would encourage undergraduates and teachers to join together in a deep and sustained program of reading in order to encounter influential ideas, works, and thinkers over the centuries” (“Enduring Questions” 2015). For the purposes of this paper the terms ‘Big Questions’ and ‘Enduring Questions’ will be used interchangeably.

Questions such as “What is justice?” “What makes a life worth living?” “What is happiness?” “How can we understand suffering and death?” evoke human wisdom and experience, drawing on a multitude of intellectual, artistic, and cultural traditions. If addressed in a serious, self-reflective manner, the Big Questions also call for reevaluation of our personal values and commitments.

In this article we discuss the theoretical and practical aspects of designing and teaching a reading-intensive, interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, Big Questions course in the humanities. We identify the pedagogical challenges presented by such courses and propose a multimedia educational model as a holistic response to these challenges. The researchers set aside the discussion of institutional challenges, as some colleges/schools resist the idea of BQ and focus on very specific vocational or highly specialized training. Also, since many BQs deal with the spiritual dimension, there is secular resistance discussed by several authors (“Liberal Education,” 2007). We recognize these tensions but their analysis lies beyond the scope of our project. For an insightful discussion see: <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/forum-helping-students-engage-big-questions>

In a nutshell, the model consists of transforming a course into a sustained, Open Dynamic Educational Project (ODEP) whose participants contribute to its growth and development over time. Digital technologies play an important role in this transformation: they help expand course content, stimulate deep contextual learning, and foster an intellectual community beyond the group of students currently enrolled in the course.

The model we describe here is based on personal observations and lessons learned while designing and teaching the *Meaning of Life* (MoL) course supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Methodologically, an ODEP aims at the concept of “significant learning” (Fink, 2013) in order to foster “deep approaches to learning” (Marton & Säljö, 1976). In what follows we discuss the ways in which the original course (and the challenges inherent to it) laid the foundation for the ODEP model and show how the introduction of the ODEP framework further enhanced the student-oriented course design as well as the overall teaching and learning experience.¹

Project background

The project started in 2013 with the Enduring Questions grant from the NEH. The grant recipient, philosophy professor Evgenia Cherkasova designed the *Meaning of Life* (MoL) course in which students explore a variety of perspectives on life-meaning in philosophical and religious texts, in art, fiction, autobiography, and in the scholarly work of philosophers and psychologists. Course material draws on traditions of Europe, Asia, and America. Cherkasova aspired to create a space—physical, intellectual, and digital—for her students to think deeply and creatively about what makes life meaningful for them and to “witness” the quests for meaning in the lives and works of the great thinkers. With this goal in mind she explored various options for interactive online learning. As a result, a website and a computer game were developed specifically for this project. The course website,² initially a reference tool for students, grew into an interdisciplinary platform featuring books, film, art, and discussions of critical life questions. It serves as a dynamic record of course activities, connecting past and present generations of students. The game (in early stages of development) helps students refine their own views on the meaning of life, reflect on philosophical theories and test them against their personal value systems.³

Once the first horizontal prototype of the game was produced (Summer 2014), the two digital components—the website and the game—were fully integrated in the course structure. The new model—an Open Dynamic Educational Project—started to take shape. The course debuted in Spring 2014, was restructured conceptually as an ODEP over the summer, and offered again in Fall 2014.

Pedagogical challenges and associated questions

While the basic structure of the Open Dynamic Educational Project emerged from analyzing the core tenets of the MoL course, the implementation process helped reveal the common patterns and challenges inherent to the Big Questions courses in general. Here we list the key challenges identified in the process of instructional design:

¹ Some preliminary implementation results were presented at the International Center for Innovation in Education conference: “Humanities without Borders: Interactive Multimedia Educational Model in a ‘Big Questions’ Course,” the 11th International Conference for Excellence in Education, (the Creativity-Innovation Challenge), Université Paris Descartes, Paris, France, July 7, 2014.

² <http://meaningoflife.cherkasova.org/>

³ The game project was sponsored by the Suffolk Center for Teaching and Scholarly Excellence. The design/testing team consists of Cherkasova (philosophy), professor Dmitry Zinoviev (mathematics and computer science), Marie Marbaek-Johanson (digital humanities consultant), and Nicholas Raby (graduate research assistant).

