

Pedagogical Strategies for Creating an Online Community

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Abstract. Social learning in MOOCs is synonymous with information-overload and can result in bad learning experiences. This is the case when thousands of learners engage in a discussion forum with many entries and long threads. The forums are challenging to engage in for learners and overwhelming to moderate for educators. These factors cause difficulties when trying to establish a well-working community of practice and can in fact discourage effective online learning. To meet this challenge, MOOCs are often designed to be self-directed, meaning that educators are released from taking responsibility for the social learning processes in the forums. Instead, educators have a digital presence in videos and are actively involved in the instructional design, which can be an effective online pedagogical strategy to fertilize social learning in open online courses and create the illusion of being seen as a student. Therefore, this short paper reports from an educator's experiences when organizing an online course where such pedagogical strategies were enacted in a prepaid online course. The educator had a significant online presence and deployed a variety of online pedagogical strategies to create community awareness of the learning content in an online course about digitalization and its impact on society at large.

Keywords: Community, social learning, online strategies, Nordic

1 Introduction and background for the short paper

There is little doubt that formal learning in manageable groups on campus constitutes well-functioning environment for social learning and that the educator is central to the learners' motivation, resilience and progress in a formal learning processes. However, with the arrival of MOOCs, access to knowledge, non-formal learning can be self-organized and networked across platforms designed for social interaction. One attempt at describing this move is Connectivism, a learning "theory" for the digital age. A connectivist approach to digital learning assumes a number of learning principles, but stresses that learning happens in social interaction in nodes within and across social networks [1]. Also, it is claimed that digital technologies provide opportunities for learning to be organized in personal learning networks [2].

However, in the emerging plethora of writings on connectivism, educational theorists fail to grasp the importance of the practical and underlying organizing apparatus in which networked learning takes place. Today, it is not uncommon for

learners to interact across several platforms designed for social learning. But, organizing oneself for social learning in learning environments comes with a significant catch; learners are faced with organizing their social learning experience against a fragmented digital worksurface characterized by information-overload. Similarly, educators must organize their social learning designs in the same context, meaning that it is a challenge to provide effective pedagogical strategies that will structure and sustain social learning in online courses over time. In this regard, an effective pedagogical strategy that can be used to create community awareness among learners, is to enact an educator's professional identity by the use of informal identities across digital worksurfaces making up an online course. For example, case studies demonstrate that learners can be more willingly to engage in an online social learning design when the educators show a more personal side of themselves [3, 4]. Thus, such educational role-performances can help reduce the social boundaries between educator and learners and work as one of many measures to tackle the high-dropout rates in MOOCs [5].

Based on the above-mentioned experiences, an educator responsible for an online course at a Nordic university decided to enact a set of online pedagogical strategies to structure and sustain an online community in a prepaid online course. The enactment of these strategies was initially carried out in a course that was publicly endorsed as a MOOC in 2013 but has later become part of a Master of Management program in continuing education. The course is entitled *Technology Change and Societal Development*" (TECHNOSOS). Today, students can obtain study credit points by completing a digital home exam, where the students write a paper over two weeks and where they get feedback in the process. Over the years, TECHNOSOS has been offered in the spring and fall semester and cohorts of enrolled students for each semester has varied from 30 to 130 students. The overall learning goal for TECHNOSOS is to explore the transition from the industrial to the network society, focusing on the dynamics of the digital economy. The work load for a student is about three months, which includes nine weeks to complete the course and two weeks to write the paper for the home exam. The work load for the course instructor is a bit more, which includes three weeks of grading and two weeks of preparations. The total work load for the educator is about 16 weeks. The course design has been the same since it was created in 2013. The data on which this short paper is based, was collected in fall 2018, where 85 students were enrolled, and 59 students completed a digital home exam.

