Chapter 82
The Human Element MOOC

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ABSTRACT

The Human Element Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on the Canvas open network was designed to be a connectivist experience exploring methods for the humanization of online education. This MOOC introduced and discussed methods that faculty could adopt in order to potentially increase instructor presence, social presence, and cognitive presence within their own online courses. The design of the MOOC and the learners' perceptions of social presence after taking part in this MOOC are discussed in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is not new. Students have been learning online for decades (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Harasim, 1990). Today, millions of students are taking at least one online course each year (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Lokken & Mullins, 2014). However, despite the growing popularity of online learning during the past decade, it took the emergence of massive open online courses, better known as MOOCs, and companies like Coursera, EdX, and Udacity to make online learning front page news.

The increased interest in MOOCs though has caused more confusion than clarity; many people now incorrectly assume that MOOCs are representative of all online courses (Farmer, 2013). While there are many different types of online courses (Lowenthal, Wilson, & Parrish, 2009), for-credit asynchronous online courses are the most popular type of online course and they differ from MOOCs in a number of ways. For instance, for-credit asynchronous online courses are usually not massive, open, or as video-centric as a typical MOOC. But even MOOCs themselves vary in important ways (Daniel, 2012; Kernohan, 2013). For instance, connectivist MOOCs, called cMOOCs, strive to place the learner at the center of the learning experience and therefore differ in important ways from MOOCs offered by companies like Coursera that focus on designing courses around famous content experts (Stevens, 2013). Despite

important differences, people too often assume that all MOOCs are the same. During 2012 and much of 2013, MOOCs were praised by the media for their ability to transform higher education (Baggaley, 2013; van den Berg & Crawley, 2013). As the glorification of MOOCs increased, others pushed back pointing out perceived shortcomings of MOOCs such as their low retention numbers, lack of discourse, lack of business model, and lack of connection to an institution's strategic goals (Kim, 2012; Koller, Ng, Do, & Chen, 2013).

Aware of the purported strengths and weaknesses of MOOCs, some colleagues and I (the first author) set forth to develop a MOOC of our own. We strongly believed that there are both good and bad online courses (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; Young & Norgard, 2006). One thing that often separates a good online course though from a bad one is an active, caring, present instructor who has not forgotten the importance of the human touch (Bergman, 2011; Pacansky-Brock, 2014). Given this, we set forth to develop a MOOC as a professional development experience that would help educators learn different strategies to humanize online learning. Our MOOC was called *The Human Element: An Essential Online Course Component* and was designed around the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The course was hosted on the Canvas Open Network and utilized tools both within Canvas' Learning Management System (LMS) and external to it; Canvas was chosen to host *The Human Element* MOOC largely because of its ability to integrate external tools through Learning Tool Interoperability (LTI). In this chapter we describe the MOOC we developed and how we leveraged technology with a human purpose into a large enrollment course and the participants' experiences learning about the human element in a MOOC.

BACKGROUND

Students regularly report feeling isolated and alone when taking online courses (Bischoff, 2000; Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). This potential problem is amplified in MOOCs where there are hundreds, if not thousands, of learners (Baggaley, 2013). Connectivism and specifically cMOOCs though have the potential to address this problem of isolation by putting the learner in the center of the learning experience. So rather than put the instructor in the center, cMOOCs strive to integrate instructional strategies that connect learners with each other in meaningful and authentic ways (Stewart, 2013), which can in turn reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. In the following sections, we briefly describe connectivism and the CoI framework in an effort to provide context for *The Human Element* MOOC and a rationale for why we believed we could create an environment where learners could not only learn about the human element but also experience it first-hand.

Connectivism and cMOOCs

Connectivism is a theory of learning developed by Siemens (2004, 2005a) and Downes (2012). Connectivism, according to Downes (2012) posits "that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (p. 9). While some argue that connectivism is not a new theory of learning and instead simply builds upon previous theories of learning (e.g., social constructivism, activity theory, situated cognition) (Dron, 2014; Kop & Hill, 2008), we, like Siemens (2005b), find that viewing learning as a network creation process:

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