Vastness of material: By definition, the Big Questions are some of the oldest and most perplexing questions posed by humanity. The relevant themes and perspectives can easily supply material for dozens of different courses. How do we organize a single-semester course whose subject matter has no distinct disciplinary or chronological parameters? Which structure and/or progression could best orient the audience?

Diversity of content: A Big Questions course often comprises diverse disciplines, traditions, and historical periods. In this context, how do we avoid a superficial survey approach and do justice to the depth and complexity of ideas? Is it possible to preserve diversity while maintaining a focused classroom conversation? Will the students have a chance to immerse themselves in the material? And throughout the course, will there be opportunities to revisit and apply what they will have studied?

Personal, introspective dimension: One of the reasons why the Big Questions persisted throughout ages and cultures is that they cut to the core of human nature and the human condition. They inquire about the fundamentals of our existence—mortality, subjectivity, free will, happiness, suffering, etc. On an existential level, each person and each generation confront these questions anew. Consequently, the Big Questions courses often deal with sensitive issues which may resonate very strongly with students (e.g. death, loss of meaning, suicide). How do we approach difficult, emotionally charged topics in a classroom? Which activities and assignments could foster students' introspection and self-reflective, caring attitude?

Students' attitudes and study habits: Students' prior training and study habits may hinder their involvement in a particular course. Some students tend to study only what they think they will be tested on (Lonka, Olkinuora, & Mäkinen, 2004; Marton and Säljö, 1976); they may also see course work as something to be done exclusively in order to “get a specific requirement out of the way.” The phenomenon is as common as it is regrettable. Based on personal observations and contemporary research (discussed below) there are reasons to suggest that, in a Big Questions course specifically, such tendencies go directly against the spirit of the course. Can we overcome the students' inertia and help them discover the pleasures of self-directed inquiry?

We want to note that none of the challenges described above belongs exclusively to a Big Questions course. For example, the vastness of material is one of the prominent features of a traditional subject area survey course. As such, any successful interdisciplinary course has to address the diversity challenge and therefore questions about basic epistemological stances and employed methodologies (Stein, Connell, & Gardner, 2008).

In addition, many courses in the humanities and social sciences in general deal with sensitive, controversial, and potentially disturbing topics, thereby touching on the Big Questions indirectly. Finally, the issue of student attitudes and study habits is universally present in all educational contexts. Therefore, it is not a particular challenge on its own but their concentration in a *single course* that produces the unique atmosphere of conflicting demands in a Big Questions course. Research on models of student learning and strategies provides some guidance on how to meet these demands through course-design.

Tracing the history of Student Approaches to Learning (SAL), Lonka, Olkinuora, & Mäkinen (2004) cite Marton and Säljö (1976) as having introduced two qualitatively different approaches: deep and surface level learning, of which the former “refers to paying attention to the meaning and significance of the materials to be learned, whereas the latter concentrates more on rote memorizing” (p. 302). Given the vastness and diversity of material, the students in a Big Questions course may be tempted to resort to “surface learning.” In addition, in their analysis of the ways students organize their studying Lonka *et al.* note “the *achieving (or strategic)* approach” which aims exclusively at high grades (2004, p. 303). Research suggests that a “strategic” approach *may be* the proper formula

for some educational contexts.⁴ However, the “strategic” and “surface” approaches are insufficient at best and counterproductive at worst in Big Questions courses where achievement refers, among other things, to students’ conceptual change on personal and existential levels. If human dimension and caring are among the kinds of learning we want to promote (as in Fink’s taxonomy of “Significant Learning” discussed below) and a “deep” approach to learning is one of the long-term objectives, it makes sense to adopt a student-centered framework which responds directly to the learners’ attitudes and study habits with an informed pedagogical model (Fink, 2013; Pintrich, 2004).⁵ As the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras saw it, “education is not implanted in the soul unless one reaches a greater depth” (450/2005, p. 81).

We believe that the current structure of the *Meaning of Life* course as an Open Dynamic Educational Project provides a helpful paradigm for addressing these and other related challenges and can be applied to a variety of courses similar to MoL in nature and scope. The next section summarizes MoL pedagogical strategies and preliminary results which led to the development of ODEP. In the consequent sections we provide a working definition of ODEP, describe its key features in connection to Fink’s model of Significant Learning, and sketch out future implementation trajectories.

