

DELIVERING A MOOC USING A SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE: THE SMOOC DESIGN MODEL

Nathaniel Ostashevski
Curtin University
Perth, Western Australia, Australia

Doug Reid
Grant MacEwan University
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT

This paper articulates a design model for a SMOOC or Social networking site situated MOOC. A noncredit open online course entitled Social Media Tools and Supporting Your Professional Learning (AUSMT) is one example of a SMOOC that the researchers have designed and delivered. The course was delivered within a social networking site (SNS) group and the learning activities utilized social media tools for content delivery and student engagement. A secondary outcome of the course is a persistent “group” repository of resources and activities for students who have access to the specific SNS. The AUSMT course can be characterized as a type of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) as it has similar organization and delivery of learner activities/engagement. Developed using the Networked Learning Framework (NLF), this course is an example of an implementation that makes use of a SNS “group” as an organizational structure and virtual meeting place for learners. One challenge identified in the literature with respect to MOOCs is the lack of control that may be needed for pedagogical or organizational reasons. The SMOOC model addresses this challenge and provides other benefits which make the concept useable in more formalized learning. Additional research detailing the specific student activities and resources resulting in student learning in a SMOOC, as well as how these can be assessed for more formalized learning are topics identified for future research.

KEYWORDS

AUSMT, MOOC, Networked, Social, networking, group

1. INTRODUCTION

The AUSMT course was constructed and delivered in an “open” group of a university social networking site (SNS). Open group, in this instance, refers to the SNS participants ability to self-enroll or join the group space without any additional intervention of the group creator or administrator. The SNS in this particular case is a modified ELGG implementation being supported by the research and development arm of a distance education university. ELGG (Curverider, 2011) is an open source social networking engine that is modifiable to incorporate any number of social media tools to provide a customized social network. The AUSMT course development included the use of social media tools available within the customized SNS such as: profiles, groups, discussion threads, image and file sharing, a microblogging tool, blogs, wiki pages, and social bookmarking. In addition to the tools within the university SNS, other social media tools were utilized in the delivery. These external tools were Twitter and YouTube. The AUSMT was constructed to be delivered within a group in the SNS, and remains as an open repository of learning activities and artifacts for students.

2. LITERATURE

According to the 2010, 2011, and 2012 Horizon Reports, over the next several years the use of technology for learning will become more learner controlled, collaborative, and utilize online relationships as well as online resources. These reports also point out that economic factors and new models of education are bringing increased pressure to the way that educational institutions deliver education to their students (Johnson et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2011; Johnson, Adams, & Cummins, 2012). One of these new models of education is the Massive Online Open Course or MOOC that is beginning to evolve from early models to more corporate and institutionalized versions (Sharples et al., 2012). According to the New York Times (Lewin, 2012) MOOCs are part of a dramatic shift in online education and they have the potential to perhaps revolutionize how formalized education is delivered. However, another newspaper (Vaidhyanathan, 2012) reports that MOOCs represent a step backwards in terms of online learning with videos and online quizzes being the predominant form allowing for the massive scale of these courses, and that no real “learning” occurs. Regardless of the popular view, it appears that in order for MOOCs to make any contribution to online education, much more research around design, delivery, and assessment possible in MOOCs needs to be undertaken. This paper is a contribution to the discussion of how SNS situated MOOCs or SMOOCs can be designed and could be a model used in formal or institutional learning delivery.

The AUSMT course was designed and delivered using the Networked Learning Framework (Ostashewski & Reid, 2010), and can be characterized as a MOOC, according to McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, and Cormier’s 2010 definition:

“A MOOC is an online course with the option of free and open registration, a publicly shared curriculum, and open-ended outcomes. MOOCs integrate social networking, accessible online resources, and are facilitated by leading practitioners in the field of study. Most significantly, MOOCs build on the engagement of learners who self-organize their participation according to their learning goals, prior knowledge and skills, and common interests.” (McAuley et al., 2010)

This definition of a MOOC does not encompass all models and deliveries of massive open online courses such as the Stanford AI course or Coursera/EDx models.

