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Transformative MOOCs in Action

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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In 2015, three long-time community and cooperative practitioners and one distance education professor working on local sustainability issues decided that it was time to explore a digital learning space. We were looking for a way to pool ideas, experiences, knowledge, and resources among people working in the social and solidarity community and commons and environmental movements, and to do it at a large scale and across long distances.

By accessing a small amount of university resources and calling on some help from sympathetic students with IT skills at Athabasca University, a Canadian distance education university, we began.

We could see that many practitioners worldwide were addressing basic needs and building alternative and effective innovations in various sectors like attainable housing, local food and agro-ecology, poverty reduction, social care, alternative finance, community energy, decarbonization, and some movement and coalition building. From experience, we found that they often worked in silos. Our idea was to help them find each other and soon.

This was the heyday of the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). Somewhat naïvely, we reached out to the MOOC as a model. We quickly found fault with the one-way model of the X-MOOC (“eXtended”). The c-MOOC (“connective”) and its connectivist pedagogy, however, showed more promise. It fit with our belief in the power of peer-to-peer learning among members of purpose-driven grassroots projects, networks, and movements seeking socio-ecological transition above personal profit or gain.

Building the Synergia MOOC

The four of us formed the [Synergia Cooperative Institute](#). We recruited co-authors from the international social and solidarity networks as volunteers to design, curate, and write the modules. Some were academics and researchers; most were practitioners. We put together a rough outline for a course.

From there, we cold-called a cross-section of sector practitioners, leaders, staff, members, and activist friends to participate in a three-week pilot. In the fall of 2016, fifty people (from twenty-five agencies and twelve countries) participated, made suggestions, argued, and identified revisions to the original design.

As a result, we enlarged an already substantial bundle of case studies (some emergent, some working at large scale) and effective practice relevant to transition. We were ready to share bottom-up, network, and movement innovations; tacit knowledge; and social learning.

Our network friends also helped us recruit participants from their memberships for the first public offering of “Towards the Next System: Transition to Cooperative Commonwealth” in April to June 2017. We put the course on the open-source platform CANVAS. We made it free and the materials free to reuse. We attracted 520 participants in seven modules over seven weeks.

Discussions were rich. Early forums were busy—too busy—what a later participant described as “the MOOC melee.” People dropped away. Whole MOOC completion rates were typical and low. But feedback from those who stayed (and even those who left) was incredibly positive. Encouraged, we decided to try again.

It took a year to revise for a second delivery. We went to eight modules and changed up the pacing based on participant advice. We ran the first four modules of the MOOC for four weeks (we scheduled five hours per week), took a four-week break, and then offered the last four modules. And this time, we video-called network leaders and international friends to help us recruit groups already connected by common interest and purpose from their memberships. If they took the course as a group, met weekly to discuss the materials, and reflected on “aha” moments, we felt the experience might help them rethink their own project strategies and practice. We called these Action and Study Circles. A dozen network volunteers offered to lead the circles in different countries. The priority for Synergia became to test the impact of the MOOC with people already connected in a common interest and purpose, who

consciously take the course as a group. Why? The reason is simple. We believe the MOOC can be leveraged by groups in ways that will significantly amplify and accelerate transition.

In total, 1140 participants from 40 countries signed up in 2019, among them 120 people in 15 circles. More than half already have higher education backgrounds. Overall, 800 registrants dug into the MOOC—some for a few hours, some for hundreds of hours. Most important, starting with the second four-week set of modules until the end of the course, some 368 people remained engaged online. Their feedback has been especially helpful, filled with suggested new resources, calls for additional directions, a few well-placed critical prods, and some amazing positive endorsements encouraging us to continue the work. More people came, more stayed longer, and more completed. But only a few of the circles stuck with it.

What Have We Learned?

Based on the experience, we continue to believe building large-scale open learning, with smaller action circles and study groups, represents a fruitful pathway to accelerate transition practice.

Keeping practitioners and peer-to-peer exchange at the center of the project we believe helps participants to learn more about the nuts and bolts of making transition happen, and the strategic application of knowledge about transition at scale and in diverse places.

As we move into our fourth iteration of “Towards Cooperative Commonwealth: Transition in a Perilous Age” for late 2021, we have begun to reshape the design again, adding former participants to the teaching team, integrating emergent issues, patching in more ways of seeing, focusing key discussions on systems change, playing with timing and pacing to improve retention, adding more choice and some same-time elements, and trying new digital forms of collective knowledge sharing.

We know impacts on participants will always vary. Some people drop in, harvested resources, and come and go in a day. Others choose to dig into a preferred module like local food or finance for a few weeks and forgo others. Some stay with us for half of the course, and still others explore every inch on offer. Many state that they find hope and solidarity along the way.

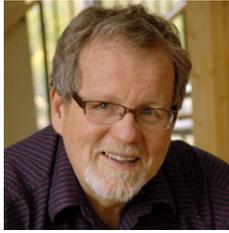
Inclusivity and diversity of the team remains a goal and a challenge. Offering people optional study tracks that match their level of commitment and time pressures can also be challenging to work out.

Our top priority is getting the action circles right this time. And finding a software that helps us filter and track individuals into small affinity groups and study circles by sector, interest, language, and time preference.

We are looking to collaborate with others doing this work, including software folks developing open-source learning spaces or video-conference alternatives like Meet.Coop.

We also need a business model. We are getting low on elbow grease. But all said, if we are going to transition, we need all hands on deck, both theory and praxis, and we believe the time has come put practitioner knowledge at the center of transition.

About the Author



Mike Gismondi is a co-founder of the Synergia Institute and Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at Athabasca University, where he specializes in environmental sociology and global studies. With Synergia, he is applying his distance education and open education skills to blend large-scale peer-to-peer learning with small groups of community practitioners to accelerate the eco-politics of transition. He holds a PhD in social and political thought from York University.

About the Publication

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