Responding to challenges: *The meaning of life* course before and after ODEP

Given the subject’s breadth and diversity, the *Meaning of Life* course combines intellectual history with in-depth examinations of key texts. The readings cover a broad range of perspectives from the Old Testament’s *Ecclesiastes* to the ancient Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching* to the twentieth-century existentialist writings and beyond. The students are encouraged to see a search for meaning as an exciting intellectual endeavor and an existential challenge of great practical importance. For this reason, the material is organized thematically, around three interrelated units: 1) *A Life Worth Living: Humanity’s Ideals* focuses on the ancient and modern visions of harmonious existence and human flourishing; 2) *Threats to Meaning: Humanity’s Discontents* discusses the disillusionments leading to a loss of meaning and purpose; and 3) *Recovery of Meaning: Crises and Hopes* explores the possibilities of self-discovery and growth as a result of a major crisis.

To enable students’ introspection and immersion in the material, course assignments and projects combine elements of close reading, conceptual analysis, and continuous reflective activities/exercises. All projects are meant to be shared, revised, and polished throughout the semester, a practice which we intend to steer students away from surface learning and “quick fixes.” The best student work is published online, creating a record of class results and best practices. During the first run of the course in the Spring of 2014 the assignments included:

- *Meaning of Life Profile*

⁴ Thus, discipline genre (e.g., STEM or humanities) has been shown to significantly influence approaches to teaching and learning. Lueddeke (2003) studied how the particular discipline (categorized according to “hard” versus “soft” sciences) impacts the instructors’ approach—either toward a conceptual change/student focus (CCSF) or an information transmission/teacher focus (ITTF)—and found that “soft science” faculty show a stronger conceptual change/student focus than their “hard science” counterparts (p. 220-221). In a 2006 study Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, & Ashwin, using similar methodology and discipline criterion, also found that “the teachers from hard sciences scored significantly higher on the ITTF approach scale than the teachers from soft sciences” and “the means of the ITTF and CCSF approach scales differed significantly across the disciplinary groups.” (p. 291-292)

⁵ For example, Pintrich (2004), commenting on similarities with SAL, champions a ‘self-regulated learning perspective’ (SRL) which is sensitive to “not just individuals’ cultural, demographic, or personality characteristics that influence achievement and learning directly, nor just the contextual characteristics of the classroom environment that shape achievement, but the individuals’ self-regulation of their cognition, motivation, and behavior that mediate the relations between the person, context, and eventual achievement.” (p. 388)

At the beginning, students answer a few questions about their personal values, goals, and ideals. Throughout the course they revisit their initial answers, identifying the texts which affirm, challenge, or completely refute their ideas about life's meaning and purpose. At the end of the course, students submit revised, expanded profiles containing an analysis of any change of perspective which may have occurred as a result of course work.

- *Collection of Questions and Quotes*

In this reading intensive exercise which runs through the whole course students are asked to record their impressions of the texts by collecting and commenting on memorable passages. A quote may be chosen because it rings true or sounds completely absurd; because it is deeply moving or highly controversial, pessimistic or uplifting, illuminating or obscure. The assignment combines a personal dimension (students choose quotes which "speak" to them) and a skill-building dimension (students learn to articulate why a particular quote caught their attention while practicing critical reading and proper source documentation).

- *Reflection Papers*

A reflection paper is a thoughtful, engaged, well-written exploration of a key idea of the course. It prompts students to work toward mastery of the material by exploring its depth and complexity from textual, historical, and personal perspectives. Students may also make connections to contemporary issues, course work in other classes, and share personal observations.

- *Crisis of Meaning Interview*

Students interview a friend, colleague, or family member who is willing to share his/ her story of crisis and recovery. A crisis of meaning is a turning point in someone's life characterized by a loss of purpose, rejection of values once taken for granted, or the shattering of a familiar self-image. An interview must include both a crisis event and a narrative of recovery, e.g reconciliation, personal growth, deepened self-awareness, etc. Completing this assignment requires theoretical grounding in the issues related to the loss of meaning and the interviewer's ability to handle the intimate, interpersonal nuances of such issues in a conversation—not to mention basic interviewing and communication skills. For this reason, students go through a number of preparatory exercises before they begin work on an interview itself.

