



Towards Cooperative Commonwealth Transition in a Perilous Century

MOOC Delivery: March to August 2019



Synergia Institute

Synergia Co-operative Institute is a community service co-operative whose purpose is to promote transition to sustainable political economy based on the principles of co-operation, social justice, economic democracy, ecological responsibility, and service to the common good.

Since 2017 Synergia Institute, in partnership with Athabasca University, has piloted three versions of a free distance education & training program offered through a MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course) coupled with community-based Action Circles and Study Groups operating at community level.

Synergia is an international network of senior, lifelong practitioners and community educators committed to sustainability through progressive system change. We are a highly networked co-op that unites academics, activists, practitioners and policymakers in a common effort to identify and implement models of economic, environmental, and social practice that transition societies to a new model of sustainable political economy – one that is democratic, socially just, and based on the principles of co-operation and the common good. Our transition work is unique insofar as it focuses on institutional and systems-level change.

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Summary

Today, political, economic, social and ecological crises are deepening, putting life at risk on a global level. Many of us are working toward solutions that are socially just and ecologically sound. Advocacy for a new economics is growing. But as calls for systems change flourish, we often operate in silos, unaware of each others' thinking, tools and strategies. Missing opportunities to work together and learn from one another.

Towards Cooperative Commonwealth: Transition in a Perilous Century is a massive open online course (MOOC) designed by academics and practitioners of the Synergia Institute with support from Athabasca University to encourage peer to peer learning among cooperative, social economy, commons and sustainability practitioners and other international community development network actors: a master class in movement building for a new model of political economy that is sustainable, democratic, socially just, based on the principles of cooperation and the common good.

This report provides a summary of the delivery of the MOOC from March to August 2019, including participant demographics, performance, and evaluation.

The first full offering of the course drew 1088 registrants. Based on survey results (n=435), participants represented a wide diversity of sectors, demographic characteristics, and levels of education, drawing from 44 countries across six continents.

Although many participants were unable to complete the course, most indicating time and other obligations as the main constraints, the course content and facilitation were rated highly and highlighted in their responses to the end-of-course survey. A large proportion of survey respondents entered the course already actively involved in and committed to cooperative and change initiatives in their communities, and several indicated that their thinking about systems and systemic change had not shifted significantly over the short duration of the course. Where such shifts in perspectives and values did occur, however, they were distributed across all levels of experience and prior activity, suggesting that the course has value to participants at any stage in their career towards bringing change to their communities.

Survey respondents also made a number of key suggestions for improvement to the course. These suggestions include adapting the structure of the course to operate on multiple levels, either in terms of workload (intensive versus accessible) or in terms of participant orientation (academic versus applied), or dividing it into two separate courses. Respondents were also looking for more immediate practical, hands-on guidance to implementation, flexible materials, or downloadable packages, as well as making important suggestions for greater diversity of voice within the course, including the course team.

In addition to their interest in sharing the course, in some form, with their colleagues and communities outside the course, many respondents also felt the need for a stronger sense of sharing with peers within the course. The volume of posts in the forums tended to create the sense of a crowd rather than a supportive peer group; several respondents asked for grouping or clustering of participants, in some cases linking it to the networking necessary for change itself.

Despite the challenges described by the survey respondents, they also provide a strong vision of a highly networked, mutually supportive, diverse and flexible program with great potential for working towards global change through local initiatives.

Course overview

Towards Cooperative Commonwealth: Transition in a Perilous Century emphasizes the grassroots efforts by local communities to organize, mobilize, scale-up and spread proven and promising local socio-economic and environmentally just development alternatives. Accelerating systems change is crucial to address a planet and society in crisis.

The course introduces participants to a rich array of movements, models, and strategies used by those working to change systems. Each offers inspiring evidence of like-minded citizens, communities, producers and consumers around the world, engaged in resisting and changing the trajectory of unregulated capitalism. Their work is explored at different levels as they forge democratic and durable ways and means to meet basic human needs—for clean energy, healthy food, quality health and social care and affordable housing. To address basic needs, however, other cross-cutting functions require attention.

The systemic challenges are significant: reclaiming the commons—land, water, forests, clean air and knowledge—in ways that elevate the common good over private profit; democratizing and re-localizing ownership of production; reclaiming finance from its self-appointed role as master to that of servant of the public interest. Moreover, as livelihoods become more precarious and inequality of income and wealth increases, how these systemic challenges are approached will shape our ability to meet basic needs equitably and sustainably.

