AU MOOC: LEARNING TO LEARN ONLINE

Athabasca University

Marti Cleveland-Innes, JoAnne Murphy, Iain McPherson, Dan Wilton, Caroline Park

www.ltlo.ca

THE STORY OF A MOOC

The global MOOC development initiative emerged ahead of the normal rigorous evaluation that accompanies education design and delivery in higher education. Many questions about purpose and quality remained at start-up, and still remain, unanswered. To answer these questions, Athabasca University created an AU-MOOC Advisory Group. One objective of the Advisory Group is to support those interested in constructing an AU version of a MOOC; MOOCs aligned with our mandate to remove barriers to learning and engage/recruit learners we may not have otherwise engaged.

Learning to Learn Online responds to both: the need to carefully examine the structure and substance of MOOCs and provide an experience to those who may not yet feel ready for a formal engagement in an online course. Read on to review the design and outcomes of this unique MOOC.

INVESTIGATION

2008	cMOOC designed by Seimens and Downes. AU faculty instruct and graduate students receive credit.
2011-2013	xMOOCs emerge from Stanford, MITx, EdX, Udacity, Coursera, Canvas, FutureLearn.
Mar-Apr 2013	Because the MOOC initiative emerged ahead of the normal rigorous evaluation that accompanies design and delivery in higher education, many questions remained unanswered. Athabasca University convenes an AU-MOOC Advisory Group (AUMAG) to review this phenomenon. Its objectives:
• Create and provide an expert, evidence-based assessment of, and a critical, academic, and practical voice on, MOOC issues to local, national and international networks.
• Determine direction regarding the assignment of credit for individuals who participate in MOOCs outside AU.
• Support those interested in constructing an AU version of a MOOC, where such an endeavor will continue our mandate to remove barriers to learning and engage/recruit learners we may not have otherwise engaged.
• Observe, document, measure, analyze and disseminate our MOOC experience.
Oct 20, 2013	Research in collaboration with Gates Foundation is announced: http://www.moocresearch.com

PLANNING

Dec 12, 2013	AUMAG agrees to offer a public course on becoming an online learner, with no credit and at no cost.
Jan-May 2014	AUMAG hones topic idea, audience focus, MOOC platform, and budget requirements.
Jun 2014	AU Executive group approves topic and budget.
Sep 2014	AU-MOOC initiative underway as Project Manager JoAnne Murphy and Project Assistant and Instructional Designer Iain McPherson approach the course development phase. The project timeline is established and the LMS (Canvas) contacted to discuss the course offering, dates of delivery, and LMS deadlines/timeline. A course start date is set for February 23, 2015. Six weeks later, the course start date is revised to March 9, 2015 to allow for adequate development time.

DESIGN

Sep-Oct 2014	MOOC Team works on course objectives, syllabus, design ideas and a course title. AUMAG participates in finalizing these documents and decisions.
Oct-Nov 2014	Decision reached that course will be called Learning to Learn Online (LTLO).
Oct 20, 2014	Course proposal is submitted to Canvas for approval; Canvas MOU negotiations with Athabasca University are settled by the end of November 2015.
Nov 4, 2014	MOOC Team and AUMAG meet to discuss course instruction, activities, assessment, enrolment, certificates and pre-course survey.
Nov 13, 2014	Team presents the AU-MOOC project to AU community via live webinar. There were approximately 35 attendees.
Nov 2014	Web specialist/graphic designer Dan Wilton is added to the LTLO design team.
Dec-Feb 2015	Development of course content and instructional design.
Jan 2015	Canvas is provided with a course description and brief instructor biographies for an ad for the MOOC on their homepage. First review by LMS provider, Canvas.
Jan 12, 2015	LTLO opens for registration on Canvas website.
Feb 9, 2015	LTLO Team meets with AUMAG to discuss the research aspect of the AU-MOOC project.
Feb 23, 2015	Final course review by Canvas.

ACTIVE

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Mar 9, 2015	Learning to Learn Online launches on the Canvas platform.
Apr 13, 2015	Course ends.

