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## **The Human Element MOOC: An Experiment in Social Presence**

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### **Abstract**

The Human Element Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on the Canvas open network was designed to be a connectivist experience exploring methods for humanization of online education. This MOOC introduced and discussed methods that faculty could adopt in order to potentially increase instructor presence, social presence, and cognitive presence within their own online courses. The design of the MOOC and the learners’ perceptions of social presence after taking part in this MOOC are discussed in this chapter.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Online learning is not new. Students have been learning online for decades (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Harasim, 1990). Today, millions of students are taking at least one online course each year (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Lokken & Mullins, 2014). However, despite the growing popularity of online learning during the past decade, it took the emergence of massive open online courses, better known as MOOCs, and companies like Coursera, EdX, and Udacity to make online learning front page news.

The increased interest in MOOCs though has caused more confusion than clarity; many people now incorrectly assume that MOOCs are representative of all online courses (Farmer, 2013). While there are many different types of online courses (Lowenthal, Wilson, & Parrish, 2009), for-credit asynchronous online courses are the most popular type of online course and they differ from MOOCs in a number of ways. For instance, for-credit asynchronous online courses are usually not massive, open, or as video-centric as a typical MOOC. But even MOOCs themselves vary in important ways (Daniel, 2012; Kernohan, 2013). For instance, connectivist MOOCs, called cMOOCs, strive to place the learner at the center of the learning experience and therefore differ in important ways from MOOCs offered by companies like Coursera that focus on designing courses around famous content experts (Stevens, 2013). Despite important differences, people too often assume that all MOOCs are the same. During 2012 and much of 2013, MOOCs were praised by the media for their ability to transform higher education (Baggaley, 2013; van den Berg & Crawley, 2013). As the glorification of MOOCs increased, others pushed back pointing out perceived shortcomings of MOOCs such as their low retention numbers, lack of discourse, lack of business model, and lack of connection to an institution's strategic goals (Kim, 2012; Koller, Ng, Do, & Chen, 2013).

Aware of the purported strengths and weaknesses of MOOCs, some colleagues and I (the first author) set forth to develop a MOOC of our own. We strongly believed that there are both good and bad

online courses (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; Young & Norgard, 2006). One thing that often separates a good online course though from a bad one is an active, caring, present instructor who has not forgotten the importance of the human touch (Bergman, 2011; Pacansky-Brock, 2014). Given this, we set forth to develop a MOOC as a professional development experience that would help educators learn different strategies to humanize online learning. Our MOOC was called *The Human Element: An Essential Online Course Component* and was designed around the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The course was hosted on the Canvas Open Network and utilized tools both within Canvas' Learning Management System (LMS) and external to it; Canvas was chosen to host *The Human Element* MOOC largely because of its ability to integrate external tools through Learning Tool Interoperability (LTI). In this chapter we describe the MOOC we developed and how we leveraged technology with a human purpose into a large enrollment course and the participants' experiences learning about the human element in a MOOC.

## **BACKGROUND**

Students regularly report feeling isolated and alone when taking online courses (Bischoff, 2000; Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). This potential problem is amplified in MOOCs where there are hundreds, if not thousands, of learners (Baggaley, 2013). Connectivism and specifically cMOOCs though have the potential to address this problem of isolation by putting the learner in the center of the learning experience. So rather than put the instructor in the center, cMOOCs strive to integrate instructional strategies that connect learners with each other in meaningful and authentic ways (Stewart, 2013), which can in turn reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. In the following sections, we briefly describe connectivism and the CoI framework in an effort to provide context for *The Human Element* MOOC and a rationale for why we believed we could create an environment where learners could not only learn about the human element but also experience it first hand.