The guiding structure for exploring this web of interacting factors throughout the course is represented by the conceptual weave in Figure 1.

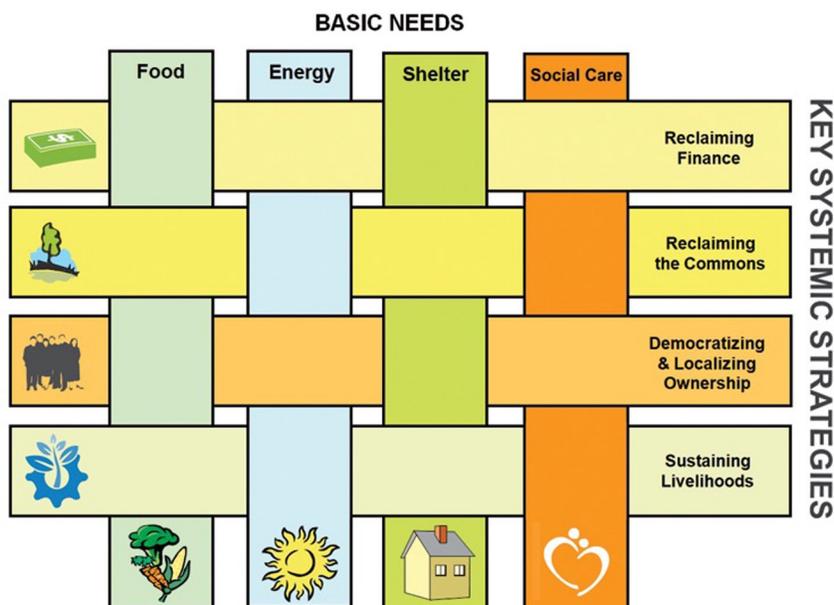


Figure 1. Course structure as conceptual weave.

Modules

The course is structured into two segments of four modules each, shaping a unifying perspective across a diverse range of solution-focused practices and models. They weave together complementary themes of resistance aimed at protecting the common good and organizing aimed at regenerative solutions, both necessary prerequisites for advancing systems change.

Segment 1: *4 weeks beginning March 25*



Module 1

Framing the journey: Capitalism, planetary limits, and the struggle to restore and share our common wealth

Sets out the context, key concepts for analyzing the problem, and introduces a number of community alternative models and tools, providing a vision and foundation the 8 weeks.



Module 2

Stewarding land and resources for the common good

Examines solutions that involve common, co-operative, and community forms of land ownership and how this relates to systemic change.



Module 3

Ecological resilience and a just food system

Designing food and agricultural systems focused on people's health and the health of the environment, not maximizing profit.



Module 4

Precarious livelihoods: Pathways to solidarity

Examines precarious employment, the effects of technology and the digital or third industrial revolution on employment, and explores some of the diverse innovations, place based and digital, being forged to address the growing precariousness of livelihoods.

Segment 2: 4 weeks beginning May 22



Module 5

Democratizing social care: From welfare state to caring society

Understanding cooperative and user-controlled social care systems for human services, as opposed to centralized provision by the state or for-profit companies.



Module 6

Democratic ownership: Pathways to a resilient energy future

Exploring the development and design of renewable and sustainable energy generation systems that are distributed and democratically controlled at the community level.



Module 7

Democratic money: Financing transition

Exploring how democratic and co-operative ideas form the basis for financial systems and forms of currency that serve the common good and local economic well-being.



Module 8

Synthesis: Building the politics for systems change

A glimpse of how all this fits together and your opportunity to contribute to an overall synthesis of how these ideas and practices can generate transition to a new paradigm.

Following the course, the Synergia team of facilitators and specialists remained available, at no cost, for three weeks to facilitate further discussion and feedback with participants and groups wishing to focus their synthesis work in Module 8 on applications to their local context or project.

Course materials

The course is offered as a vehicle for both individuals and groups to increase their knowledge, and to deepen their critical understanding and day-to-day practice for social change in ways that both draws from, and contributes to, a politics of change globally. This includes a mechanism for group study on specific issues, or the formation of action circles in which groups of like-minded people can adapt ideas, strategies, and technical expertise to further their work on local issues or common projects.