"I loved the amount of interaction. The idea of a personal learning network was completely new to me, and I feel this course has done me a great service by emphasizing that."

"I feel more prepared to begin my online university courses. I feel a sense that I know what to expect and more confidence that I can succeed."

- student responses from the User Experience Survey
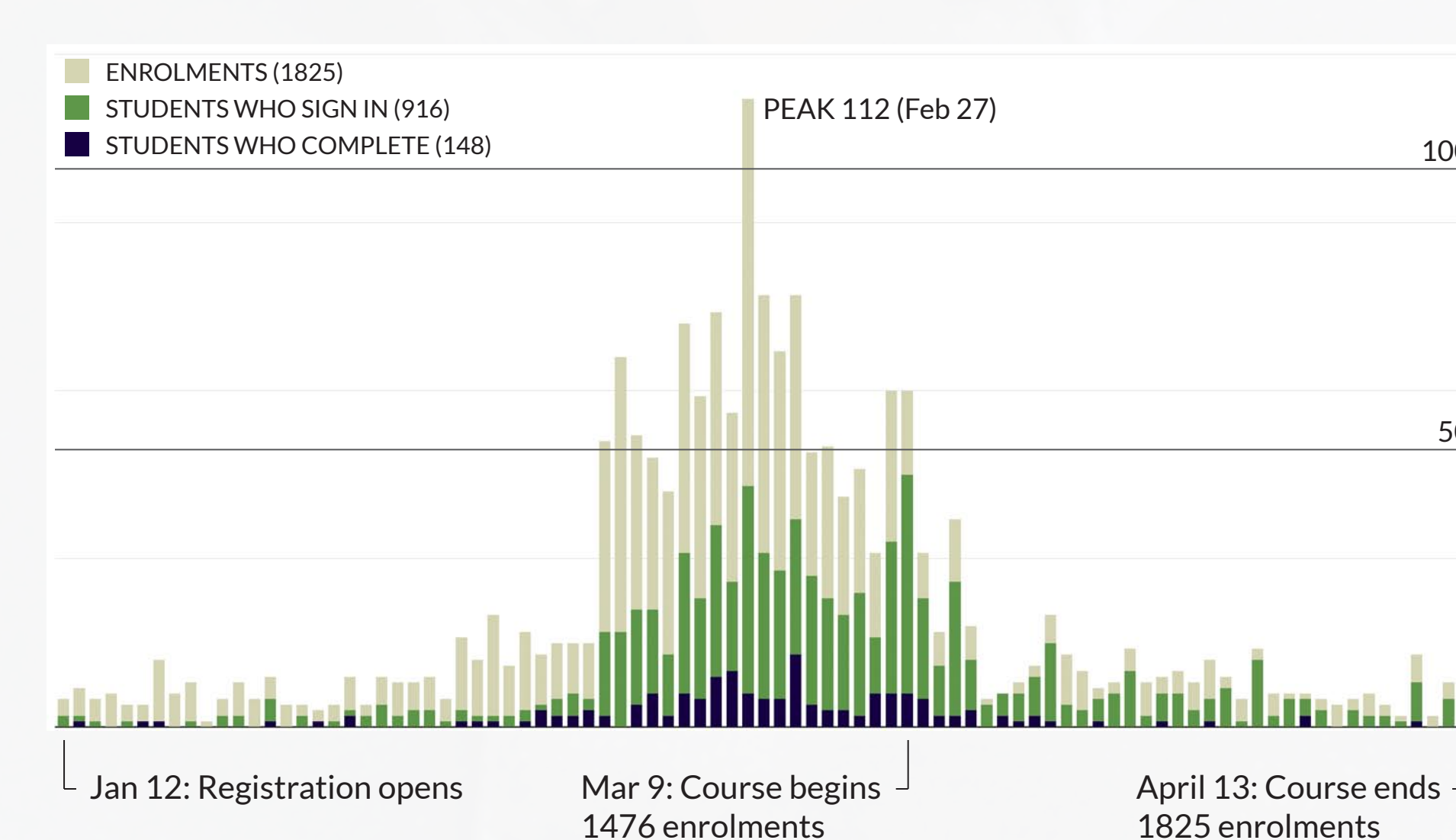
GOALS AND DESIGN

1. **Learn about course participants early in the course to enable us to enhance the learning experience and foster a learner-centered learning environment.**
Pre-course survey; learner introductions; divided learners into smaller groups monitored by course facilitators who made efforts to become acquainted with learners.

