

A complex network diagram with nodes and edges. Nodes are represented by circles and squares in black, yellow, and grey. Edges are thin grey lines connecting the nodes. The diagram is dense and fills the entire background.

Doing Digital Humanities

Concepts, Approaches, Cases

Edited by Joacim Hansson and Jonas Svensson

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Teaching Humanities Online

Practical Examples from Linnaeus University

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& Linda Piltz*

Introduction

The focus in this chapter is on teaching humanities using different digital tools and platforms and how this can both challenge existing practices and develop new ways of teaching subjects like languages and comparative literature.

At Linnaeus University (LNU) we have extensive experience of developing online courses but there is a constant need to strengthen digital pedagogy in order to meet both the expectations and the needs of new students. For example, teaching online requires a different kind of scaffolding than teaching on campus and the importance of developing the digital literacy of both teachers and students is crucial. If the goals of humanities are to discuss and develop an informed critique, to provide a different way of looking at the world and to question it, a practice that has been taught in very similar ways using the seminar model where teacher and students present and challenge each other's analyses, how can this practice be moved from a physical room to a virtual

one? Can using digital tools actually improve these decades-old humanist didactical practices?

Using two examples from Linnaeus University; the open online course: *Fantastic Fiction* and *Where to Find It* and blended learning including a MOOC in a course for academic writing, this chapter discusses both challenges and opportunities in teaching humanities online using a variety of digital tools.

Teaching Online: MOOCs

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have a well-documented history originating in a course devised by George Siemens and Stephen Downes, *Connectivism and Connectivity Knowledge*, at the University of Manitoba in 2008. The course was offered to 27 fee-paying campus students and then extended as an open, free course attracting 2,200 participants from all over the world. The aim was to investigate the potential of collaborative learning in connected networks in line with the concept of connectivism as defined by Siemens (2005). It also coincided with and was dependent on the growth of open educational resources and open education where educators share, reuse and adapt teaching resources using open licenses such as Creative Commons. These early MOOCs shared this collaborative and open approach and were generally aimed at educators and researchers, generally recruiting through online communities and with little or no financial backing.

In 2011 however, the concept hit the headlines as a Stanford University MOOC in artificial intelligence attracted 160,000 registrations. This prompted a rush of high-profile universities into the field resulting in the formation of the global MOOC consortia that still dominate the market today: Coursera, EdX, Udacity, FutureLearn and many more. The MOOC boom of the period 2011–2014 was characterised by massive registration numbers,

low completion rates and considerable debate around the instructional nature of the majority of courses with a standard format of recorded lectures plus multiple-choice quizzes. This contrasted sharply with the collaborative and less massive nature of the original variety of MOOCs that still continued to thrive, though very much in the shadow of the headline-grabbing consortia.

Over the last eight years, the concept of the MOOC has been interpreted in many different ways to the extent that the term is rather misleading today. In particular, the term *open* may be questioned since many consortia today charge fees for certification, access to tuition and even for registration. Furthermore, the teaching material in most MOOCs is fully copyright and cannot be reused and the course material is only visible to registered users.

Despite this, the commonly held definition of a MOOC is expressed as follows:

MOOCs are online courses designed for large numbers of participants, can be accessed by anyone anywhere as long as they have an Internet connection, are open to everyone without entry qualifications and offer a full/complete course experience online for free. (Mulder & Jansen 2015)

Although there are many examples of MOOCs being offered for university credits, as well as full degree programs being offered using MOOCs (with significant fees), the majority of courses are offered as lifelong learning, offering an introduction to a topic or focusing on a specific skill. Institutions who offer MOOCs today see them as an integral part of their outreach activities; showcasing the institution, raising its national and international profile and attracting students to regular programs. For this reason, it is generally not fruitful to compare MOOCs with for-credit courses (either campus-based or online). One often reported benefit of offering MOOCs is the spin-off effect they have on developing the

quality of for-credit programs in terms of using digital platforms and tools (Macleod et al. 2015).

Interest in MOOCs in Sweden has not been particularly strong although a number of institutions have offered courses through the major MOOC consortia. The considerable investments needed to offer courses via the global consortia mean that smaller institutions have needed to find other channels for offering open courses (massive or not). There are, therefore, a considerable number of smaller open online courses run on a variety of platforms and offered without major marketing campaigns. These are often bottom-up initiatives where groups of teachers decide to offer an open course in order to attract new student groups to their subject area and where the course material developed for the open course is also reused in regular for-credit courses. This is the case in the courses described in this article developed at Linnaeus University.