Each week includes a study guide like this one that introduces the topic, identifies the learning objectives, the time schedule, required videos and readings, and reflective exercises for the week. Each module's guide assigns a number of readings or videos exploring key aspects of the topic, as well as a reflection and visual activity built around the reading and viewing.

The weekly time allocated to viewing, reading, note taking and learning activities is roughly 5 hours.

Peer-to-peer engagement

Participants are invited to share and engage in the course themes and content.

Introductions

One place is held for participants to briefly introduce themselves, where they are from and what factor(s) brought them to invest time in this introductory course, as well as their learning priorities.

Module Discussion Forums

Each module will have a discussion board for asking questions, posting reflections, and learning how particular content relates to the participant's context and the context and vocation of others. Each forum includes a separate opening question relevant to each objective of its module. Synergia animators and facilitators accompany the main MOOC forums.

Visual Exercise

In the visual exercise forums, participants are asked to post or upload a visual and short comment to do with the forum topic, expressing their ideas in a non-verbal form.

Weekly Reflection Exercise

Each week concludes with a reflection exercise. Participants are also asked to review the reflections of other participants and hopefully engage in further discussion.

Authors and moderators

Synergia colleagues designed this MOOC in a connectivist way, bringing practitioners into the curriculum design and teaching roles, inviting community changemakers to pilot the first draft, and encouraging horizontal discussions among MOOC participants working in diverse sectors to advance socially and ecologically just systems change.



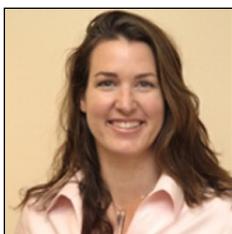
Michael Lewis

Michael is well known in Canada and internationally as a practitioner, author, educator, and leader in the field of Community Economic Development and the social economy. His experience cuts across the full range of functions connected to community renewal and development. He has built and advised a wide range of businesses, organizations and governments all over Canada and internationally. An innovator, activist and thinker with a penchant for linking practice with policy and the micro and macro, Mike is a co-founder of Synergia Institute. He is adjunct professor in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Athabasca University and co-author (with Pat Conaty) of *The Resilience Imperative: Co-Operative Transitions to a Steady-State Economy*. He has taken the lead in the design, curation and much of the writing of seven of the eight modules and worked in close collaboration with co-lead Dr. Mike Gismondi and several of the module instructors.



John Restakis

John Restakis is a co-founder of Synergia Institute and lead author of the Social Care module. He is former Executive Director of Community Evolution Foundation and former ED of the BC Co-operative Association in Vancouver, a position he held for sixteen years. His professional background includes community organizing, adult and popular education, and co-op development. He is Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Sustainable Development, Simon Fraser University, BC and is Research Associate for Co-operatives UK. John was Research Co-ordinator for the FLOK Project in Ecuador on Social Knowledge and the Social Economy and developed policy on Social Infrastructure and Institutional Innovation. Restakis also advised Syriza on the development of the social and solidarity economy in Greece. He does consulting work on international co-op and community economic development projects, researches and teaches on co-operative economies and the social economy, and lectures widely on the subject of globalization, regional development, and alternative economics. He is the author of *Humanizing the Economy – Co-operatives in the Age of Capital*.



Julie MacArthur

Julie is instructor and co-author of the Energy module and will moderate the energy democracy week. Her research explores the politics of community renewable energy policy and the potential of small-scale project actors to shape the form and effectiveness of new climate policy initiatives. She is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at University of Auckland, and the author of *Empowering Electricity: Co-operatives, Sustainability and Power Sector Reform in Canada* (2016, UBC Press), together with a range of policy briefs, journal articles and other pieces on energy politics and policy. Julie is also a research associate in the University of Auckland Energy Centre and the Public Policy Institute.