2. **Immediately engage learners and keep them engaged.**
The course featured regular videos from course instructor and course inspirer; colourful, attractive homepage with easy access to module material; frequent opportunities for interactivity at different levels; interesting and relevant material.

3. **Reach learners on an emotional level.**
Use of engaging graphics, multi-media and activities which sparked learner's interest, increased motivation, and fostered recognition of the relevance of the content. Emotion conveyed through instructor presence such as video and dialogue reflected in learners.

4. **Prepare a multi-modal design to appeal to various learning preferences.**
Various types of content representation and use of multi-media; ongoing course discussion; variety of assessment methods such as quizzes, practice activities, explore activities, and e-portfolio entries.

5. **Maintain the 'open' concept of a MOOC by providing learners with choice in their own learning experience; design for learners of varying knowledge and computer experience.**
No prerequisites for any part of the course; learners were free to choose their learning path and could move through the course however they wished and at whatever level of engagement they chose. Computer and Internet Basics sections were created to ensure scaffolding beginning at even a novice computer user as an effort to further reduce barriers to entry.

6. **Design to feature cognitive, teaching, and social presences as posited by Garrison, Anderson & Archer's Community of Inquiry model.**
Cognitive presence: Content was presented in progressive chunks and learners were provided the opportunity to practice and apply each section of content; learners were led through constructivist activities leading them to formulate their own customized strategy for adapting to the online learning environment.
Teaching presence: Three levels of instruction were present in the course- the Professor, the Inspirer, and the Facilitators. The course was 'led' by an AU Faculty member who acted as the figurehead of the MOOC in the role of the 'Professor'. The Professor provided a consistent 'flat' presence through the use of pre-recorded video and pre-set text segments. The second layer of instructor presence (the 'Inspirer') involved a dynamic interactive presence in the course. The third level of instruction was that of the Facilitators who were responded to learner emails, discussion board posts, submissions and activities.
Social presence: Instructor-students interaction and student-student interaction were encouraged throughout the course; video announcements and use of multi-media were used to increase social aspects of the course; ongoing course discussion was facilitated, fostering the development of a learning community.

7. **Establish a learning community.**
Learners were encouraged and prompted to develop learning community through course content, within activities, and by course Facilitators.

THE EXPERIENCE

INSTRUCTION AND FACILITATION

Three levels of instructor presence to 1) support learners and 2) encourage development of a Community of Inquiry (CoI).

Lead Instructor: AU Faculty member
Provided a *static* presence via pre-recorded videos (module introductions) and text-graphics placed strategically in modules to help clarify complex subject matter.

The Inspirer: AU MDE Graduate Student
Provided a *dynamic* presence via informal video and text announcements, discussion board posts, and email support, acknowledging and addressing notable content contributions and in-course activities by learners. Declining frequency as learners became more self-reliant and built CoI.

Facilitators: 10 MDE Graduates/Students
Provided a *dynamic* presence designed to provide a sense of touch with all participants. Each Facilitator responsible for:
• daily monitoring and facilitation of discussions in one 'Homeroom' forum and topics started in the various course forums by learners from their homerooms; and
• responding to email queries from leaners.
Declining frequency as learners became more self-reliant and built CoI.

COURSE RHYTHM

Start-up (3-4 days)
LMS support tools (Canvas) and course directions (course design team) handled numerous issues and questions, but it was still VERY hectic in the first few days. There were multiple emails and discussion posts. Most related to navigation and the use of the Canvas LMS. Some related to one non-functional interactive activity.

