

# ds106: Not a Course, Not Like Any MOOC

Looking for something different from the current hysteria of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)? A digital storytelling course started by Jim Groom at the University of Mary Washington (UMW), ds106 was set loose as an open course in January 2011 (<http://ds106.us/>). Yet the UMW catalog does not include such a course. Its actual course designation is CPSC 106 (Computer Science)—a small but telling example of how ds106 plays with and questions the norm.

Most classes in digital storytelling revolve around the personal video narrative form as popularized by the Center for Digital Storytelling (<http://www.storycenter.org/>). But ds106 storytelling explores the web as a culture, as a media source, and as a place to publish in the open. Not claiming to authoritatively define digital storytelling, ds106 is a constant process of *questioning* digital storytelling. Is an animated GIF a story? What does it mean to put “fast food” in the hands of Internet pioneers? Why would we mess with the MacGuffin? Is everything a remix? Though this is perhaps simply semantic word-play, ds106 is not just “on” the web—it is “of” the web.

Characteristic of ds106 is its distributed structure, mimicking the Internet itself, and its open-source non-LMS platform. Students are charged with registering their own domain, managing their own personal cyberinfrastructure, and publishing to their own website. Via the WordPress plugin FeedWordPress, all content from students is automatically aggregated to the main ds106 site—but all links go back directly to the students’ sites.

What do students get out of this? Colin Schulz, a former UMW student, explains:

Going into DS106, I had extensive knowledge of computer programming but did not understand how to implement my programming skills with web design. By managing and creating our own blogs on the WordPress platform in ds106, I successfully learned about the WordPress platform and web design.

The summer following successfully completing the course, I interned for a company. One of my tasks was to simply put language into a newly created website that was not launched but was successfully built by a professional web developer.

Within the first week of doing minor fixes to the new website, I was asked to restart the process from scratch and fully design and develop them a new website by myself. The skills I obtained from participating in ds106 allowed me to

finish the website in a month, and since then it’s been fully launched.

The idea to open up ds106 followed the lead of the first course to be called (by Bryan Alexander and Dave Cormier) a “MOOC”: the 2008 “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge” (CCK08) course taught by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. Open participants in ds106 can choose to use any blog platform, which is then subscribed to by the ds106 site. Other institutions teaching related courses connected their students into the flow of ds106: Temple University in Japan, York College (CUNY), SUNY Cortland, Kansas State University, Kennesaw State University. At any one time, the ds106 site includes overlapping work of students at UMW, students at these other institutions, and people who are just following along. Thus ds106 is more *community* than *course*.

In its present incarnation at UMW, ds106 stands apart from the current crop of MOOCs in several ways:

- *There are no video lectures.* Assignments are published weekly, including a mix of readings, videos, and creative work.
- *There is no concept of dropping out.* The structure of ds106 allows open participants to tune in only to parts they care about. One such participant, Emily Strong (<http://erstrongds106.wordpress.com/>), shares: “I’ve heard before that practicing creativity regularly makes you more creative, and from participating in DS 106 I have to say that this is absolutely true. Between daily creates and projects from the assignment bank, I am constantly creating things, and I find myself taking more creative approaches to everything else in my life, from approaching problems at work to noticing the interesting angles and textures of a room.”
- *The experience for open participants need not be the same as that for enrolled students.* Most MOOCs aim to create the same experience for all participants; in ds106, open participants create their own pathways.
- *Massive is about impact more than numbers.* Open participants add value to the experience for enrolled students. They offer ideas and constructive feedback and are often active members of UMW students’ group projects. Regarding numbers, the ds106 website currently subscribes to 620 blogs and has aggregated 23,000 external posts since January 2011. More than 800 people have published at least one item to ds106, with some of them having published hundreds.
- *ds106 offers no certificates or badges.* People join out of their own interest or just to be part of a community. Open par-



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ticipant Margaret Herrick (<http://margaretherrick.com/blog/>) notes: “ds106 has given me the conviction that I, at 72, can make videos that tell my story beautifully, thoughtfully, and truthfully. The community aspect gives me the security that, no [matter] how busy I am with other things, I can always ‘drop into’ ds106 and continue to learn more.”