### **Connectivism and cMOOC's**

Connectivism is a theory of learning developed by Siemens (2004, 2005) and Downes (2012). Connectivism, according to Downes (2012) posits "that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (p. 9). While some argue that connectivism is not a new theory of learning and instead simply builds upon previous theories of learning (e.g., social constructivism, activity theory, situated cognition) (Dron, 2014; Kop & Hill, 2008), we, like Siemens (2005), find that viewing learning as a network creation process . . . impacts how we design and develop learning within corporations and educational institutions. When the act of learning is seen as a function under the control of the learner, designers need to shift the focus to fostering the ideal ecology to permit learning to occur. (Implications for Higher Education and Corporate Training section)

We found this especially true when designing a MOOC on the human touch. cMOOCs are self-organizing meeting places for like minded individuals to collect, connect, and explore topics of interest (Milligan, Littlejohn & Margaryan, 2013). It is the process of information curation, synthesis, and sharing that makes these courses extremely learner centered. Further, connections via social networks like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn enable learners to continue their connections for months or even years beyond the end of a course and to learn different ways to add the human touch to online courses.

### **Community of Inquiry**

The CoI is a guide developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in the late 1990s (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Garrison and his colleagues posited that meaningful learning takes place in a CoI through the interaction of three core elements: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. The first element, social presence, is the ability of participants "to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison et. al., p. 89). The second element, teaching presence, involves instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction. And the third element,

cognitive presence, is “the extent to which the participants in . . . a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., p. 89). The interaction of these three elements is believed to lead to a meaningful educational experience.

Early on researchers studied the three presences separately (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; McKlin, Harmon, Evans, & Jones, 2002; Rourke & Anderson, 2002). Of the three presences, social presence received the most attention (Garrison, 2007). This interest in social presence is partly due to its long history dating back to the 1970s (Lowenthal, 2009) as well as researchers and practitioners overall interest in finding ways to ensure that participants are seen as real and there--that is, seen as human--when using communication media like asynchronous discussion forums. While more recently researchers have shifted to studying all three of the presences together (Akyol, Vaughan, & Garrison, 2011; Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010; Ke, 2010), we still see value in focusing specifically on peoples’ perceptions of social presence and ways that instructors design for it (i.e., teaching presence) not only in MOOCs--which are critiqued as being impersonal (Baggaley, 2013) but also in cMOOCs where a teacher is not the center of all interactions.

## The Human Element MOOC

*The Human Element* MOOC course was built with the CoI framework as its foundation. Each module explored one of the three components: teaching presence (which we referred to as instructor presence), social presence, and cognitive presence. *The Human Element* MOOC was designed to engage participants while encouraging them to reflect on and improve their own online teaching practices. While the learners were immersed in learning the CoI framework, the course wayfinders were modeling instructor presence and encouraging both social and cognitive presence.

The course was designed to be a professional development experience consisting of four weekly modules (see Table 1). The first module was meant to introduce participants to the MOOC and the remaining three modules aligned with each one of the presences of the CoI framework. The course objectives were:

- Experience the integration of educational technology tools in an online course context where an emphasis with technology can create personal interaction or instructor presence.
- Share insights and suggestions associated on how to “humanize” online courses by maximizing the use of flexible educational technology tools.
- Demonstrate how technology interactions can make instructors and learners seem more "real" online and how these interactions have an influence on learning (see Figure 1).

<Place Figure 1>

*Figure 1: Course home page and course objectives.*

Each module included an introduction, learning objectives, a to-do list, an annotated bibliography of further reading, video explanations of the topic, discussion boards for communication and community building, assignments to allow learners to practice new skills and opportunities to share their learning via social media and the web (see Figure 2). Additionally, VoiceThread was used to allow the participants to connect with the content of the course in a very relevant manner (Kilgore, Mangrum, & Miller, 2013). These items were included in each module to provide structure to the course and to maintain consistency from week to week (Burgess, Barth, & Mersereau, 2008; Caplan & Graham, 2004) as well as to ensure that the participants were given opportunities to connect with one another in this four-week course. Two webinars were scheduled to bring the participants together because live synchronous events can help establish presence (Butler & Evans, 2014; Fadde & Vu, 2014; Semingson, 2014). The first webinar, hosted by Michelle Pacansky-Brock, focused on humanizing online classes (a recording of the webinar is located at <http://www.insidehighered.com/audio/2013/10/09/humanizing-your-online-class>) and served an additional purpose of setting the stage for the weeks to come in the course. In addition to live webinars and asynchronous discussions, participants were also encouraged to use Twitter (using the #humanmooc hashtag) throughout the MOOC; Twitter can be an effective tool to establish connections and build social presence (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009a, 2009b).