Some course projects encourage students' active involvement with historical and intellectual traditions and texts (*Reflection Papers, Collections of Questions and Quotes*). Others focus primarily on personal values, goals, and experiences, suggesting connections between class discussions and life problems students face (*Profiles, Crisis of Meaning Interviews*). At the same time, each project is intentionally multidimensional, combining theory and practice, cultivation of skills and introspection. The epigraph for the course, which comes from the Roman philosopher Seneca, captures its main goal: *Vitae, non scholae discimus* – "It is for life, not for school, that we learn." Each classroom activity and assignment is designed to reveal this vital connection between life and learning.

The activities listed above were a part of the MoL course before it was transformed into an Open Dynamic Educational Project. Two digital components were instrumental in creating an ODEP version of the course—the enhanced MoL website and a philosophical computer game. Within the new framework, the website became a digital hub for course projects, a space to record and display student work showcasing the most successful projects and increasing publicity. Through ODEP, the quality of student writing and intellectual insight is assessed on two levels: 1) whether a paper/ project meets the general standards for college work (applied in both pre- and post ODEP contexts) and 2) whether a paper/ project merits potential publication on the MoL website. Publications set the higher standards of quality, encourage connections among different generations of students, publicize the course content and invite independent feedback from colleagues, students, and public at large. Most importantly, publications motivate: all students whose work was chosen to be featured on the website saw it as an honor and continued to work on revisions long after the course was over and the final grades were in. Publicity played an important institutional role as well: for example, during

orientation sessions over the summer, some prospective students cited the website as a key resource in their course choice.

Perspectives on Gameful Learning: Implications for the MoL game

The second component of the MoL ODEP—a newly developed computer game—merits special mention. Simulations and games have been part of a large socio-historical shift from an “information transfer” to an “experience-based” educational model since the 1970s (Ruben, 1999). One notable difference that has occurred over this span of time is that with advances in technology the *reality* of experience-based learning (e.g., service learning, case study, support groups) has become in some cases a *virtual reality* of various degrees of likeness with the original. Now in the 21st century computer and video games serve a variety of purposes: from leisurely diversion, to training surgeons, military personnel, pilots and other professionals. The U.S. Department of Education has even created an office of educational technology in order to “provide leadership for transforming education through the power of technology” (“Office of educational technology,” 2015).

Recently, the issue of the educational potential of game technologies has received widespread attention. Some researchers have found that (video/computer) games increase student motivation and achievement of learning goals (Divjak & Tomić, 2011; Erhel & Jamet, 2013; Felicia, 2011; Tüzün, Yilmaz-Soylu, Karakus, Inal, & Kizilkaya, 2008), thereby championing integration of games into the education system at large. At the turn of the millennium, there was a spike in publications about videogame technologies and their potential place in education. One rather popular account came from Prensky (2001a) who coined the terms “digital natives” and “digital immigrants,” advocating for a radical change in educational strategies based on the alleged “digital” generational differences (Prensky, 2001b, p. 1). For the better part of a decade Prensky’s assumptions and methods went without critical examination while many authors employed his terminology to discuss gaming technology and education. In 2008, Bennett, Maton and Kervin labeled the majority of this discussion “an academic form of moral panic” (p. 785) that had allowed “unevidenced claims to proliferate” (p. 786). They called for “a considered and disinterested examination of the assumptions underpinning claims about digital natives such that researchable issues can be identified and dispassionately investigated” (p. 787). The debate is ongoing.⁶

On the one hand, as we noted earlier, there are studies that show educational games to have significant positive impacts on learning outcomes and motivation as experimental constructs. On the other, we are suspicious of the unfounded enthusiasm about the prospects of the wholesale “gamification” of education.⁷ The question we kept in mind while developing the MoL game was: what kinds of games do we play and therefore which practices do we rehearse and perfect? In this sense, it was our intention to create a *serious game*, one that is “designed to entertain and educate players and to promote behavioral change” (Blumberg, Almonte, Anthony, & Hashimoto, 2013, p. 334). Gallagher and Pretwich (2012) also note that “games and serious games support both generational differences and a varied, ubiquitous set of technological opportunities that can be leveraged for learning.” (p. 2)

⁶ Thus, one study suggests that belonging to a certain generation (age-group) does not have a significant effect on ‘digital nativeness’ (Helsper, & Eynon, 2010). Supported by such findings and following the same critical argument, Koutropoulos (2011) argues that “these figures and overgeneralizations have oft been repeated by followers of the digital native message, without much self-reflection or critique” (p. 526), referring to it as a “fetish of insisting in naming this generation the Digital/Net/Google Generation” (p. 523).