After start-up
More manageable rhythm. Some learners moved quickly through the modules. (Facilitators felt the need to keep up.) Inspirer stuck to the original schedule while acknowledging self-paced progression of learners.
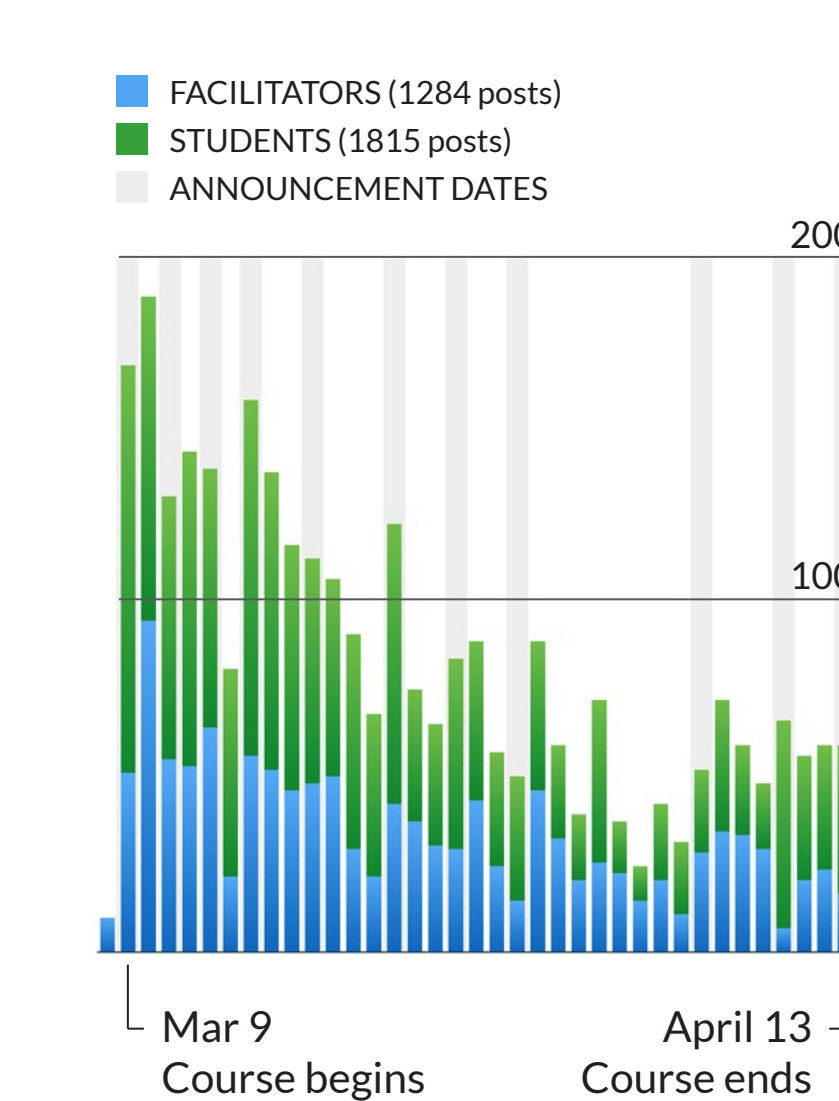
PROCESS

