

# Crowd-authoring: The art and politics of engaging 101 authors of educational technology



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## ABSTRACT

Large-scale knowledge sharing and social networking have become fashionable in academic circles, yet without systematic interest in a large-scale authorship approach. The present article addresses this by proposing what could be called ‘crowd-authoring’ – an approach in which a global group of academics work together to co-author a manuscript. It addresses the following question: To what extent is it technically and politically feasible to bring together an international crowd of academics to author an article? It reports on an experiment wherein 101 scholars of education and technology spread across the globe collaborated in three rounds via email to write a 9000-word manuscript. Despite the technical challenges and the political tensions among the authors, it was found that crowd-authoring could be put into practice. The recommendation is therefore that funding agencies should sponsor an intercontinental group of academics to form an ‘assembly of authoring’, the task of which is to constantly compose authoritative articles on a regular basis. Such an assembly of authoring could, moreover, be funded to develop into an ‘assembly of action’, with its members explicitly seeking to bring about changes and social interventions.

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## 1. Introduction

This article lies at the intersection of the sociology and philosophy of social sciences. It is structured around a theoretical proposition showing a positive relationship between the quantity of authors and the quality of the authored manuscript, in that, if the number of authors increases, the value of the authored article improves. Hence, this article proposes ‘crowd-authoring’ – an approach wherein a global pool of scholars work together to compile an article. This developmental idea came about in response to the various recent attempts at promoting crowd-based approaches, encouraging wide collective participation in the constitution of societies and their activities (Prpic & Shukla, 2013). An example in this respect is ‘crowd-sourcing’, which is a method of gaining desired services, thoughts or knowledge by soliciting contributions from the public (Estellés-Arolas & González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012). Wikis are another similar notion, in the form of web applications enabling the collaborative adjustment, extension and omission of content and its configuration (Tapscott & Williams, 2008). The concept of ‘citizen science’, likewise, encourages the participation of the public in scholarly work (Hand, 2010). Crowd-

funding similarly gives value to a mass collective input, referring to the practice of funding a scheme by raising monetary contributions from the public (Belleflamme, Lambert, & Schwienbacher, 2013). Whereas ‘crowd-learning’ (Kalisz, 2015) is about ‘learning together’, crowd-authoring is about ‘authoring together’ – and indeed ‘authoring together’ can lead to ‘learning together’ and leaning from one another. Another crowd-based approach is collaborative fiction, a type of composition by a set of authors sharing creative control of a story, resulting in ‘marriage of minds’ (McGoldrick, 2000). Crowdcity is also a social innovation platform that enables organisations to work together to tap into the power of their crowds, connecting with the knowledge and experience of a cross-section of people to discover new ideas, new perspectives, insights and opportunities and to address the unique challenges they face. Bearing these notions and ideas in mind, there seems to have been a tendency (and moreover movement) towards ‘crowd capital’ in various aspects of life (Leadbeater, 2009; Prpic & Shukla, 2013) – and yet academic fields and their methodologies remain behind in this respect. It seems timely to introduce crowd-based approaches to academic fields given that academics have advised and encouraged their ‘clients’ and wider society to engage in crowd-based approaches despite these academics having not implemented these approaches in their own field, including their authoring activities (Al Lily, 2016). This is when crowd-authoring

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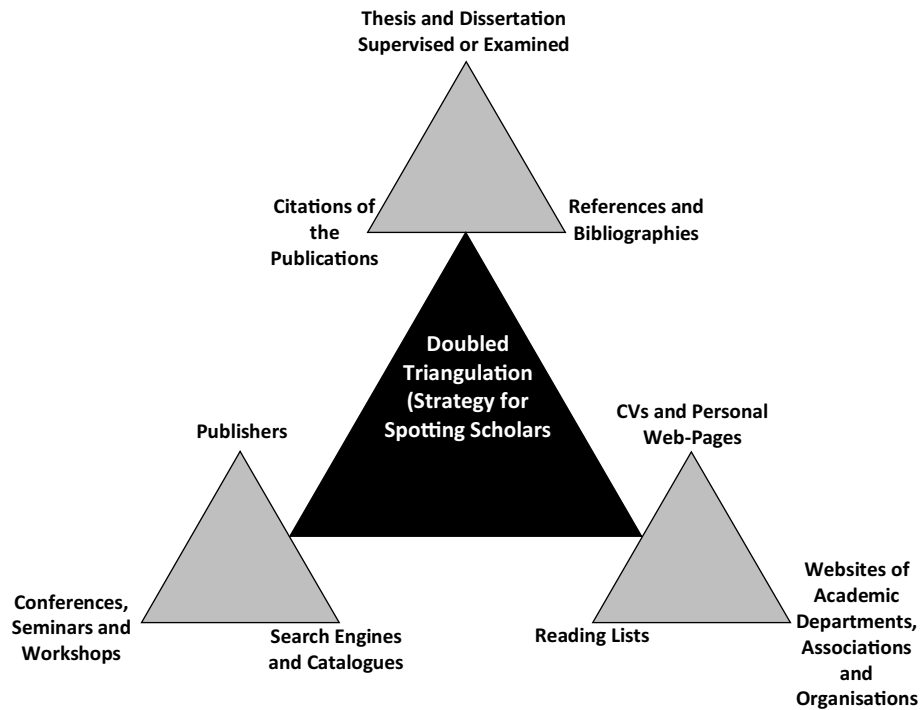