**Week 0: Introduction.** The first module, called week zero, introduced participants to the course, provided a schedule of activities, and an explanation of how to participate in the MOOC using social media and blogs. While MOOCs are not new, we wanted to make sure that learners started this learning experience with a thorough introduction of the tools and the expectations. Learners were also encouraged to introduce themselves to their peers using the video capture tool in Canvas, share the URL to their blog, and complete a demographics survey. Research suggests that the shared social identity that could result from this sharing can contribute to learners' sense of belonging to *The Human Element* MOOC (Rogers & Lea, 2005). The facilitators made a concerted effort to welcome each participant individually as the research indicates that it is the perceived presence of the instructors that is influential in student satisfaction (Swan & Shih, 2005).

**Week 1: Instructor Presence.** The second module focused on teaching presence (which we referred to as instructor presence). The learning objectives were to identify and apply humanizing techniques that would enhance online courses, create and share an introduction video, and develop content that would enhance instructor presence. Learners were provided an overview to teaching presence using text, video, and announcements. Participants took part in a VoiceThread activity where they left comments on slides related to enhancing instructor presence because research suggests that these types of activities can build presence and humanize a course (Pacansky-Brock, 2013, 2014). They were also introduced to mobile apps like Explain Everything that can help establish teaching presence. The second webinar, hosted by Dr. Reshan Richards (inventor of the Explain Everything mobile app), focused on ways to build teaching presence with mobile apps. Finally, participants created an instructor introduction video for their own online courses and then shared their videos with fellow participants so that the community could learn from each other. Research has shown that instructor self-disclosure coupled with feedback on individual student's posts can strengthen a sense of connection and motivate students (Ke, 2010) and that teaching presence efforts can help build a community of learners and ultimately a sense of belonging in online courses (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Hostetter & Busch, 2013).

**Week 2: Social Presence.** The third module focused on social presence. This week the learning objectives were to examine the use of social media to extend the boundaries of the classroom, to differentiate between social presence in a class and social media presence, and to set achievable personal goals for utilizing social media tools and enhancement of social presence in online courses. Course Wayfinder Sam Brenton from the UK posted this week's video lecture on designing effective social learning activities. Guidelines on how to use Twitter to increase social presence were also shared. Within discussion boards, the participants shared some of their personal experiences with good and bad social learning activities and tools that they used to engage students in social activities, which the literature suggests can help establish their own social presence (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999). The discussion focused on the importance of thinking about pedagogy first and technology second when engaging learners. Participants were asked to set three to five of their own achievable goals to increase social presence in their courses and submit their personal plan as a course assignment.

**Week 3: Cognitive Presence.** The final module focused on cognitive presence. This week the learning objectives were to identify techniques and strategies for creating deep learning, to consider methods for student content curation and synthesis, and to develop and share an assignment where peer reviewing is utilized to enhance cognitive presence. Research indicates that teaching and social presence has a significant impact on cognitive presence (Archibald, 2010) and that promotion of critical thinking or critical inquiry skills requires both leadership and structure (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). In order to address cognitive presence in this module, learners explored ways that they could tap into cognitive presence by promoting critical thinking. Participants were asked to identify techniques and strategies that would strengthen learning outcomes, discuss the possibility of leveraging peer review to enhance cognitive presence, and explore having students curate content and explain the value of that content using a tool like TedEd. The course participants shared a TedEd lesson they created for their own online course. The community sharing led to new idea formation and modification of existing lessons by participants.

Table 1  
*The Human Element MOOC structure*

Week	Focus
Week 0	Introduction Introduction to the course, the instructor, and fellow learners.
Week 1	Instructor Presence Focused on identifying and apply humanizing technique that would enhance participants own online courses, create and share an introduction video and develop content that would enhance their instructor presence.
Week 2	Social presence Focused on using of social media to extend the boundaries of the classroom, to differentiate between social presence in a class and social media presence, and to set achievable personal goals for utilizing social media tools and enhancing social presence in their own courses.
Week 3	Cognitive presence Focused on identifying techniques and strategies that would strengthen learning outcomes, discuss the possibility of leveraging peer review to enhance cognitive presence, and explore having students curate content and explain the value of the content using a tool like TedEd.