⁷ Overall, we side with Young *et al.* (2012) who propose that researchers ask precisely how “a particular video game being used by a particular student in the context of a particular course curriculum affect the learning process as well as the products of school (such as test grades, course selection, retention, and interest)” (p. 84). See also Selwyn’s (2012) ten conditions for improving academic research and writing on education and technology.

Broadly, these two perspectives describe how we intended the Meaning of Life game to function in the classroom: students would be encouraged to apply philosophical insight to the decision-making process in a series of constructed game situations while reviewing course material on the way. We expected this approach to be effective in presenting vast intellectual material in an accessible form as well as reinforcing the learning process through repetitive strategic choices. The implementation of the game met our expectations.⁸ In our game called *Vixi: A Master's Way* ("vixi" in Latin means "I have lived") the player functions as an active learner, choice-maker, and "traveler" in the history of ideas. *Vixi* features diverse paths to meaning represented by eight "philosophical schools": the Classical Greeks, the Epicureans, the Stoics, the Taoists, the Existentialists, the Pessimists, the Humanists, and the Buddhists. The game generates various scenarios/situations to which the player has to respond. Throughout the game the "Great Masters" from different schools offer their "advice" or "warnings" in the form of direct quotations. Each of the player's strategic choices is assessed by all the schools and the player's affinities with different philosophical perspectives gradually emerge. At the end of the game the player receives a "post-mortem" analysis of his or her virtual life choices.

It is important to note that MoL students' engagement with the game is not limited to playing it. We created a game whose database and structure is open to revisions by the players themselves. While working their way through the game, each class of students/players is asked to participate in game design through mini-assignments suggesting new strategies, clarifications, improvements, and content additions. As game-designers, students must familiarize themselves with the particular principles of game play in order to generate interesting challenges for the player, a conceptual activity which has been shown to positively impact motivation and deep learning strategies (Vos, van der Meijden, & Denessen, 2011).

To further motivate students, we offer the chance for the most intriguing and well-ordered situations to be included in the future version of the game. Working from a dual perspective of the player and the designer, students have a unique opportunity to experience and reflect on key ideas of the course and their applications. As we expected, most participants picked up on the benefits of this "dual-role" and reportedly spent more time on related course work.⁹

By integrating gameful learning, game design and website activities into the MoL structure we were able to create multiple conceptual links among textual resources, learning activities, and course participants; to cite just one example, game development prompts students to practice and perfect textual analysis skills in a larger context when they select passages to be included in the game as the "Master's advice," or when they construct challenging existential situations and connect philosophical principles to practical life choices.

⁸ In order to gauge educational effectiveness and student experience with the MoLgame for our personal records, we created a series of surveys to investigate our initial hypotheses. Here are some of the responses. When asked what the best point about the MoLg was student [K] wrote: "it puts into practice the theory of every school so that you see examples and are able to get a better understanding of every reading." When asked for an "overall initial reaction," student [G] wrote "I think this game would be extremely helpful and being able to compare/contrast different schools of philosophy. I'm excited to see where it goes ☺" while student [K] noted that introducing the game is a "very good idea. Makes philosophically heavy subjects easier to grasp".

⁹ Here are some characteristic responses from the second round of MoL surveys addressing a updated version of the game and corresponding assignment: when asked whether *the game assignment should continue to be a part of course*, 100% of students answered "yes". To the question "*Did you think both playing the game and designing parts of the game are more helpful than doing either one or the other? Please explain*" student [D] answered: "Yes because playing the game gives you an idea of what you're working toward and designing the game helps you reflect on and apply course material" and student [L] answered "Yes, playing the game gives you a sense of how to design your own parts. Designing parts helps you remember course work". When asked "*What were, if any, the positive aspects of the assignment?*" student [D] responded that "engaging in the game helps us understand the material and see its importance".