Fig. 1. A Strategy for Spotting Scholars within a Particular Academic Domain.

becomes of the essence. The term ‘crowd’ refers to ‘any group of people who can act collectively to make decisions and solve problems’ (Kalisz, 2015, p. 55).

## 2. Rationale

This article is concerned with two particular issues: the quantity of authors and the quality of the authored publication. Some aspects of the literature argue for a positive association between such matters, implying that the more writers are involved, the greater the academic quality of the written article. Galbraith (1967), for example, speaks of ‘collective intelligence’, showing that, when a larger number of intellectuals become involved in a single project, the final outcome is more likely to be superior. On the other hand, however, other components of the literature argue the opposite; the more authors there are, the poorer the quality of the authored publication is. For example, the psychological concept of Groupthink (cf. Whyte, Fortune, March 1952) refers to a psychological phenomenon happening within a group of individuals, in which the desire for harmony or conformity in the group can bring about irrational or dysfunctional decisions and results. That said, Janis (1972) remarks that, if psychological phenomena (e.g. Groupthink) are carefully addressed, the quantity of contributors and the quality of the final outcome will become positively related. Bearing this remark of Janis in mind, a theoretical proposition could be that, with effective management of psychological phenomena or any other managerial, administrative, social, cultural and political phenomena, crowd-authoring could result in high-quality articles that are superior to those articles with a limited number of co-authors. This theoretical proposition may be no surprise for the reader, but what should be surprising is that, despite the value of this proposition, it has not been applied to academic authorship, despite academics having long insisted on a collective approach to authorship (e.g. Newman, 2001; Zervas, Tsitmidelli, Sampson, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2014).

## 3. Conceptual framework

The theoretical framework of this project is based on an epistemological stance, focusing as it does on knowledge. In this article, the academic world is viewed through the lens of social constructionism, emphasising the value of developing jointly constructed academic understandings of the world and its various issues (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Kelly believes that scholarship ‘is a collective action, and the emergent intelligence of shared knowledge is often superior to even a million individuals’ (p. 93). The greater the pool of co-authors, the smarter the manuscript gets. This article helps encourage ‘authoring collectivism’ in the social sciences, laying emphasis on the interdependence of every academic authoring activity (cf. Triandis, 2001). However, any attempt to introduce authoring collectivism to academia means helping bring about a historic and historical alteration in the academic parameters of the social sciences, which have long been associated with ‘authoring hyper-individualism’ (Cooper & Scott, 2013). Despite its problems, academia remains a model of the democratic system in some ways, as it at least still grants its core professionals a reasonably high level of autonomy. It is when authoring collectivism has to be coordinated beyond small teams that the real struggle seems to occur. Although Cohen and March (1974) were writing in the 1970s, their words seem to be applicable to academia today: ‘anything that requires the coordinated effort of the organisation in order to start is unlikely to be started, and anything that requires a co-ordinated effort of the organisation in order to be stopped is unlikely to be stopped’ (1974: 206). In academia, organisation is always disorganisation. This is not to say that academia is unskilled in creating theoretical knowledge on democratic collectivism, but rather that it is unable to apply this knowledge and thus democratic authoring collectivism in relation to scholarship (Cornford & Pollock, 2003; Garvin, 1993). This is perhaps because, although academic institutions are places that the outside world needs for expertise, they are ‘notoriously weak in applying advanced knowledge to their own organisation and procedures’ (Hammond et al., 1992, p. 161).

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