



Game on

*To set itself apart, a community college
creates a different kind of MOOC*

Overview

Massive Open Online Courses—known as MOOCs—are catching on. Valued for their ability to reach an international audience through the web, they blend traditional educational tools, such as videos, with open forums for discussion to create rich academic communities.

As of early 2013, the only MOOCs offered in Canada were typically at the university level. They were theory-based and led by academics. Could a community college compete?

Fanshawe College in London, Ontario, wanted to be the first to find out.

For its creation of the unique Applied Sustainability MOOC, Fanshawe won the 2013 Desire2EXCEL Award for Innovation.

AT A GLANCE

Client	Fanshawe College
Students	1,008 since inception
Level	Community College
Solutions	Brightspace Open Courses

CHALLENGE

- Differentiate the MOOC from other Higher Education offerings
- Attract and retain students

SOLUTION

- Develop the MOOC to look and feel like a game
- Offer learners options
- Transform professor to explorer

RESULT¹

- 538 students from 17 countries enrolled in first cohort
- 17.5% retention, more than double typical MOOC retention
- 22% retention for second cohort

¹ Results provided by Fanshawe College



Challenge

HOW TO CELEBRATE THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE DIFFERENCE

Being the first to create a community college MOOC meant carving a swath through unknown territory, taking big risks, and facing the possibility of failure. They might build it, but would the learners come?

"We knew we had huge competition," says Wendy Wilson, MOOC Coordinator at Fanshawe College. "We didn't have any superstar professors, nor did we have the cachet of a Harvard, or even a University of Toronto. We wanted to be first out of the gate, and we wanted to get some positive attention."

At the same time, it was important to set out in a direction appropriate for Canada's community colleges. "We wanted to show that colleges are practical, pragmatic, applied institutions where you can learn to do something rather than just learn theory," says Wilson.

Of course, to be successful, a MOOC has to do more than attract students—it also has to keep them. Because there are no academic credits associated with the MOOC, that's a challenge.



Solution

THEY KNEW WHAT WAS POSSIBLE—AND MADE IT HAPPEN

Fanshawe College is no stranger to Brightspace technology. Wilson and her co-administrator Ryan Walmsley have worked together on the Fanshawe College version of the Brightspace platform, branded as FanshaweOnline, or more commonly "FOL," for years.

"Building the MOOC on the Brightspace platform was easy because we are so familiar with their learning management system," says Walmsley.

"Brightspace technology is flexible, so we knew we could be creative. We were able to inject some fun aspects you wouldn't see on a university MOOC and give students meaningful options. We created a course that personalizes learning paths within a comprehensive structure—that's what a great MOOC is all about."

COLOR LEVELS GIVE IT GAME

The first step was choosing a subject with enough drawing power to give the MOOC a fighting chance. The Fanshawe team gravitated to the subject of sustainability in the areas of construction, architecture, design and urban planning. Not only is sustainability topical, it's a passion of Wilson's.



“I liked the fact that we were able to customize the course easily, and that we had a lot of control over what we were able to do. Really, working with D2L on our MOOC was like developing a regular online course, and then offering it to the world.”

Ryan Walmsley, MOOC Co-administrator, Fanshawe College

Solution continued

A masterstroke of their new Applied Sustainability MOOC—and what gives it the look and feel of a game—is that it's designed in levels. The levels mimic Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, which is foundational to the field of sustainability. Green is for weekly quizzes, silver is for discussing specific topics, and students at the gold level take on tasks like a garbage audit. Platinum students do an extended project, such as a Sketchup home design.

Levels allow students to choose how much effort they want to invest. "Comments show that some students see the levels as a kind of game they want to win," says Wilson. "Others see the pressure of achieving a higher level as a motivator."

BRIGHTSPACE TECHNOLOGY MAKES IT PERSONAL

According to Walmsley, using Brightspace tools helps them engage on an individual basis with students to benefit retention.

"We enabled Intelligent Agents so that the system could respond to certain student actions—or inactions—without the need for manual instructor intervention in every case. We know that feedback is most valuable when it arrives quickly, and this tool helps us deliver individualized responses, including the final letter of completion, almost instantaneously."

"Conditional releases help us liberate students from linear, cookie-cutter course design. By setting up 'success conditions,' we can automatically restrict information and activities until each student is ready." He adds, "The result is a warmer, more personalized experience."



AN EXPLORER KEEPS IT EXCITING

Since Fanshawe can't compete with famous professors, they changed the game. An explorer leads their MOOC. Rather than being armed with theories, he is armed with fascinating YouTube videos featuring interviews at wastewater treatment plants, green homes, LEED-certified buildings, and public spaces such as markets and town squares.

"Matt describes himself as the stand-in for the audience," says Wilson about Matt Farrell, a Fanshawe faculty member with an interest in sustainability who acts as the explorer. "His enthusiasm for the topics has a noticeably positive effect on the experts he interviews and draws out their best information and stories."

"I think the true innovation is the use of choice, and the use of the explorer, rather than the professor/talking head, and the fact that we actually went places and talked to experts on site."

Wendy Wilson, MOOC Coordinator, Fanshawe College

Result

LEARNERS CAME, LEARNERS STAYED

Wilson and her team were right—the topic pulled in the learners. Enrollment swelled to 538 students from 17 countries within three weeks of launch.² There was a broad cross-section, including Fanshawe students and PhD students from abroad as well as the parents of college students learning alongside their offspring.

A greater indication of success, however, is the 17.5% completion rate.³ According to an oft-quoted study by PhD student Katy Jordan, who has gathered completion data on 29 MOOCs from around the world, the average completion rate is less than 7%. By that standard, Applied Sustainability is wildly successful.

Outcomes from the MOOC were applied to a second cohort offered later in the year. Some minor fixes early in the course led to an increase in the completion rate to 22%.⁴

“Understanding early reactions is crucial to retention. Once you have them, most of them stick around,” says Wilson.

MOOC RETENTION⁵

Typical university MOOC	6.8%
Applied Sustainability (first cohort)	17.5%
Applied Sustainability (second cohort)	22%



APPLIED SUSTAINABILITY MOOC AGE OF PARTICIPANT⁶

20 or younger	21%
21–25	25%
26–35	19%
36–50	14%
50+	19%



APPLIED SUSTAINABILITY MOOC LEVEL OF EDUCATION⁷

High school	29%
Community College Diploma	26%
Bachelor's Degree	28%
Masters or Ph.D.	11%



About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | www.brightspace.com

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