To sum up, the three MoL components—the course, the website, and the game—have been evolving together to form what we call an Open Dynamic Educational Project. Their interrelatedness can be represented by a simple diagram (**Figure 1**. Three ODEP Components, Interrelated and Mutually Reinforcing):

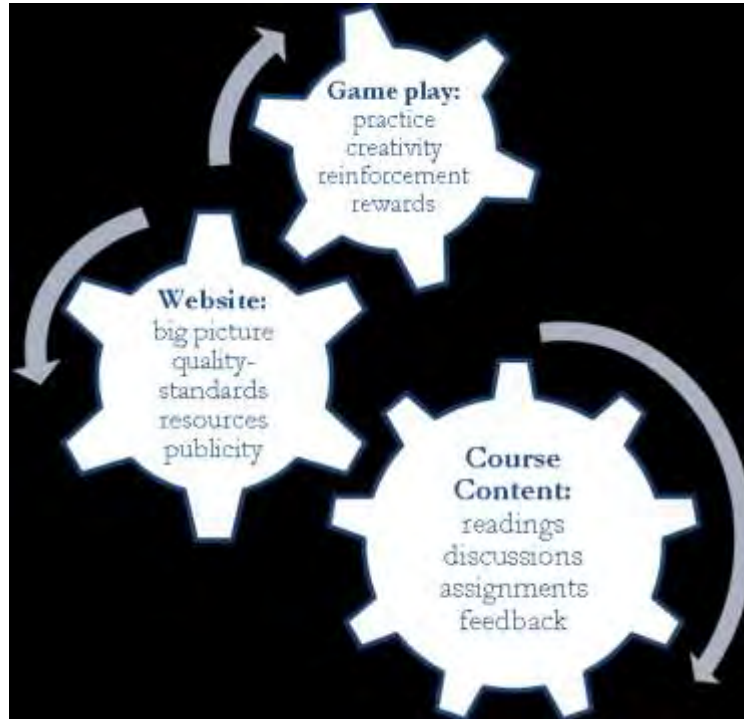


Figure 1: Three ODEP Components, Interrelated and Mutually Reinforcing.

The ODEP model: A definition

An Open Dynamic Educational Project is a learning space—physical, intellectual, and digital—which comprises *both* a collection of multimedia resources developing over time *and* a dynamic community of learners who are also contributors to this collection and to the learning process as a whole. As a touchstone for our model, we reference UNESCO’s concept of an “Open Educational Resource” (OER). In 2011, the organization published a set of guidelines in which OERs are defined as “materials used to support education that may be freely accessed, reused, modified, and shared” (UNESCO, 2011, p.1). The basic framework of an ODEP aligns with the spirit of UNESCO’s vision of universal accessibility. At the same time, our model calls for some qualitative modifications:

- *Open:*
The first term, “open,” is augmented. For UNESCO, open *access* to educational materials is the main concern. For us, the term also implies an invitation to contribute. We believe that openness is more than access to and distribution of materials, it is also a welcoming environment, open to participation, inventiveness, creative adaptation, and cultivation of talent.
- *Dynamic:*
We add the term “dynamic” to capture the idea that learners are participants as well as designers. Through their active involvement and contributions all components of the project evolve and improve *over time*. Most importantly, dynamism also refers to the participants’ development and personal growth.

- *Project:*
Since the learning process is irreducible to a collection of objects and/or resources we introduce a rather broad term, “project,” to connote a communal, interactive, cross-generational set of activities. Thus, an educational project combines interrelated components, digital or otherwise, constantly evolving and future-oriented. Innovation is a project’s driving force while collaboration is its cohesive activity.

Though there is conceptual overlap between ODEP and 1) the concept and intention of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and 2) the concept and intentions of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), a rough-and-ready distinction between ODEP and these other models is that the latter emphasize “availability” above all whereas our framework highlights genuine interaction, grounded coherency, and shared history.