Two current types of MOOCs have been differentiated by Rodriguez (2012); the AI-Stanford MOOC, and the Connectivist MOOC (c-MOOC). Both types of MOOCs share some similar features; are potentially available to hundreds or thousands of learners, are open and free to participate in, involve experts in the topic of study, progress over a series of weeks. Major differences are in the role of the teacher and the view of knowledge and learning. The AI-Stanford MOOC adopts a traditional cognitive-behaviorist lecture and knowledge dissemination approach to learning and in some sense only provides a scalable digitized version of traditional learning. However the c-MOOC adopts a connectivist learning approach that is personalized, encourages divergent and creative thinking, and the participation of learners is “based on connection, collaboration, and sharing” (Rodriguez, 2012).

George Siemens (2012), one of the originators of the Connectivist style of MOOCs, described eight features that make the c-MOOC distinct. A c-MOOC is characterized by the following features:

1. Connectivist in nature where knowledge is distributed and that learning is the process of navigating, growing and pruning connections.
2. Knowledge is generative as opposed to replicative as in the AI-MOOC model which results in learners creating and sharing digital artifacts.
3. Coherence (of the topic being studied) is learner formed as a result of the learner exploring the topic and related domains of knowledge - as opposed to an instructor controlling what materials will be explored in the study of the topic.
4. Interactions are distributed across the networks and tools employed.
5. Synchronization of learners and their knowledge is facilitated by all those participating.
6. Resonance or “idea collision as innovation” with other learners occurs.
7. Innovation & impact focused.
8. Fostering self-regulated learners.

Another key descriptor of the c-MOOCs that Dron (2012) points out as a significant difference is with respect to the role of the instructor: “It is about recognition that the ‘instructor’ is a co-traveller on the learning journey who might have a particular sense of direction, but is not a traditional guide on the side.”

3. THE SMOOC

The AUSMT course described in this paper is of the c-MOOC type sharing several similar features with that model of open online course. While the AUSMT does not follow to all of Siemens (2012) eight identified characteristics of a connectivist MOOC, such as coherence of topic being studied, that may be a result of the designers (authors of this paper) needing to present a particular goal or outcome for the course to potential participants. Furthermore the designers acknowledge that the creation of the AUSMT course followed their own participation in a MOOC-like course delivered by George Siemens six months prior to the development of the AUSMT course. The authors' experiences as participants of the "Teaching and Learning in Social Networks" (TLSTLN) professional development course presented by Siemens were used as a starting point for the creation of the AUSMT course. The TLSTLN experience resonated with the authors, who had worked as instructional designers, educators, and multimedia developers in the past, and development of another professional learning course with a slightly different implementation was envisioned. The AUSMT course was designed as a result of discussions and previous trials of the authors' fields of research which include online education, authentic professional development, collaboration, and effective multimedia design.

The learning design and structure of the AUSMT Course followed previous c-MOOC like organization and delivery. Additionally the course included scaffolding activities to support novice users of social media tools and to encourage experienced users of the tools to contribute with their expertise. The AUSMT course was delivered over eleven weeks with eight weeks of interactions being delivered over that timeline. Typical presentation during a week included activities following the cycle of student engagement described in the Networked Learning Framework; engagement, exploration, discussion, and creation. Initially students were engaged in the topic with a weekly video clip presenting the topic using an "interest-grabbing" conversation between the two instructors. These video clips can be found on YouTube by searching for the AUSMT tag line. Following the weekly video clip was engagement with the research literature, that presented some expertise for students to explore and contextualize the topic being presented that week. Next exploration by the students of the topic and some discussion about that exploration was asked for. A final creation or active participation in a collaborative activity completed the activities around the weekly topic. The learning experience was designed to allow students to often self-select activities from two or more choices – one set of activities for students new to the topic, and another set for students who were already experienced in the weekly topic. The weekly video prepared by the facilitators were not only used to create instructor presence, but to also connect each of the weekly activities to the *theme* that was threaded throughout the course.