<Place Figure 2>

Figure 2. Overview of each module.

One goal of *The Human Element* MOOC was for participants to not only learn about how to add the human element to their own courses but also to help them experience the human element first hand during *The Human Element* MOOC. In the following section, we will outline how we investigated participants' reaction to our humanizing efforts in this MOOC.

## METHOD

The Human Element MOOC was offered Oct 21, 2013 to Nov 24, 2013 in the Canvas Open Network (see: <https://www.canvas.net/courses/human-element-an-essential-online-course-component-1>). After four weeks of promoting the MOOC via social media sites and two webinar events, 697 participants were registered for the MOOC. While persistence is difficult to measure in MOOCs, of the 697 registered only 137 participants completed the first survey in week one—thus providing a more accurate estimate of how many people actively participated in the MOOC. Over ninety percent of the participants had a master's degree or higher and over half of them were 50 years or older (see Table 2). Of the 137 "active" participants, 56 people agreed to complete the CoI Questionnaire (CoIQ) during the last week of the course, of which 42 were female and 14 were male. While the participants' occupation was not collected on the survey, the learners self identified as instructors, distance education administrators, instructional designers, or trainers in the first discussion forum; 73% of the participants also indicated that they were currently teaching online.

Table 2  
*Demographics of Participants in the MOOC*

Participants	Education Background	Age	MOOC experience
137	91% Master's degree or higher	21-29 yrs old: 2%	0-1 MOOCs: 59%
		30-39 yrs old: 17%	2-3 MOOCs: 25%
		40-49 yrs old: 30%	4-5 MOOCs: 11%
		50-59 yrs old: 33%	6-8 MOOCs: 5%
		60+ yrs old: 18%	

The CoIQ was developed by a team of researchers (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Swan et al., 2008) to investigate students' perceptions of each of the three components of the CoI framework. The CoIQ asks students about their perceptions of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. The section focused on social presence consists of nine questions (see table 3)--three questions focus on affective expression, three questions focus on open communication, and three questions focus on group cohesion.

Table 3

*CoIQ Social Presence Questions*

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Social Presence

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*Affective expression*

- 14. Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course.
- 15. I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants.
- 16. Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.

*Open communication*

- 17. I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium.
- 18. I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions.
- 19. I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants.

*Group cohesion*

- 20. I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust.
  - 21. I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants.
  - 22. Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration.
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We also collected voice, video, and text feedback left on VoiceThreads within the course to capture students' perceptions of social presence and to add some voice to the results. Last but not least, three participants, who were very active in the MOOC and on Twitter, were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire six months after the MOOC ended to see how they have integrated what they learned in *The Human Element* MOOC into their own teaching.

## RESULTS

In the following section we present the results of our inquiry. We first present the results from the CoIQ. We then highlight some themes that emerged from the VoiceThread comments and the follow up interviews.

### Community of Inquiry Questionnaire

During the last module of the MOOC, 56 participants completed the CoIQ. The participants responses to the social presence questions on the CoIQ averaged 2.94 on a scale ranging from 0=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly agree—with agree being the most common response across all nine questions. When looking at the results for each of the three categories of social presence, participants rated open communication ( $M=3.07$ ) the highest, followed next by affective expression ( $M=2.96$ ), and then group cohesion ( $M=2.80$ ).

While the overall means can be helpful to compare each category, we find it more helpful to look at how participants answered each question. There are three questions focused on affective expression. The most common response for all three questions was that they agree. More specifically, over 89% of participants reported that they either agree or strong agree that online communication is an excellent medium for social interaction, 75% of participants reported that they agree or strongly agree that they were able to form distinct impressions of other course participants, and 63% reported that they agree or strongly agree that getting to know others gave them a sense of belonging in the course (see Table 4 and Figure 3). The CoIQ has three questions that focus on students' perceptions of open communication. There was less variability with open communication with 82% of participants reporting that they agree or

strongly agree that they felt comfortable conversing through the online medium, 79% reported that they agree or strongly agree that they were comfortable participating in discussion, and then 82% reported that they agree or strongly agree that they were comfortable interacting with each other. While the overall average response for group cohesion was lower than the other two categories of social presence, participants still overall reported that they agree with each question. When asked if they were comfortable disagreeing with others 57% reported that they agree or strongly agree, then 67% reported that they agree or strongly agree that their point of view was acknowledged, and finally 75% reported that they agree or strongly agree that they felt online discussions helped to develop a sense of collaboration (see Table 4 and Figure 3).