MOOC proponents argue that a well-designed MOOC can offer much more than just a free online instruction. A recent blog post paints an impressive picture:

a MOOC is an evolving and dynamic learning and collaboration ecosystem that may encompass more than one technical platform and various modes of learning from short, byte-sized videos and e-learning capsules to user-generated content... MOOCs are well-suited for open-ended topics that generate discussions and debates, have new knowledge and research growing around it, and are of interest to a wide audience...A MOOCs core aspects are participation and emergence. The characteristics and context of a MOOC (*when effectively facilitated and thoughtfully designed*) evolve as it progresses. The initial topic becomes the trigger around which communities and cohorts form, discussions take place, resources get created and shared (Chattopadhyay, 2015)

Our reader will note that the description above utilizes some of the same concepts and terminology central to an ODEP definition.¹⁰ Yet an ODEP (at its best) has a particular advantage over a MOOC (at its best): it effectively connects open education with “closed” institutional setting, utilizing their respective strengths.¹¹ In the next section we discuss the specifics of this crucial connection.

ODEP and significant learning

As a holistic pedagogy, an ODEP contributes to what educational theorist L. Dee Fink calls “Significant Learning” (Fink, 2013; Fink, n.d.a; Fink, n.d.b). With a revamped taxonomy based on Bloom and colleagues’ original work from the mid-20th century, Fink advances a perspective on teaching and course design grounded in six interdependent kinds of learning: Foundational Knowledge, Application, Integration, Human Dimension, Caring, and Learning How to Learn.¹² Fink broadly conceives of learning in terms of change. He states: “[f]or learning to occur, there has to be some kind of change in the learner... And significant learning requires that there be some kind of *lasting* change that is *important* in terms of the learner’s life” (Fink, n.d.a, p. 3). This approach clearly resonates with the dynamic character of an ODEP and with the idea of *learning for life*, an outlook which inspired the development of the ODEP framework.

¹⁰ For example, Morris and Stommel (2013) respond to the critics who claim that MOOCs are not sufficiently interactive: “interaction is not only possible within a MOOC; it also has the potential to be extremely dynamic... MOOCs are anthropological opportunities, not instructional ones” (para. 3, 4).

¹¹ Ulf-Daniel Ehlers, president of the European Foundation for Quality in e-learning, convincingly argues that making such a connection in a meaningful way is one of the major challenges contemporary educators face. (“The Big Challenge,” video interview, 2013, [7:40-8:18])

¹² Fink’s pedagogical framework has been successfully put into practice in diverse content areas, including humanities (“Designing Significant Learning Experiences,” 2014; Fallahi, 2011; Rose & Torosyan, 2009; Zhang, 2012). Educators report uniformly positive results.

We believe that Fink's overall methodology is a useful parallel to our model because a well-designed Open Dynamic Educational Project has the capacity to engage all aspects of significant learning. Thus, in the emerging MoL educational project, "Foundational Knowledge" category (understanding and remembering information and ideas) is addressed throughout: MoL students study primary texts in the history of Eastern and Western philosophy, learn basic terminology, and explore conceptual links between different disciplines, such as philosophy, literature, psychology, history, and art. Class discussions, website resources, and the game, each in its own way, provide support for the intellectual foundations of the course and evoke two other categories of Significant Learning: 2) Integration (connecting ideas, people, realms of life) and 3) Application (skills; critical, creative, and practical thinking). Specifically, the game makes explicit the real-life applications of theory by offering diverse scenarios/situations in which the player encounters first the general principle of action and then chooses among courses of actions corresponding to this principle. Both "Application" and "Integration" are further enhanced by *Crisis of Meaning Interviews* and *Reflection Papers*. The engagement goes beyond coursework when students learn about their friends and family members, connect to other students who took the course before or contribute to website resources. Meaningful connections with other departments and colleagues are possible as well; among the links formed through MoL activities are those of philosophy and computer science (game structure), journalism (interviews) and creative writing (introspective narratives, story-telling aspects of the game).