Pat Conaty

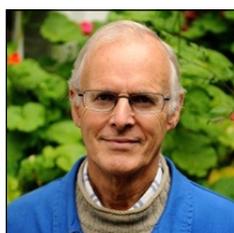
Pat is co-author of the Livelihood and Finance modules. A Californian working in England and Wales, Pat has worked with New Economics Foundation since 1987 and is research associate of Co-operatives UK. He specializes in action research, education and development that focuses on successful methods of social economic innovation. Pat has been working on introducing other innovative forms of co-operative economic democracy, including Union co-ops, community land trusts for housing and workspace, social co-operatives for care services and ecological co-operatives for green energy and local food systems. Inspired by the work of the late Elinor Ostrom, Pat also specializes in innovative work on Commons solutions, many of which are covered in his 2012 book with Mike Lewis, *The Resilience Imperative: Co-operative Transitions to a Steady-state Economy*. The theme of the book is practical solutions for the Great Transition that co-develop commonwealth in ways to meet basic needs for equitable co-operative finance, right livelihoods, low-cost housing, local food and renewable energy.



Tim Crabtree

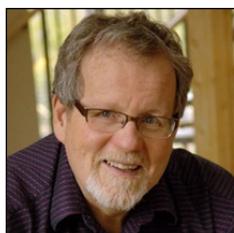
Tim Crabtree is Senior Lecturer in Economics at Schumacher College, working part-time on the MA in Economics for Transition. Tim is instructor for the food module. He has been involved in “new economics” for 30 years, after studying economics at Oxford University and then working for the New Economics Foundation for 5 years. He has experience in policy development, local economic development and business advice, and was the co-founder of a number of a successful social enterprises including the Wessex Reinvestment Trust group and Dorset-based Local Food Links Ltd – where he was responsible for developing farmers’ markets, food festivals, community gardening projects, a specialist workspace (the Centre for Local Food), a vocational training programme for young people and a school meals catering service, employing 25 people, which now supplies 33 schools with a turnover in excess of £1 million p.a.

Tim worked for Cardiff University, researching the future direction of the community food sector. He continues to work with one of the Wessex Reinvestment Trust social enterprises - Wessex Community Assets - which co-ordinates the UK's largest programme of community land trust housing, as well as supporting community share issues in areas such as renewable energy and local food. Tim Crabtree helps to co-ordinate Wessex Community Assets' focus on research and innovation – in particular exploring new approaches in the field of community led housing. This links with an action research PhD he is undertaking with the Plymouth University- Schumacher College Research Node. Tim will be the lead instructor for the Food Module.



Robin Murray

The late Robin Murray was involved from outset in development of Synergia and the idea of the MOOC. He was the team's advisor and inspiration. An industrial economist Robin was a consultant on industrial strategies and development issues to a wide range of governments, and served as Director of Industry in the Greater London Council in the 1980s and Director of the Ontario Community Economic Development Secretariat in that Canadian province in the 1990s. In the field of development he co-founded Twin and Twin Trading in 1985. Twin works with existing farmers' co-operatives, and helps establish new ones, while Twin Trading imports and sells their products in the UK. They have in turn established producer co-owned branding companies, in coffee, chocolate, fresh fruit and nuts. Twin acts as a trading and marketing arm for some 300,000 small farmers in co-operative networks. Robin also co-founded the environmental partnership Ecologika, whose members work in the fields of waste, energy, transport, food and health. As a group they played a major role in the re-direction of UK waste policy over the past decade, including new venture formation. Robin co-authored *The Open Book of Social Innovation*.



Mike Gismondi

One of the co-founders of Synergia Institute, an adult educator, and distance education practitioner with Athabasca University, Canada's Open University, Mike Gismondi worked closely with Mike Lewis and the module authors to guide the online development of the Synergia MOOC. He acknowledges the institutional support of Athabasca University, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the people at CANVAS, and his professional colleagues at Athabasca U. Special thanks to Lori Claerhout for her support and accompaniment in life, and for donating many hours of professional help to the Synergia authors and the greater cause.

Mike trained as a sociologist with a focus on bottom-up grassroots initiated social change, whether popular struggles in Central America and the developing world, or the struggles by the public to be heard in environmental conflicts in his own Canadian backyard. He has written widely on public participation, forestry and tar sands issues, and socio-ecological and energy transition topics. He first met many of his colleagues in this project while researching social economy in Canada and internationally with the BC-Alberta Social Economy Alliance (BALTA, 2006-2012). Later, he co-led the BALTA Scaling Innovation for Sustainability (SIS) research partnership (2012–2015), where he focused on resolving ecological and social inequality in systems change. Mike co-edited *Scaling Up: The Convergence of Social Economy and Sustainability* (2016). Currently, he is working with community actors undertaking utility scale solar energy generation projects, researching the obstacles and opportunities for energy democracy in oil rich Alberta, Canada.