Table 4  
*CoIQ Social Presence Results by Question*

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
<i>Affective expression</i>						
14. Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course.	1.82% (1)	9.09% (5)	25.45% (14)	38.18% (21)	25% (14)	2.76
15. I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants.	0.00% (0)	5.36% (3)	19.64% (11)	57.14% (32)	17.86% (10)	2.88
16. Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.	0.00% (0)	0.00% (0)	10.91% (6)	54.55% (30)	34.55% (19)	3.24
<i>Open communication</i>						
17. I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium.	0.00% (0)	8.93% (5)	8.93% (5)	48.21% (27)	33.93% (19)	3.07
18. I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions.	0.00% (0)	3.57% (2)	17.86% (10)	48.21% (27)	30.36% (17)	3.05
19. I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants.	0.00% (0)	3.57% (2)	14.29% (8)	53.57% (30)	28.57% (16)	3.07
<i>Group cohesion</i>						
20. I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust.	1.79% (1)	3.57% (2)	37.50% (21)	39.29% (22)	17.86% (10)	2.68
21. I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants.	0.00% (0)	5.56% (3)	27.78% (15)	46.30% (25)	20.37% (11)	2.81
22. Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration.	1.79% (1)	3.57% (2)	19.64% (11)	53.57% (30)	21.43% (12)	2.89

<Place Figure 3>

Figure 3. Frequency of responses to the social presence questions in the CoIQ.

## VoiceThread Comments

We found that the ongoing dialogue using VoiceThread, discussion forums, video announcements, and Twitter chats strengthened the human presence within the course. As the course was coming to an end, we asked participants to reflect on their learning and use VoiceThread to leave behind

advice for future faculty regarding the development of social presence in an online course. The following are comments from participants in the MOOC.

### **Participant #1**

I think a key lesson that I've learned is to think about establishing social presence outside the LMS, and to try to get students where they actually live. When I try to establish conversations on the discussion board ... I don't get a lot of student participation. But the first time that I used Twitter in class... It really made a difference as far as student buy-in, largely because they were already on Twitter, and because that's where they live, that's a good place to get them to socialize about the class and with the class outside of the classroom.

### **Participant #2**

Be open to trying new things. Social presence is a staple of digital native communication. You will get through to them better if you take the time to learn at least one social tool.

### **Participant #3**

Be friendly: find ways to interact with students informally outside the LMS. Everything doesn't need to be linked to a cognitive objective. Of course, retention is a valuable objective, and our social presence can make a difference.

Some themes present in participants responses and captured in these quotes include: The importance of engaging students and building presence not only within but also outside of the Learning Management System, the power of social media tools like Twitter to engage and connect with students, and the importance of social presence when it comes to student retention and persistence.

Not all of the comments were positive. For instance, participants reported technical problems such as “can't get voice to record in VoiceThread” or “Sorry, can't get the VoiceThread to record my voice for some reason – still troubleshooting.” Some participants also were apprehensive about creating instructor videos for various reasons as illustrated in the following comments:

- I'll admit to being a little anxious about using video in my online classes. I haven't done it yet, but I might. One of the joys of online teaching is not having to worry about my appearance.
- Tech scares me. I don't have a camera on my computer.
- At one university I teach for, we record our lectures, the problem is that the field I am in changes and updating recorded lectures is a big pain.
- One of the things I think's going to be a challenge now with ADA is coming up with a script that isn't too formal and still provides that personal self.

