

Synergia Project

1. Scope & Purpose

The Synergia Project is a new initiative whose purpose is to promote online learning technology to support the diffusion of co-operative knowledge (both formal and tacit) and practice to meet the challenges of building a sustainable, equitable, and socially just future. A key aim of the project is to bridge the international co-operative movement with the emerging movement for a new commons and the global movement for sustainability.

Housed at the Athabasca University (AU) and supported by the participation of British Columbia-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance (BALTA) in Canada, Co-operatives UK, Schumacher College, and the P2P Foundation, the project commenced in December 2013 with a dialogue process that engages key innovators and experts from the co-op, new commons and sustainability fields to participate in the design and content of an online learning platform using MOOC technology. The project is funded by the AU Research Fund.

The completion of the program design and the confirmation of the MOOC content comprise Stage 1 of the project. Stage 2 entails the completion of the MOOC “curriculum” and the launch of the Synergia MOOC with links to concrete development opportunities on the ground.

The project is being co-ordinated by Mike Gismondi at the Centre for Social Science at AU. John Restakis, Research Associate with Co-operatives UK and Research Investigator with the FLOK Project, is Lead Researcher for the Project and Pat Conaty, Research Associate with Co-operatives UK, is the Research Lead for the UK.

2. Research Activities

The primary focus of the research is on documenting the process by which the MOOC is designed and put together using a dialogical process that engages key experts and practitioners from the target fields of co-operatives, new commons and ecological economics, and the open learning community. This is a horizontal discussion among peers and practitioners across all these sectors.

The focus in this first stage is also on the most effective design for online learning platforms that enable high levels of online engagement and learning among participants and high levels of knowledge transfer and application for local development purposes by practitioners and stakeholders in key movements. Particular attention will be given to MOOC C models that encourage horizontal connections among participants, as opposed to MOOC X models, which entail more of a broadcast approach with users.

The key activities of Stage 1 include the following:

1. Identify key contributors and participants in the MOOC design
2. Clarify primary audience and content of the course
3. Confirm MOOC design and learning methodology
4. Clarify how the MOOC links to effective practical application to local development work

In summary, the research will document the best available evidence on how people learn best using online technology and also identify the best principles for designing online learning projects with a practical application across a variety of regions and local conditions.

Our project is concurrent with an initiative at Athabasca U and funded by the Gates Foundation, which looks critically at MOOCs and is exploring the best practices in online learning as they apply to the design of large open online courses. We hope to benefit from access to these discussions and the MOOC type software being tested at AU.

3. Synergia Partnerships

Under the BALTA project in Canada, co-operative knowledge diffusion, adaptation and knowledge transfer is already occurring from the UK to Canada and has been bearing fruit over the past two years in relation to Community Land Trust development in British Columbia and Co-operative capital raising in rural towns of Alberta. There is also evidence emerging of early stage knowledge transfer happening the other way from the multi-stakeholder Solidarity Co-operatives expertise in Quebec to emerging social co-operative developments in both Wales and England in the social care field.

A key element in Stage 1 is the recruitment of key supporters and contributors that will be essential both for co-designing the MOOC and for contributing to the delivery of the program itself. Participants will include those with technical knowledge of MOOC systems, plus individuals with a diverse range of expertise among co-operative institutions, university and educational bodies, and civil society organizations in the peer-to-peer, commons, social economy and environmental sectors.

Experienced specialists and practitioners will be drawn from three primary fields: the international co-operative movement, the commons and peer-to-peer movement and the sustainability movement. A special effort will also be made to build upon existing relationships and partnerships in Canada, the UK and Latin America.

4. Commitment: What are we asking from Partners?

In Stage 1, we are asking primarily for expert reflection and input into the overall design of the MOOC in accordance with the principles of horizontal engagement and open dialogue outlined at the start of this paper. This will entail an intensive discussion and critical reflection process that will form the foundation for the design and content of the MOOC.

In Stage 2, we are asking for commitments from partners to provide content for the MOOC and for which they will act as facilitators or instructors, for a specified period of time. Some of the participants in Stage 1 will also be involved in Stage 2; others will be invited in for this stage alone.

In Stage 2 we will also be seeking the organizational support of key partnering organizations to assist in the marketing of the MOOC and the engagement of stakeholders within their respective networks, both online and on the ground.

Finally, this process of recruitment and engagement of individuals and organizations to provide expertise and organizational support for the MOOC will establish the nucleus of a Synergia network that can continue to modify and improve the transfer and exchange of knowledge and best practices across the key sectors described above.

Key organizations recruited to date include: Athabasca University; BALTA; Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan; Centre for Co-operative and Community-based Economy (CCCBE), University of Victoria; Alberta Co-operative and Community Association (ACCA); Co-operatives UK; Schumacher College; P2P Foundation; New Economics Foundation; and the Plunkett Foundation.