Participants

Participant demographics are drawn from a pre-course survey conducted through Canvas, the course LMS. Of the 1088 student participants in the course, 435 (40.0%) completed the survey.

Distribution by sector

Pre-course survey respondents were asked to identify the organizations, sectors, networks, or movements in which they were active. Their responses to this open question included a wide diversity of sectors and activities, with most respondents indicating their involvement in several local, regional, or international organizations. Their primary response(s) have been categorized into a number of key sectors as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Survey respondents by sector (n=397).*

Sector	Respondents
Democracy, social justice, and social equity	58
Community development	44
Cooperatives	38
Agriculture and food security	34
Education and youth	33
Economics, economic development, and fair trade	29
Land stewardship	21
Climate, the environment, and environmental sustainability	20
Religion, mindfulness, and personal development	20
Health, social services, and social care	18
Arts	17
Housing and urban and rural development	13
Government and politics	12
Human rights, refugees, and global security	8
Digital cooperatives and open science	5
Energy	5
International development	3
Social innovation, social finance, and credit cooperatives	3
Not currently active	16

Participant motivations and interests

Pre-course survey respondents were asked to identify which motivations drew them to engage in the Synergia MOOC. Respondents were allowed to select multiple options, and the high level of response for each option as shown in Table 2 indicates the broad interests of participants, particularly for specific course topics rather than general or networking interests.

Table 2. Survey respondent motivations and interests (n=403).

Motivation	Respondents
Strengthen my practical capacity to contribute to meaningful social change	360 (89%)
Desire to broaden knowledge and deepen my analysis	349 (87%)
Concern over climate change and ecological issues	340 (84%)
Personal development to better serve my community, organization, or network	330 (82%)
Concern over growing inequality	314 (78%)
Desire to contribute to strengthening social movements	293 (73%)
Exposure to models and strategies used by other Transition practitioners	276 (68%)
Desire to connect with like-minded others online	226 (56%)
General interest and curiosity	194 (48%)

Respondents were also invited to provide further details about their motivations in taking the course; selections from the 197 responses are below:

I want to learn and speak from my tradition and identity but then learn about others. I'm interested in seeking pluralism of ideas and thoughts.

After 25 years of using litigation for social change, I'm having a hard time seeing outside that framework and finding other approaches that feel potentially effective and personally appealing. I'm hoping that the exposure to others' good works using a range of otehr tactics and strategies will bring inspiration and a change in thinking for me.

I think you hit on all of the motivations I had for joining this course! For all of the issues facing this planet, I am most interested in identifying the leverage points that move us from concept/concern to action/change. I participate in webinars, community lectures, read various books and know that the world is filled with so many good ideas and good people trying to move the needle on climate change, income inequality, big money in politics, social justice, criminal justice, etc. and yet we seem to be stuck and I am hoping this course provides new insights into how we can move all of these needles.

As someone not directly involved in any of these areas at the moment I'm also taking the course with the hope that it will inspire a bit as to how I can best contribute and make a difference.

For me the major attraction is to learn and fraternize with other people who are motivated to work towards systems change within a co-operative framework. I'm what Ian MacPherson called a "mystical co-operator", in that I really believe that a utopian future can be gained by the spread of commercial and productive organizations owned and controlled by their members, and that these orgs can spread through education and imitation across society - towards a Co-operative Commonwealth. I realize that the majority of people who even use the phrase "Co-op Commonwealth" don't know who JTW Mitchell was, or are even aware of the heyday of European consumers' co-operation. But I know there are a significant number who, while they may not be as excited about patronage dividends, essentially "get" that co-operation is about more than a model, and also believe that being a good co-operator makes us better people. The spirit of Victorian reformism lives on in the strongest areas of the non-profit sector!

I am facing potential rezoning of our property to align our anarchistic community and eco buildings with local bylaws. This will be a lengthy and complex process for which I aim to engage local supporters in the way of funding, advocacy, research and campaigning.

I am passionate about reducing inequalities in health and promoting wellbeing. Health isn't just the absence of disease, it is autonomy, control and flourishing.