Further, it would not be an exaggeration to say that all MoL activities are designed to evoke the learning categories of "Caring" (developing new feelings, interests, values) and "Human Dimension" (learning about oneself, others). To cite just one example, many students while analysing the interviews they conducted noted the revelatory moments such as "this interview helped me better understand my sister and other people who suffer from depression" or "I knew that my mother did not graduate from high school but I had no idea how deeply she regrets the lost opportunities."¹³ The MoL ODEP also responds in a number of ways to the "Learning How to Learn" category (becoming a better student, a self-directed learner, inquiring about a subject). For instance, students who choose to revise their work throughout the semester learn to incorporate constructive critique, anticipate objections, and build on their existing strengths as writers and thinkers. As we have mentioned earlier, through ODEP, there is an opportunity for willing, caring students to revise their work for the website or the game. Students thus learn to recognize the difference between a good paper in a course and a publishable paper. This lengthy yet fruitful process maintains students' interest and provides a structure for acquiring self-directed learning skills.

While there are many more parallels between MoL ODEP activities and SL categories, their detailed exposition lies beyond the scope of this paper. Concluding our discussion of Fink's taxonomy we suggest that with the proper application of the ODEP framework, the idea of "integrated course design," central to Fink's system, would take on a new dimension. Take, for example, the two digital components of the *Meaning of Life* project—the website and the game. They are not just auxiliary tools or fancy supplements. Both are designed and maintained as vehicles of a comprehensive, "active" learning experience. Intertwined with course activities and assignments, they serve many purposes: from stimulating interest to fostering students' sense of agency.

Meaning of life ODEP: Future trajectories

Seminars for Freshmen. The pilot version of the course in Spring 2014 was a 200-level general humanities course. In Fall 2014 the *Meaning of Life* was offered as a Seminar for Freshmen and will likely continue in this format in the future. Certain freshman-specific challenges are to be expected: students' level of academic preparedness, emotional maturity, lack of experience with

¹³ For the purposes of this paper, students' testimonies are slightly modified aiming at the overall picture. The actual interviews with students' post-interview reflections can be found at : <http://meaningoflife.cherkasova.org/course-materials/student-work/crisis-of-meaning-interview/>

college life and its daily demands, etc. Yet there are also unique opportunities: at Suffolk University, Seminars for Freshmen are especially well-suited for building an intellectual community because the instructor serves as a guide to college life in general as well as an academic advisor for all students enrolled in the course.

Through ODEP activities, freshmen meet and cooperate with other students and alumni who share their interests (website editors, game designers, research and teaching assistants). In advising sessions, supported by the website resources, students learn about specialized areas of study they may wish to explore in the future. Finally, those freshmen who choose to stay in touch and/or contribute to the project after the course is over are likely to create meaningful generational ties with incoming students, upper-classmen, and alumni. They are also prime candidates for participation in a longitudinal study of ODEP effectiveness, if such a study were to be conducted.

The Website. We will continue to feature student work and integrate it with class discussions, activities, and assignments. We plan to explore opportunities for collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines who address MoL themes in their classes and/or in their practice. For example, the idea of the *Crisis of Meaning Interview* can be expanded to include conversations with professionals who assist people in existential crises—psychotherapists, social workers, philosophical counsellors and others.

The website team will invite original publications and solicit feedback from readers. As in the past, we will offer interested students and alumni the opportunity to volunteer as website editors, moderators and web designers, depending on their skills and expertise. While we will continue to rely on volunteers we also plan to apply for external funding to support project related activities.

The Game. All aspects of the game, including its conceptual and visual structure, will continue to be open to revisions by project participants. At the present time, *Vixi: A Master's Way* functions as a simple click-to-go interface with regular content updates. Speculating from an empirical finding that “technological advancement increased participants’ sense of presence, involvement, and physiological and self-reported arousal” (Ivory & Kalyanaraman 2007, p. 532), we assume that a more technologically advanced version of *Vixi* will show increases in educational benefit.

There may be a chance to test this hypothesis if we succeed in securing additional funding for future game development. Currently the project depends fully on the enthusiastic work of volunteers. We have begun to explore possibilities for partnership with professional designers and game developers interested in serious games.

We are excited to share some preliminary results of the ODEP framework and implementation with educators and educational theorists. We are also very interested in a further discussion of the theoretical aspects of the Open Dynamic Educational Project, its definition and potential applications. In this article we focused exclusively on an ODEP as it applies to the humanities in general and to the *Big Questions* courses in particular. If the model described here proves to be beneficial to some courses in the humanities, as we believe it will, perhaps in the future it can also be adapted to other educational contexts.

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