Video: Proved labour intensive to produce. Rich modality and personalized messages from the Inspirer resulted in generally positive reception and high levels of uptake. Some learners asked that accompanying text versions be supplied to 'save time.'
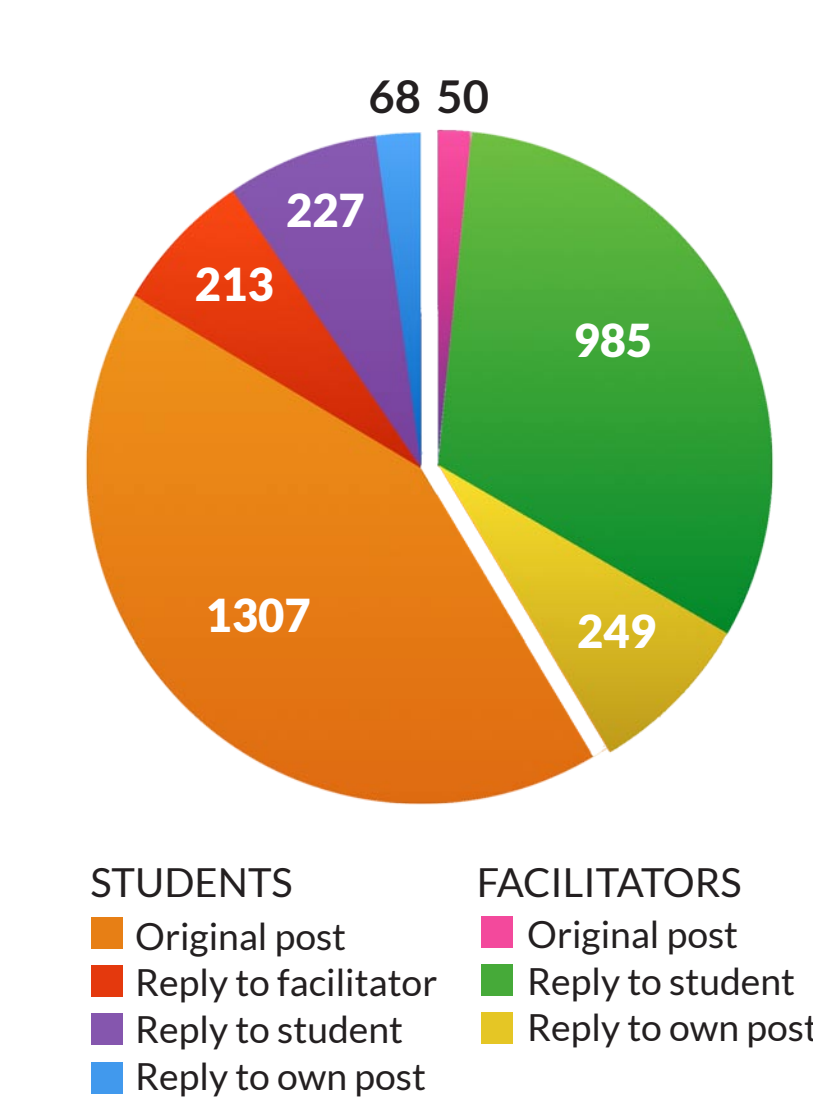
Text: Discussion boards were promoted as the preferred text tool (versus email) since all can see and benefit from posts and contribute to questions and topics. Most text-based communication was discussion board activity. The exceptions: facilitators contacted the supervisor (the Inspirer) via email for clarification, notification of problems. A small number of learners still sent questions via emails.

Learner activity (videos, discussion boards and emails): Viewership and volume were very high in the early days, but tapered in frequency and volume as the course progressed. Dynamic videos (announcements) were viewed more than static videos (module introductions).

ENROLMENTS BY DATE

- ENROLMENTS (1825)
- STUDENTS WHO SIGN IN (916)
- STUDENTS WHO COMPLETE (148)

PEAK 112 (Feb 27)

Jan 12: Registration opens
Mar 9: Course begins — 1476 enrolments
April 13: Course ends — 1825 enrolments

DISCUSSION: ACTIVITY

- FACILITATORS (1284 posts)
- STUDENTS (1815 posts)
- ANNOUNCEMENT DATES

Mar 9 Course begins
April 13 Course ends

POSTS BY TYPE

68 50
227
213
1307
985
249

STUDENTS
- Original post
- Reply to facilitator
- Reply to student
- Reply to own post

FACILITATORS
- Original post
- Reply to student
- Reply to own post

INTERACTION AND COMPLETION
COMPLETION RATES OF STUDENTS WHO PERFORMED THE FOLLOWING TASKS

- 16% Signed in (148/916)
- 40% Posted at least once (123/310)
- 40% Received reply from facilitator (120/297)
- 57% Posted reply to fellow student (72/126)
- 68% Received reply from student (72/106)
- 72% Received reply from and replied to a fellow student (57/79)