Example 1: The First MOOC

As the Swedish Higher Education Authority points out in the report *Öppna nätbaserade kurser (MOOCs) i svensk högskola* (2016), many international higher education institutions offer MOOCs (UKÄ 2016, 6). Nevertheless, as mentioned before in this chapter, the interest in MOOCs in Sweden has not been particularly strong and only a few Swedish higher education institutions have been or are involved in MOOCs (UKÄ 2016, 6). As Löwe, Nilsson, Piltz and Creelman mentions in a Moonlite-report (2019), the Department of film and literature's MOOC *Fantastic Fiction and Where to Find It* was the first department at Linnaeus University to organize a MOOC (Löwe et al. 2019, 11). Furthermore, the Department of Film and Literature at Linnaeus University was also a pioneer in the field of comparative literature since the MOOC included content found in for example genre studies related to fantastic fiction and fantasy (Piltz 2018, 5).

So why should a higher education institution get involved in MOOCs? What are the strategic purposes and benefits? According to an internal report and a report from the Erasmus and MOONLITE-project, the strategic reason of the MOOC *Fantastic Fiction and Where to Find It*, can be linked to several factors (Piltz 2018, 6f; Löwe et al. 2019, 6–7). To begin with, a MOOC can raise interest in the university, raise its international profile and offer participating students an international learning environment without the need for physical mobility. Moreover, a MOOC can create opportunities for collaboration between researchers, create opportunities for global, national, regional and local dialogues, and contribute to social benefits and collaboration with the rest of society. Secondly, a MOOC can contribute to spreading social, cultural, global and democratic values and open up for sustainable education, learning and development overall. Thirdly, a MOOC can reach students that are difficult to reach otherwise, such as first generation graduates and/or international students who lack the financial conditions for a traditional university education. As a result, MOOCs can contribute to widened participation in higher education. Moreover, the web-based courses can serve as a kind of entrance point to higher education as well as inspiring and motivating lifelong learning (UKÄ 2016, 6f). In terms of financial goals, a MOOC offers the opportunity to register more students than a traditional campus course, and a MOOC has the potential to attract thousands of students to each course. Furthermore, developing a MOOC creates opportunities for developing digital learning, digital higher education and digital competence (UKÄ 2016, 6–8) for teachers. The development process of a MOOC can also improve the quality of other courses, both campus courses and online courses, and the study material produced for the MOOC can be used in other courses: a very positive side effect that also can lead to an important financial benefit.

Regarding Fantastic Fiction and Where to Find It, the beginning of the open online course can be traced back to a small group of dedicated teachers who were – and are – committed to making education accessible to a broad audience (Löwe et al. 2019, 8). All of the teachers have researched fantasy literature and wanted to share their knowledge with interested students from all over the world. Moreover, fantasy and fantastic fiction are extremely popular globally. In March 2017, the project became a pilot project at the Communication office at Linnaeus University and because of this opportunity in combination with generous financial support from the Department of Film and Literature, the MOOC could be finalized (Piltz 2018, 7; Löwe et al. 2019, 11). To date, four iterations have been completed. On the four iterations completed, there have been 1,750 registered participants. A minority of these participants have been LNU students or students from other Swedish universities. In addition, there have also been participants from Sweden who have no previous experience of academic studies or higher education in general. However, the majority of participants has been international students, with and without academic experience. This in turn can create opportunities for international exchanges and perspectives in general, as well as attracting and increasing recruitment of international students to higher education programs in Sweden.

To highlight some basic facts, Fantastic Fiction and Where to Find It consists of five modules: “Introduction to Fantasy Literature”, “Children’s Fantasy Literature”, “Time Travelling Fantasy Literature”, “Feminist Fantasy Literature” and “Horror and Fantasy Literature”. The layout in each module follows the same model: Firstly, a short presentation of the teacher who is responsible for the module. Secondly, expected learning outcomes for the module. Thirdly, lectures and interviews. The participants can choose to watch the lecture on the video platform LnuPlay or

read a written version of the lecture. Fourthly, links to required reading and additional study material. All study materials are free and available online. Lastly, each module ends with a quiz and a discussion assignment that deals with the topic presented in the module. In order to pass the course and get a MOOC-certificate, the participants must finish all five quizzes and discussion assignments. However, several participants choose to not do the entire course, which in relation to MOOCs should not be seen as something problematic or negative (Hubbard 2015, 14). Regarding the focus on fantasy and fantastic fiction, this can be linked to the department's other courses, potential hybrid courses and the teachers' areas of research interest.