2 The course learning design

Since 2013, TECHNOSOS has used Canvas Instructure as MOOC platform. The course layout is rather behavioristic, e.g. the instructor informs the learners in a predefined sequence of events. We do not find examples of modules designed in a way where the presentation of theory is immediately followed by an activity where students perform a task to reflect upon the learning material. Characteristically, the learning material consists of video recorded lectures and many web pages with written text that the students have to read before pursuing an assignment. The course material consists of a

series of books about the digital economy where the content from the books have been uploaded and distributed across the course. So, TECHNOSOS is rather “text-heavy”, making the learning experience to consist of reading and clicking through many web pages of text before eventually being asked to complete an assignment. In most cases, the assignments are prompts for online discussion. In sum, the main goal behind the learning design is somewhat to *read* an online book and reflect upon the content with co-students while engaging in tasks in the discussion forum.

TECHNOSOS has 14 assignments in the discussion forum that are distributed across nine modules. These assignments constitute the foundation for the creation of an online community. The number of assignments varies from each module. For example, in some modules there is one assignment while in others there are two. The students are expected to submit *nine* posts in the discussion forum, which function either as a start on a thread or can be a response to a post in an ongoing thread in each module. This means that each student is expected to engage with the material nine times during the course. The discussion forum is an embedded feature in the Canvas platform. The theme for each module, number of assignments, and the total number of posts generated for each module, as well as the overall participation for the entire course for the fall semester 2018 is displayed in Table 1. In total, we can observe that TECHNOSOS generated 829 posts and contains on average about 60 posts for each module.

Table 1. Overview of modules, assignments for each module and total posts.

No	Module	No	Theme assignment	Posts
		1	Presentation of course participant	67
1	Technology changes society	2	Self-driving cars	88
		3	Optional theme	61
		4	Copyright issues and sharing	61
2	The immaterial economy	5	p2p networks	45
		6	Attention economy	54
3	Attention economy and transaction cost theory	7	Transaction costs	59
		8	Filter bubble	44
4	Rational choices and commodity	9	Sharing economics	67
		10	Digital learning	73
5	Network effects / sharing economy	11	Becoming your own publisher	34
		12	C-commerce	50
6	Digital economy in context	13	Business models	64
		14	The development in Norway	62
7	The traits of digital technologies			
8	Business models			
9	Changing the Norwegian society			
Sum				829

3 Strategies for creating engagement

To create an online community, several pedagogical strategies were deployed, which consisted of a *recursive* digital presence of the educator across various digital workspaces. The principle hub for creating engagement was the embedded discussion forum in the platform Canvas. The educator also used other means to create community awareness, like other social media platforms outside/embedded in the Canvas platform. The course used five workspaces. The intent and experiences with each online workspace is explained in the following sections.

3.1 Online workspace 1: General notifications to students

In order to create a digital presence, the educator regularly informed the students by e-mail notifications following a predefined structure. For example, the educator sent an email to all students and continuously posted announcements on Blackboard, the university's official LMS, throughout the semester. Every announcement reminded students to check their email for updates on the course. These e-mail notifications established a routine that the students needed to adopt to. Initially the educator sent an invite to the students two weeks prior to the course start. During the course, at the start of each week, the educator sent a notification to the students containing a standard message about the learning goals for each new week. The students were also informed about livestreaming sessions and other types of relevant information.

3.2 Online workspace 2: Communication with students (Q&A)

Online courses need effective channels to communicate with students, and importantly, strategies for when the communication should occur. In TECHNOSOS, the educator developed a rapid response practice, i.e. replying as soon as possible on inquiries from students. This approach also worked as a strategy to strengthen the digital presence of the educator. The educator communicated with the students via the university's LMS, Blackboard. The version of Blackboard in use did not contain a messenger system, which meant that communication with students took place on email. Communicating with almost 80 potential students on e-mail proved to be a great challenge for the educator. In practice, communicating with the students involved answering questions about a range of various issues, like how to log on to various platforms, compulsory assignments, etc. The educator tried to answer all the requests from the students within a day, which meant that the course instructor was always on "standby" and had to answer quickly since an expected response time or netiquette for e-mail use had developed. Answering e-mails was very time-consuming.

