

# NETWORKED LEARNING CONFERENCE 2010

## The Ideals and Reality of Participating in a MOOC

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### What is a MOOC?

A new term – massive open online course – coined as a result of the 12 week long Connectivism and Connective Knowledge online course (CCK08) convened and ‘led’ by George Siemens and Stephen Downes to explore the potential of an open network for learning about and experiencing in practice ‘connectivism’ proposed as a new learning theory for a digital age.

**Massive** – because it attracted more than 2200 participants, 150 of whom were active including the 3 authors and 1870 of whom remained subscribed to The Daily online newsletter for the duration of the course. **Open** – because there were no entry requirements, it was free to any interested non-credit participant and the emerging content was freely accessible from the start on the course wiki (and has remained open since). **Online** – the course was distributed across a variety of online sites – established by the course leaders (Moodle, UStream, Elluminate, Wiki) and participants (blogs, wikis, Ning, Facebook, Diigo, Google groups and Second Life). **Course** – because 24 participants were for credit via the University of Manitoba and it was structured as a course over 12 weeks with weekly assignments and live events.

### What is Connectivism?

*‘At its heart, connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks.’*

What Connectivism Is- <http://halfanhour.blogspot.com/2007/02/what-connectivism-is.html>

### The Ideals

The course design would enable participants to experience the principles of connectivism in practice, outlined by Stephen Downes as *Autonomy, Diversity, Openness and Connectedness and interactivity*. - <http://halfanhour.blogspot.com/2009/02/connectivist-dynamics-in-communities.html>

**Autonomy** would give course participants maximum choice of where, when, how, with whom and even what to learn. A sufficiently diverse population would ensure avoidance of group think and echo chambers. **Diverse** readings, discussions and environments would be enabled. **Openness** would accommodate all levels of engagement with no barriers between ‘in’ and ‘out’, free flow of information through the network, a culture of sharing and focus on knowledge creation. **Connectedness**; learning would be made possible through connection and interaction in the network.

### The Research

Conducted on a wiki - <http://connectivismresearchproject.pbworks.com/> There were two stages of data collection: a SurveyMonkey questionnaire which focused on participants’ preferences for communicating in blogs and forums (the subject of a second paper presented at this conference - Blogs and Forums as Communication and Learning Tools in a MOOC). The questionnaire was sent to 167 bloggers (19 of whom were also forum users), 132 forum users and two course instructors (n = 301). 90 responses = 29.9% response rate. CMap was used both to identify the questionnaire statements and to analyse the results. Analysis of the questionnaire data raised questions which were used

for follow up email interviews with 58 self-selected CCK08 participants (including the two instructors). 22 responses = 37.9% response rate.

## The Findings

Findings provided information about the participants' choices for communicating in blogs and forums, but email interviews also revealed a lot about participants' experiences and perceptions of the principles of connectivism. Autonomy, diversity, openness and connectedness/interactivity are all characteristics of a MOOC. **Autonomy** was valued by participants (59%), but less so by those lacking in confidence or new to the concepts and environment and was equated by some to a lack of assessment. **Diversity** was ensured by large numbers, different nationalities, cultures, ages, backgrounds, learning preferences, individual needs and choices. **Openness** was variously interpreted as 'free' as in beer, 'free' as in liberty or speech, 'free' as in transparent/shared. Some participants chose to work alone. 86% dropped out, but we don't know how many 'lurked'. Connectivity and interactivity was afforded by technology but did not necessarily ensure **connectedness** and interaction. A number of barriers to connectedness and interactivity were identified, e.g. 'trolling', expertise divide, style of instruction.

## The Reality

Autonomy, Diversity, Openness and Connectedness/Interactivity are all problematic in a MOOC. **Autonomy** is essential because instructor/participant interaction is limited by the large numbers. Experience of autonomy can be limited by English fluency, expertise divide, assessment requirements, personal learning styles, personal sense of identity, 'trolling' and the implicit or explicit power of instructors. Autonomy can make participants feel 'unsafe' and move into groups with like-minded people and echo chambers, thus affecting openness and diversity. **Diversity** can lead to lack of support in a MOOC. Some participants do not have 'wayfinding' skills; some need support in online socialisation (to build the trust required for online connectedness), some have difficulties such as lack of English fluency, technological challenges or dyslexia and need specialised support. CCK08 was designed for minimal tutor moderation/intervention which is difficult to reconcile with complex diversity. **Openness** was variously interpreted and further confused by participants' understanding of the word 'course'. CCK08 was an open network rather than an open course. Experience of openness was compromised by lack of clarity about the purpose and nature of the course, lack of moderation and lack of constraints. **Connectedness**/interactivity; learning begins with a connection, but connectivity is not sufficient for connectedness/interactivity. Meaningful connectedness and interactivity are difficult to achieve. The principles of connectivism – autonomy, diversity, openness and connectedness/interactivity are all interdependent.

## The Implications

Autonomy, diversity, openness and connectedness/interactivity are course design principles which will attract learners, but there are many dilemmas associated with attempting to fuse a course (particularly a MOOC) with a network. Constraints and moderation may be necessary for effective learning in a MOOC and a complex, open course, rich in emergence, is defined by what must *not* happen, inverting the traditional design process. Ethical considerations should be taken into account when 'destabilising' a course.

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