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CS 6460: Educational Technology: Assignment 1b

(or, “And now for something completely different…”)

As I mentioned in my statement of purpose, I have long been interested in online education and particularly asynchronous and/or student-paced online education – in fact, my application to the OMSCS program was directly inspired by my curiosity about where it, and other programs like it, would lead.

I have also long been interested in graduate school.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, until recently, I didn’t perceive much overlap between the two. Like many casual observers of online education, I assumed that sense of intellectual immersion and community one derives from being physically present in a university could not or would not be replicated in an online environment.

My actual experiences in the OMSCS have made me rethink this. In this program so far I’ve felt a much stronger kinship with my classmates and colleagues than I did at any time during my undergraduate education and previous graduate work. In practice, the global nature of the program has meant that I have 24/7 access to advice and moral support. The size of the community and the breadth of its interests and experience mean that I have many natural collaborators, and the asynchronous nature of the Internet and our channels for communication (mainly unofficial) means that I’m much more aware of others who share my research focus.

Uncovering these facts prompted me to wonder whether, perhaps, the research component associated with a traditional graduate program could also be introduced into the OMSCS. Conventionally, online Master’s degrees are coursework-focused, on the theory that true collaborative research is difficult to carry out at a distance. (Scale also plays a major role, as many professional Master’s programs, even if not quite as large as the OMSCS, enroll a much larger number of students than the traditional graduate programs at these same universities. In these scenarios the standard mentorship model, where a faculty member intensively works with and guides each student, is untenable.) But what if we could design a mentorship model suitable for this and other large programs?

**Communities of practice**

The intellectual context…

[summary of Wenger, etc.]

**Community in the OMSCS**

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**Collaboration and mentorship at a distance**

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**Future directions**

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**Reading and resources**

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1. The 3-hour Director’s Cut of my personal statement included a section on this and on why I chose to go into industry, rather than pursuing my original dream of a PhD in Computer Science. But you’re probably better off not slogging through that. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)