As *Fantastic Fiction and How to Find It* is now on its fourth iteration, we have made a few changes. The course is now open for six months, giving students ample time to finish the course if they wish to do so. We have added a module focusing on teaching fantasy literature in the classroom, as a number of our students were teachers. This module is not an official part of the course, but a non-mandatory addition. The most important change we have made regards scaffolding. We now have a more active presence on the course with a TA who every week makes an announcement, encourages students to discuss with each other and, now and then, joins these discussions, urging students to continue them. When students are “seen”, when their assignments are read, not only by a TA but also by other students, it helps motivate them to complete the course.

Example 2: MOOC in a Campus Course on Academic Writing in a German Class

A course in academic writing is part of the second semester of studying German. This course has many challenges for the students. First of all, they need sufficient language skills to read aca-

demically, to produce texts fluently in German and to work independently. Secondly, they have to master the features of the genre “Academic essay”: starting with finding relevant research questions and formulating a research thesis, grasping the state of research and moving up to formal aspects for instance; how to cite appropriately. For many students, this is new territory if they have moved directly from high school to university. If they already have previous experience in writing English or Swedish essays, they may find that the German scientific tradition is quite different. All this is covered by the four ECTS credits course *Academic Writing* (Vetenskapligt skrivande), with the aim being to prepare students for their future Bachelor thesis. The workload is calculated to be about 40 hours over four weeks.

Due to decreasing student numbers in language courses over the last years, teachers cannot offer so many direct teaching hours for the course. This is a dilemma since the students’ language skills have also deteriorated over the years and teachers cannot compensate with enough classroom lessons. Obviously, there was a strong need to rethink the course concept. When Linnaeus University participated in the Erasmus+ project Moonlite in 2017, we redesigned the course (see also Traeger et al. 2018, 114–115). The primary aim of the redesign was to ensure more time for individual support for the course students.

With a blended learning concept, a learning model combining both formal (traditional seminars) with non-formal (online course) methodologies, we have replaced a couple of lessons with materials from a MOOC. The MOOC, *Wissenschaftliches Denken, Arbeiten und Schreiben*, has been produced by Fachhochschule Münster on the platform Iversity. The MOOC is a self-paced course, consisting of eight lectures, accessible all year round. The course provides filmed lectures, articles, short assignments and quizzes. The students can either follow the whole course or choose several films and lectures. In the study guide,

the teacher lists the films that are necessary to fulfil the assignments. Although the schedule for the course has slightly changed over the years, the basic working principles have remained the same:

- *Week 1:* The course starts on campus with an introductory lecture, where the teachers present the course aim and structure, discuss examples and present the work with the MOOC.
- *Week 2:* The students work in parallel with the MOOC and step-by-step develop their thesis project.
- *Week 3:* Students send their project proposal to classmates for feedback. Seminar: Students present and discuss their PM.
- *Week 4:* Students work with their thesis, mentored by the teacher. Students work with the MOOC. Students send their thesis for the next round of feedback to their study group. At the end of week 4, students send their thesis for review to the teacher.

After the first session, the students and the teacher expressed their satisfaction with the course. The students mentioned as positive elements the ability to watch the lectures several times. The access to the content from anywhere, anytime and on any device created an individual and flexible learning environment and this was much appreciated. The follow up-seminars in class helped the students to keep deadlines, reflect and get input on their work.

The clear structure of the course prepared the students for the seminars. Classroom time could be effectively spent answering questions. It was not difficult to access both Linnaeus University's learning platform MyMoodle and the MOOC platform Iversity, even if students would have preferred all material to be in one place. Some minor problems occurred. Some students were

already skilled in writing academic papers and therefore felt it unnecessary to both watch films/do the tasks on the MOOC and attend lectures. One student mentioned that he/she liked campus lectures better and another one did not use the MOOC at all.

Over all, the good results – all students passed the course with good grades – encouraged the teacher to continue with the concept. From the teachers' viewpoint, more benefits were clear: the students were much more engaged in their learning process and took more responsibility. The workload for the teacher was manageable and more focused on individual mentoring. Due to the semi-structured course format, the teacher did not need to prepare all lectures (PowerPoint presentations, learning resources).

The course enhanced the students' digital skills. Moreover, because the MOOC was originally made for German students, it also developed their linguistic skills.

From the perspective of the department, the redesign of the course was a success because classroom time was used more effectively. In addition, the saving of lectures on campus also reduced travel time and costs for the students. All in all, the benefits exceed the few criticisms.

The course on academic writing is one of several in which MOOC components were integrated and tested. The Moonlite project team conducted interviews with teachers and their feedback is still worth to bear in mind when integrating a MOOC into a course module (Traeger et al. 2018, 116–117):

- Compatibility/matching with the academic year. Many study courses in Sweden are taught in compact blocks and therefore might be scheduled for one month. It is difficult to foresee or plan if a MOOC course with a related content will be running at the same time.
- The choice of courses. A course description provided by a MOOC platform does not really give an idea if the

course matches the aims of the syllabus. The teacher needs to participate in the course or maybe in several courses to be able to choose one that matches the syllabus. Most MOOCs cannot be previewed by the teacher without enrolling and participating. This process is time consuming.