Two characteristics of the AUSMT course have potential application for supporting MOOCs as delivery models by education institutions. The first characteristic is a design characteristic described as the SNS *group* or the "S" component of the SMOOC. Adding the SNS group as an organizational structure to the c-MOOC model that Siemens has articulated provides a potential solution for the use of the MOOC structure within formalized learning delivery. In a SMOOC, all of the learning activities start and end with some form of engagement or interaction within the SNS group space. For learners with novice social media or online learning skills – this returning to the group space provides a starting point and "sense of meeting place" where the educational activity is centered. This kind of potential use of a SNS group has been pointed out previously by Dron and Anderson (2007) where they identified how the group structure could be used to support formal learning. They pointed out that the group structure within a social networking mashup such as Ning, ELGG, or Facebook could be used to support the following kinds of formal learning requirements:

1. Activity - Collaborative Projects
2. Common social Tools - Threaded discussion, Chats
3. Goals - Accreditation formal learning
4. Time Frame - Semester
5. Commitment to participate - High often assessed
6. Motivation to Contribute - External
7. Metaphor - "Virtual classroom"
8. Expectation for Help - High, often mutual dependence
9. Forms of communication - One to one, one to some, some to many, some to some (Dron and Anderson, 2007)

This list of features are the type of supports that the group structure provided for the AUSMT activities, allowing learners to forage off in the extended network and collective to return to the group space to share what they have found or learned.

The second characteristic of the AUSMT course design that has potential for supporting a SMOOCs is best described with an analogy that is able to contextualize the role of the instructor(s). While the instructor role is not exactly a design feature, planned interactions by the instructor are, and that is what is being referred to in this description. The analogy is between a SMOOC and a city tour. A city tour is available and promoted to tourists when they visit cities around the world. A city tour typically requires the following: a bus, a driver, a tour guide who provides details about points of interest during the tour, and tourists along for the ride. In a SMOOC, the tour bus is the social networking site group space and the tour guide is the instructor. This group space provides the tourists with a common and recognizable place to meet and be transported by during the tour. Inside the tour bus (the SNS group) tourists often discuss and share their experiences with each other, perhaps resulting in tourists gaining additional understandings and experiences of the city they are touring. In a city tour, the tour guide has developed a rough schedule of the points and places of interest to explore as the bus moves throughout the city. At various points in the tour, the bus stops and tourists are provided instructions by the tour guide on what is interesting to explore on foot, how long the tourists have at that particular stop in the tour, and the time of departure to the next stop on the bus tour. Similarly, the instructor or “educational tour guide” in a SMOOC plans out the stops, provides guidance to learners, and then sends learners out to explore the topic – with the reminder to return to the SNS group to get back on the bus in time to continue. Sharing with and supporting other tourists is encouraged by the tour guide, as this is what makes a bus tour even more memorable for the tourists. This cycle of travel – stop and explore – rejoin the bus – and then travel again - continues until the end of the city tour is reached. The analogy of a SMOOC being a city tour with the instructor as tour guide highlights how the role of instructor is different than that of a lecturer or knowledge disseminator. As well the role is different than that of a “guide on the side” because learners are provided with instructions and then sent out to explore, find, and return to share and create “memories” with others on the tour bus. This description and analogy are of potential value to designers and developers of SMOOCs in the future – as the role and tasks of tour guides provide some starting point for understanding the role that Dron (2012) pointed out as “co-traveller” with learners.

4. CONCLUSION

Connectivism is a pedagogical approach that has been described as having significant potential for technology and social media supported learning in both formal and informal cases (Siemens & Conole, 2011). The c-MOOC model is one model conceptualized for supporting connectivist learning, but they are significant challenges that need to be addressed before adoption can progress. Anderson and Dron (2012) have pointed out that in order for the potential of connectivism for learning to be realized and capitalized on, there is a “clear need for a richer means of establishing both networked and personal learning environments that offer control when needed in both pedagogical and organizational terms.”

For institutions that are looking at the c-MOOC model of delivery as a potential way to engage students there are both significant benefits and risks. Connecting international learners, promotion of an institutional brand, sharing of knowledge around the world, and providing for new kinds of online networked learning experiences are some notable benefits. Risks are around “open” resources, return on development costs, controls of learner engagement, assessment and tracking of learners, and scalability of interactions. Some of these risks could be mitigated using organizational and structural management tools for the delivery of MOOCs and tools such as learning analytics. The SMOOC model presented in this paper is a potential solution for some of the issues and challenges which make the c-MOOC model more palatable for institutional learning delivery. Additional research detailing the specific student activities and resources resulting in student learning in a SMOOC, as well as how these can be assessed for more formalized learning are topics identified for future research.

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