- *ds106 is truly open.* Course materials are not behind a login, nor are they ever deleted. The main channel of communication is not a discussion board but is via the #ds106 hashtag in Twitter.
- *Versions of ds106 push the boundaries of the class itself as a narrative.* The 2011 “Summer of Oblivion” included the disappearance of an eccentric professor who banished students, resulting in a class “rebellion.” The following year, Camp Magic Macguffin (<http://magicmacguffin.info/>) operated as a virtual happy summer camp metaphor—where things were not *exactly* what they seemed.

Thus ds106 is neither a product nor a magic bullet to “fix” education. But within ds106 are applicable attributes that can be used elsewhere:

- The Assignment Collection (<http://assignments.ds106.us/>) includes over 500 creative activities, all contributed by participants. Rather than being assigned specific tasks, UMW students are assigned, say, 15 stars of Audio Assignments (stars being a crowdsourced difficulty rating). Students are free to choose the challenges that appeal to them. Via tags, the work that students publish for a particular assignment are linked from the original assignment as an example for others to see.
- The Daily Create (<http://tdc.ds106.us/>) provides a regular dose of creative challenges in the areas of photography, drawing, audio, video, or writing. Designed to take 20 minutes or less, responses are shared via flickr, YouTube, or SoundCloud with specific tags that allow them to be syndicated back to the main site.
- Participants in ds106 nominate work of others as “inspiring” to a “best of ds106” collection called in[SPIRE] (<http://inspire.ds106.us>), itself a project designed by Spring 2012 UMW students Linda McKenna and Rachel McGuirk.
- Many advised us that for ds106 to be an open course, we needed to hold synchronous events in a webinar environment—to us, a space that has not evolved significantly since the 1990s. But ds106 came up with something different: an open, free-form Internet radio station (<http://ds106.us/ds106-radio/>). The class uses the radio station for live broadcasts of audio projects and for bringing in guest experts. However, as a resource, it is open for other educators to explore the potential of live audio streams. Open participants created tutorials for each other, and the power of live audio has been elevated by mobile apps that allow live broadcasts.

The web syndication structure of the course is not limited to ds106. The same platform was deployed in a Fall 2012 open online course in Entrepreneurship in Education (<http://www.edstartup.net/>) and in Project Community, a course offered by the Hague University of Applied Sciences (<http://projectcommunity.info/>). Similar functionality is provided by gRSShopper (<http://grsshopper.downes.ca>), developed by Stephen Downes for a number of the Connectivist-style MOOCs.

One last characteristic of ds106 is that it is not supported by millions of dollars of investment money. Though the course started at the University of Mary Washington, ds106 truly belongs to its community. Hosted externally, the ds106 website is supported by its participants via a 2012 Kickstarter campaign (<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/jimgroom/ds106-the-open-online-community-of-digital-storyte>).

No one claims ownership of ds106. Its success can be traced to innovation supported by the University of Mary Washington and carried out by the UMW Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies (DTLT) and to the vision of former UMW leaders Gardner Campbell and Chip German and DTLT team members: Jim Groom, who crafted much of the spirit and drive of ds106; Martha Burtis, who built many of the key web pieces (and has taught the class); and Tim Owens, who shaped the design and functionality of the sites. But the contributions extend further. UMW student Aaron Clemmer built a twitter bot that updates the current content on ds106 radio, itself a contribution of open participant Grant Potter (University of Northern British Columbia). From Scotland, John Johnston has created storytelling tools (e.g., <http://johnjohnston.info/blog/?e=2264>) that emerged from experiments in ds106 assignments. We lack enough space to list *everyone* who has contributed to ds106!

How can you be a part of ds106? We’ve seen K–12 teachers tap into specific tasks from the Assignment Collection. Others make use of the Daily Create or just the radio station. The value of comments on participants’ blogs can never be overlooked. And we will set up syndication for anyone who is teaching a “ds106-ish” class in 2013 (<http://ds106.us/teaching-ds106/>) and who wants to integrate the class into the ds106 site and community.

Much more than a course, ds106 is an experiment in the shape and potential of open education. ■

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