- Syllabi with defined course descriptions, learning materials used, workload and forms of examinations must be decided one year before the course start, thus limiting flexibility.
- Matching of course content: university courses are designed for specific purposes and often with a Swedish perspective. Clearly a MOOC can contribute with different perspectives, but within a given time frame and defined course content there is also a risk of overloading a course with learning material.
- In Swedish Higher Education there is a strong focus on gender equality. This is not always the case in MOOCs offered by different providers and should be discussed with class.
- Students need to sign up for the course at another university. They might wonder why they also are asked to sign up once again for a MOOC course with a name that differs from their chosen course.
- Students not used to technical learning environments might struggle with the setting and require more guidance.

Conclusion: Why Teach Humanities Online?

The two examples discussed above both focus on different ways of using MOOCs in teaching humanities online. At Linnaeus University we have a long tradition of online courses and there are

many more examples we could have discussed and new ways to develop online teaching and learning is a continuing process.

In the introduction to *Understanding Digital Humanities* D.M. Berry argues that one of the reasons the field has arisen is because the technology has been available. As we now have the ability to use digital resources, humanities should take advantage of this as society at large has become more and more digitalized (Berry 2012, 1–20). This of course also applies for teaching where digital tools could help us reach more/other students but also help us develop our pedagogical approaches since a teacher who remains stagnant generally is not a very good one. Another important aspect is the responsibility we have as teachers to help students develop their digital literacy as this is something they will need, and this is something that takes time. Doug Belshaw argues that:

Digital literacies are transient: they change over time, may involve using different tools or developing different habits of mind, and almost always depend on the context in which an individual finds herself. They can be scaffolded and developed but to do so, involves more than training, it involves education. Digital literacies cannot be developed in one-off contextualized half-day workshop. (Belshaw 2012, 204)

In preparing students in humanities for a modern workplace, we not only need to give them knowledge about our subjects, but we also need to help them develop several different skillsets and master tools, for example digital ones.

But could there be another dimension to teaching humanities online? From 2019 and onwards one of the most shared quotation online is the following statement from Gus Speth, an American environmental lawyer and advocate:

I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these

problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. (Speth 2019, Web page without pagination)

In addressing the global warming and pollution and the need for radical changes, Speth says that as a scientist he is unable to handle the changes needed to society. How to initiate a “cultural and spiritual transformation” is not something he is trained to do. Another perspective is needed. In a presentation by Gunlög Fur, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, in which she talked visions for the future at Linnaeus University, she quoted Speth and made a point of how we, as scientists in the humanities actually can answer these questions. The intellectual “skillset” fostered by the humanities are now in demand. For example, HUM-TANK, the Swedish think tank where several Swedish universities participate, has for several years argued how the humanities have an invaluable expertise needed to both develop and strengthen academic endeavours, but also to help build a sustainable society.

So what does all this have to do with teaching online? For a long time, the ideal teaching “tool” in the humanities has been the seminar, a remnant of the Socratic conversation where a teacher and students talk together on various subject. The teacher leads the conversation, but the students are expected to participate and encourage to question everything said. When all the variables are in place, this kind of teaching leads not only to the students learning something, but also offers a way for the teacher's own assumptions to mature. It is not only the student who learns. Today the humanities all over the world are faced with a harsher economic situation that often leads to less time in the classroom and fewer opportunities for this ideal kind of seminar. Online teaching provides not only tools that can counteract this but also

tools than can help make the seminar as it should be, a forum where everyone's voices is heard (and not just those who are good at talking). In the classroom setting there are always students whose voice is seldom if ever heard and the opinions voiced are often spontaneous and not always fully developed. Collaborative digital spaces such as forums, video discussions, shared workspaces and collaborative mindmaps give all students the chance to contribute to the discussion before, during and after the synchronous meeting. Such digital spaces can be much less susceptible to group pressure than a classroom and the opportunities for the "silent" students to find their voice are therefore increased. Combining verbal with written discussion posts, encouraging students to create their own discussions and as a teacher "take a step back" is in a way easier online than in the classroom.

Naturally, there are challenges in teaching online. How do we get students to work with each other and not just focus in their own learning goals but see a course more as a joint effort? How do we assess and reward collaborative competence? How do we build scaffolding that helps both students and teachers in a situation where resources are limited? And how can we in new ways develop critical thinking in a digital environment? Even if we see many advantages in teaching online, there is still much more work to be done.

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