Title: The Connectivist Disconnect

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Research & its Importance

Earlier this year, I set up a mini open online component (mooc) of a 15pt postgraduate paper in elearning. The initiative was influenced by the hype around massive open online courses (MOOCs) and its potential for elearning professional development. MOOCs are considered an excellent experimental ground for teaching and learning with technologies. Not only does it allow educators to test contemporary pedagogies and technologies, it enables them to take the role of participants. With mini.mooc703, I aimed to encourage wider participation from academics otherwise limited by the cost, time and assessment barriers of the credit bearing course. The overall goal was to form a community of practice (CoP) on the scholarship of teaching and learning with technologies.

The preliminary offer of the course was limited to the academics of the University of Auckland and had two topics spread over six weeks. Open technologies such as Google Hangout and Communities formed the platform for delivery of content and networking. The interaction and engagement with the content and in the network was voluntary and self-directed by the participants. Though there were 24 people on the course (four times as many as in any taught course), the interactions and networking did not go beyond the initial introductions for many. Only four participants (approximately 17%) actively shared resources and managed to engage in in-depth discussions on topics of interest. What does this say about developing a CoP using the connectivist approach to elearning professional development?

A CoP brings together like-minded people with common interests (in this case elearning) to discuss issues, share experiences and collaborate to develop knowledge and best practices in the field. As reported in literature, a CoP in elearning has a lot of parallels with a connectivist MOOC (cMOOC) that is a network formed on peer support, shared interest and academic orientation (Yeager & Bliss, 2012). The connectivist approach views learning as a consequence of connections and networking that stimulate the development of knowledge. This networking is based on users own free will. Therefore, can a cMOOC be used to establish an effective online CoP in elearning for professional development?

The current experience is definitely in contrast to what’s being argued in literature. There seems to be a huge mismatch between what’s expected and required for participants to engage in a CoP. Even though they may have a shared interest, as in the case of mini.mooc703, varying degrees of motivation, confidence and experience means participants engage at different levels. Scaffolding plays a really important role in encouraging active participation. Also, the requisite
digital skills that participants are so often assumed to acquire through engagement with social technologies are overlooked in the design and facilitation of such CoPs.

According to Brennan (2013), “To learn in a cMOOC you need to connect. To connect in a cMOOC you need to learn.” This seems to be a cycle of chicken and egg when we think about whether we need to provide an opportunity for people to connect, communicate and network in a cMOOC or first guide them to develop the skills to do the same. Would the latter be seen as a cMOOC? Where is the motivation, self-efficacy and confidence that connectivists argue exist in the actors in a network?

Outline of the session

Based on the above experience, this session will be a discussion on the prospects of using cMOOCs for elearning professional development. After a brief presentation on the experience above, the audience will be prompted to contribute to the following threads of discussion:

- Experience of learning in MOOCs
- Potential of the MOOC concept for elearning professional development
- The cMOOC concept
- CoPs-what is the magic solution for initiating and sustaining one?
- Show and tell on mini.mooc 703
- Open source educational applications for professional development.

References