3.3 Online workspace 3: Moderating the discussion forum

The main strategy for creating a digital presence in TECHNOSOS was to moderate and participate in the discussion forum in the platform, which involved a considerable work load for the educator. For example, the educator logged 77 interactions in the discussion forum, while the highest number of participations from the most active student was 16. This implies that moderating the forum took on average 10 to 15 hours each week. Also, moderating the threads was challenging, since a style of commenting that encouraged social learning had to be developed. The students wrote very long posts and the challenge was to follow up by asking relevant questions that could develop the threads in a direction that was relevant to the course content. To achieve that goal, the educator's strategy was to ask the students how a post related to the learning goals in a specific module or if they could relate practical examples to analytical concepts from the syllabus. In general, both the intervention of the educator and comments from co-student tended to generate perhaps two to three replies to a post.

Table 2. Overview posts by modules and days.

DAY	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	SUM
M	15	23	7	11	6	12	10	14	14	112
T	8	15	13	6	7	7	9	8	12	85
W	14	23	17	10	6	8	8	15	20	121
T	6	7	8	10	3	16	7	5	9	71
F	7	7	5	5	7	6	4	7	13	61
S	11	6	6	10	1	7	7	10	14	72
S	36	12	23	13	14	20	18	26	37	199
	97	93	79	65	44	76	63	85	119	721

The educator experienced and a simple data analysis showed that the students focused on completing the compulsory assignments in the discussion forum, which questions the pedagogical value of moderating and creating community awareness in the discussion forum. A simple extract of data from the learning analytics in the course overview, showed that the discussion forum generated 721 interactions and that each module had about 51 entries on average. The figures are displayed in Table 2. We can also observe that the students are most actively engaged in posting entries on Sundays and Mondays, and less active during the middle of the week. The most active students wrote about 14 to 15 entries while the least active students only completed the course's compulsory requirements. In general, one can conclude that the data confirms interesting insights in what is experienced in most online courses, but contrary to many MOOCs that display a decline in activity and engagement in discussion forum as the course proceeds, the experience in the TECHNOSOS is the opposite.

3.4 Online workspace 4: Livestreaming online discussions

The fourth strategy for creating digital presence consisted of using live streaming session on YouTube. In total, the educator organized five live streaming session, which were held at every third week in the evenings. The main goal behind the live streaming session, was to create community awareness and summarize the current “temperature” in the discussion forum. As previously mentioned, the discussion forum lead to an information-overload problem. For example, each assignment generated pages on pages with posts and replies, which in practice meant that only a few students, i.e. those who posted and read extensively, were involved in the social learning process, while other students only observed some threads, possibly with a few points relevant for their learning. Also, the educator found it demanding to extract how the students' posts and reflections related to the learning goals for each module. Therefore, the educator decided to go for live streaming sessions – which in practice functioned as online lectures – summarizing two or three modules at time and thereby giving a larger picture of content that the community chose to address in the forum. The students gave mixed feedback on the live streaming sessions. Some students argued that the live session could be more structured while others found them useful.

3.5 Online worksurface 5: Engagement beyond the discussion forum

The final strategy to create digital presence consisted of encouraging the students to engage in other social media platforms, to learn and engage on learning arenas beyond the discussion forum in Canvas. To achieve this goal, the educator used Twitter regularly. The use of Twitter was organized as a straight forward assignment. The educator would, from course start, tweet about themes related to the course, like digital competence, artificial intelligence, self-driving cars, e-commerce, privacy etc. The tweets were tagged with a particular #hashtag. During the course period, the educator tweeted about 80 to 100 tweets in period covering August to October 2018. Experiences from our course suggests that Twitter is not an effective online pedagogical strategy for social learning and that the students had mixed views on the use of Twitter. Almost none of the students engaged in a form of online interaction on Twitter. Simple Twitter analytics suggests that the course instructor received *one* replay from a student. In most cases, perhaps one or two students liked or retweeted a tweet send by the course instructor, which means that engaging in the Twitter sphere was an alien online work surface for the students in the course.

4 Conclusion

The main goal of this working paper has ben to report and outline a few simple online pedagogical strategies on how educators can create community awareness in online course. The tentative conclusion is that transforming these five strategies to practice and embedding them in an online course design is pedagogically demanding, as well as time consuming. From an educators' perspective, creating a community of practice requires a large work effort and commitment. The same goes for participating students.

5 References

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