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The Higher Education Technology Agenda

Going 'massive': Learner engagement in a MOOC environment

The 2014 Horizon Report identifies one of the challenges facing higher education as being how to keep education relevant (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014). In light of the growing number of free online learning opportunities, universities need to innovate in order to engage and connect with new learning landscapes.

Recent times have seen higher education embracing new models of course delivery such as MOOCs. This is partly in response to expectations of a new generation of learners for whom education can be global, flexible, online and free. It may also be an attempt by higher education institutes to transform themselves thereby ensuring they remain relevant, innovative and adaptive.

Student engagement is obviously a key element of designing in an online environment. As the EDUCAUSE "Top ten IT issues 2014" highlights educators must not simply consider whether to engage students online but how to engage students (Grajek, S. & EDUCAUSE, 2013–2014 IT Issues Panel, 2014). Engagement in online courses poses a number of challenges and has a long way to go before it matches levels of engagement in face to face courses (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014). It requires new approaches, new understandings of what constitutes engagement as well as new metrics of levels of engagement (Vu & Fadde, 2014).

Student engagement challenges in the online environment are exacerbated in the "massive" environment of a MOOC, not just because of the sheer number of learners enrolled but also because of the voluntary nature of the MOOC and lack of summative assessment. In addition, the differing culture and subject backgrounds, motivations, interests, language proficiencies, skills, learning needs and behaviours of learners can make engagement more challenging. (Milligan, Littlejohn, & Margaryan, 2013).

This paper addresses issues of student engagement on a massive scale. It uses the case study of one of the University of Auckland's first MOOCs, describing the design principles

implemented to enhance learner engagement in a virtual environment with a high number of participants. Application of the “4Cs” principles (“consume, connect, contribute and create”) (Littlejohn, Milligan, & Margaryan, 2011) were applied to enhance student engagement.

This paper will focus on the following:

- understanding and application of the “four Cs” (“consume, connect, contribute and create”) model of engagement (Littlejohn et al, 2011);
- theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of student engagement in the MOOC environment: connectivism, constructivism, social learning;
- importance of research and learner informed design;
- role of the educator and learners in engagement eg. peer to peer learning, and online community of learners.

In addition, we will reflect on the student engagement experience from the first course offering in Nov 2014, focussing on educator experience, participation rates, retention rates, student feedback and post-course survey data.

By sharing our experience, we hope to contribute to the current conversation on best practice for student engagement in a “massive” online learning environment.

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