## **Follow-up Interviews**

We designed *The Human Element* MOOC to help improve how people teach online courses. Therefore, we were interested in seeing how participants put to practice things they learned in the MOOC. Six months after *The Human Element* MOOC ended, we asked three participants to share how their experience in the MOOC had informed their practice. Each of these participants had different experiences with online learning; one was an instructional designer, one was an online student and future administrator of distance education programs, and one was an online instructor. Their perspectives on the course provide further insights into the strength of human connections in online courses.

### **Participant #1 – Instructional Designer**

As an instructional designer I am always looking for ways to improve my eLearning. I must confess that I am a cafeteria MOOCer who has enrolled in many MOOCs over the past few years. I may come in, take what I like, and perhaps never finish. I am currently enrolled in three MOOCs right now. However, my experience with the Human MOOC was different. Expecting to

find more information about technology like VoiceThread and not innovative uses of it... I found the opposite. We actually connected with each other as we all learned with the technology. Early on in the course I was reminded that online learners no matter what we do we are still “learning alone” even when a MOOC may have thousands of students. Through using something as simple as Twitter (which I am already connected) the learning came outside of the classroom and into my pocket when I followed the hashtag #HumanMOOC. To this day I am still connected with these learners, reading their blogs, continuing conversations, and sharing resources. The Human Element MOOC was such a rewarding way to build my PLN and engage firsthand in effective eLearning pedagogy.

### **Participant #2 – Future Distance Education Administrator**

To some, online learning is a contradiction in terms. Educational purists who resist the idea that pedagogy can be practiced online with outcomes equal to those in a face-to-face classroom have likely never taken an online course or have formed their opinions from anecdotal information. By the time #humanmoooc launched, I had already taken a number of graduate courses online. I am studying for a master’s degree in administration of online learning, so I felt #humanmoooc would provide a prime opportunity to try out a MOOC, as well as learn more about enhancing the experiences of online students. I was in the middle of a semester and our online professor had all but disappeared from making announcements, discussion boards, and blogs. Although the students did a good job of going it alone, we were becoming more and more disengaged. No one needed to convince me of the power of social presence. Enter #humanmoooc. Suddenly I was wholly engaged with people from all over the globe and going way out of my comfort zone by opening a Twitter account and starting a blog on WordPress. We chatted as a group on Twitter, and visited each other’s blogs in addition to contributing to traditional discussion boards. We learned new techniques and had Aha! moments due to the interaction. The facilitators encouraged us by participating in the discussions without being intrusive. Our discussions were rich and lively, and I found myself helping other students navigate the course. While this group was extremely diverse, we had one thing in common: a desire to improve students’ online educational experiences. In my opinion, we learned how to do that under ideal circumstances – firsthand.

### **Participant #3 – Online Instructor**

I enrolled in the Human Element mini-MOOC in two primary capacities: as an instructor preparing to pilot an online class for the first time, and as a faculty developer responsible for assisting colleagues in incorporating blended learning technology into their pedagogy. I found [the MOOC] ... amazingly helpful! Some of the principles we discussed (the importance of instructor presence in video lecture materials, for instance) affirmed some effective ideas I had already stumbled upon as a blended learning experimenter. It was reassuring to learn that some of my best guesses were key best practices backed by research in online instruction. It was also comforting to try and to discuss different online teaching strategies with a community of interested learners. But the larger framework of principles for the course – instructor presence, social presence, cognitive presence – are not only important for online instruction, but have informed my pedagogy more broadly. I have incorporated pedagogical strategies such as flipping YouTube video lessons through TED-Ed and the Twitter class discussion into my own largely face-to-face classes. I am looking forward to experimenting with VoiceThread in my pilot online course this summer. And the three-part presence framework is truly helpful for communicating the potential for a humanized online experiment to other constituencies on campus, particularly online education skeptics.

While these comments only represent 3 of the 56 participants who completed the CoIQ, some common themes emerge. First they each highlight the importance of effective pedagogy when it comes to designing online learning experiences. They also point out how the participants are still connected to

many people that they met during *The Human Element* MOOC. They also mention how they have tried new ways to humanize courses they design and teach. And finally they point out how effective it was learning about the human element through first hand experience.

## DISCUSSION

MOOCs are often described as impersonal learning experiences with little to no human interaction that rely too heavily on video lectures and multiple-choice questions (Baggaley, 2013). However, MOOCs can be much more than computer-based training. MOOCs can be centers of innovation and exploration that allow educators to try new pedagogical approaches, test tools, and understand how participants learn. In *The Human Element* MOOC, the facilitators attempted to explore the use of presence to overcome this “impersonal” nature of MOOCs and online learning as a whole by leveraging the affordances of technology that improved communications and established presence within the course.

Establishing social presence is a very important part of adding the human element to online learning. We set forth to investigate how effective we were with establishing social presence in *The Human Element* MOOC. The CoIQ results suggest that overall the participants who completed the survey agree or strongly agree that they perceived effective expression, open communication, and group cohesion in this online professional development experience. Despite researchers interest in social presence, the literature has not identified an optimal level of social presence. In other words, the research does not offer much guidance whether or not an average social presence score of 2.94 is optimal. We can compare our results to other studies. For instance, using the CoIQ, Swan et al. (2008), reported an average social presence score of 3.18, Lowenthal and Dunlap (2011) reported an average social presence score of 2.85, and then in another study Lowenthal et al. (2009) reported an average score of 3.03 (Lowenthal, Lowenthal, & White, 2009). However, comparing averages of ordinal data across different studies researching online courses in very different contexts has limited value. For instance, these other studies surveyed students taking for-credit 8-16 week college courses whereas *The Human Element* MOOC was a 4 week professional development experience grounded in the Community of Inquiry framework being taken mostly by people with advanced degrees who teach online.

We set forth to investigate our participants perceptions of social presence in a MOOC focused on humanizing online courses. When looking at the individual responses, a few participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with certain questions. For instance, question 14 which asked “Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course” (Affective Communication) had over 10% of participants disagree or strongly disagree. Unfortunately this is not surprising. Research suggests that students have different social presence needs (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Lowenthal, 2012; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2011) and respond differently to different instructional strategies. While our findings should not be generalized, they do suggest that participants as a whole in our course were able to experience social presence first hand and that social presence can be established in large online courses.

## IMPLICATIONS

We found that social presence can be established in a large online course if faculty and instructional designers take the time to design intentional learning experiences that help establish and maintain social presence using a variety of technologies while they also actively engage learners and model effective ways to communicate throughout an entire course. While more research needs to be conducted on various contexts, the following tips can help faculty humanize their large enrollment online courses:

- (a) Create a course trailer to get students interested in the content of the course.
- (b) Allow students to use voice or video to introduce themselves to their classmates.
- (c) Provide opportunities for social interaction and community building inside and outside the course (i.e. twitter, google community, LinkedIn, other).
- (d) Have students critically analyze content for sharing with the community of learners (curation).

- (e) Continue the conversation beyond the last day of the course using a course hashtag on Twitter.
- (f) Give student feedback on assignments using voice or video.

## CONCLUSION

*The Human Element* was designed to help instructors of online courses learn how to leverage technology guided by the Community of Inquiry to humanize instruction. The findings from this study suggest that a community of inquiry can be developed in a short period of time within a MOOC. Though the attention focused on MOOCs has primarily been on how they will disrupt traditional higher education, our experience suggests that MOOCs might be a useful approach for professional development in the future. The participants learned pedagogical techniques that they incorporated into their online and face-to-face instruction, had rich lively discussions, and many are still connected months after the course ended. While the results suggest that participants might not have felt comfortable enough to disagree with each other, this may have been because they did not have enough time in four weeks to establish the level of trust required to be able to argue their point. Future professional development offerings like this one have the potential to improve distance education by continually offering pedagogical guidance to faculty who teach online.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

- **MOOC:** Massive Open Online Courses is a term coined in 2008 with the advent of connectivist MOOCs, that describe online course that anyone can take for free.
- **Online learning:** Learning that occurs in which the majority of the instruction takes place away from a college or university using web-based delivery systems.
- **Community of Inquiry:** A framework that argues that effective educational experiences consist of three types of presence—cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.
- **Social Presence:** The perception of others as being “real” and “there” when using a communication medium.
- **Wayfinders:** The MOOC term for the “coaches” who help guide participants to meet their own learning goals, as opposed to instructors who direct learning.