Synergia seems to BE the type of scholarly-leader coalition that I've long hoped would form - to try to unify the whole local to global activist movements! In the mid 80's I wrote a very holistic proposal intended for people I saw as very influential leaders across the whole spectrum of people types - who seemed to mainly reaching just people in one or 2 bands of the spectrum. I am not even close to being one of their/your peers, but perhaps vainly thought I might be useful as a catalyst to encourage them to speak more to each other, and collectively develop a sort of "master plan" to offer/recommend for the activists & NGOs who were taking heed of them... to tap into the inevitable synergy of such a massive effort. I got few slightly encouraging replies, but till about 95 I just did what I could to act on a few facets of my proposal on my own initiative, to whatever extent very limited \$ allowed. In the last few years I've been trying to resume similar efforts, with more emphasis on the CED and co-op component of the overall activist spectrum as a means to co-creating the local-global systems we want, rather than the more dominant NGO approach of protesting and trying to educate/motivate more of the public to do likewise.

To enhance my ability to develop a synthetic and truly global understanding of the current status of human progress (or not) towards the next evolutionary leap.

To link up to other activists in different movements as their all connected -- and i believe that sharing and solidarity across these diff movements has to happen.

Power in numbers.

Participant demographics

As may be expected from the geographical distribution, the large majority (78.7%) of participants indicated that English was their primary language.

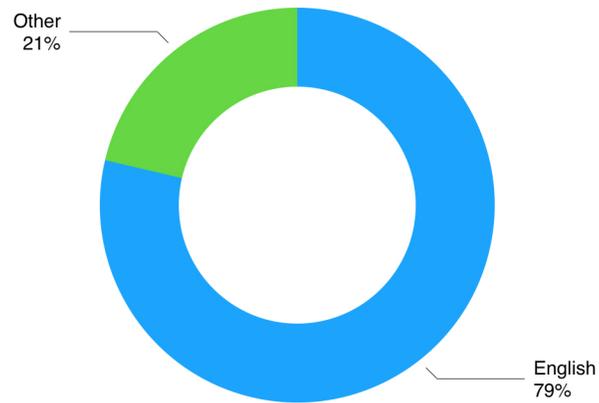


Figure 2. Respondents by primary language (n=431).

56.1% of respondents were female and 42.2% were male, with 1.6% selecting “Other”.

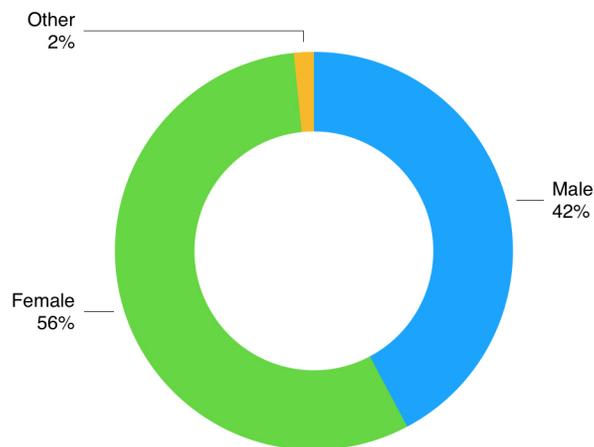


Figure 3. Respondents by gender (n=431).

The ages of respondents were broadly distributed, with 55.6% above the age of 44.

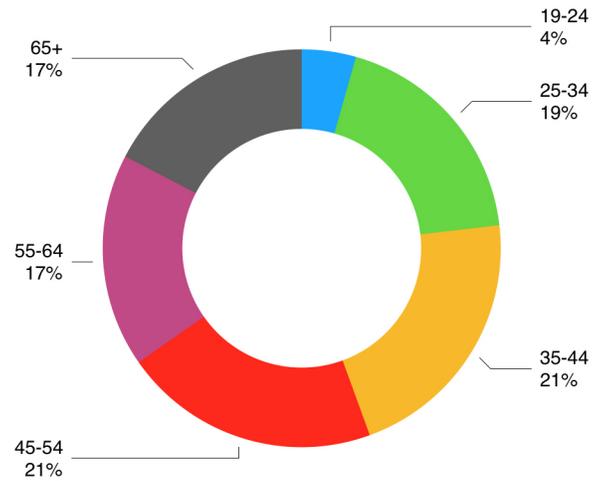


Figure 4. Respondents by age (n=432).

The survey respondents were in general highly educated, with 60.0% having achieved at least some graduate-level education and 15.3% holding doctoral degrees.

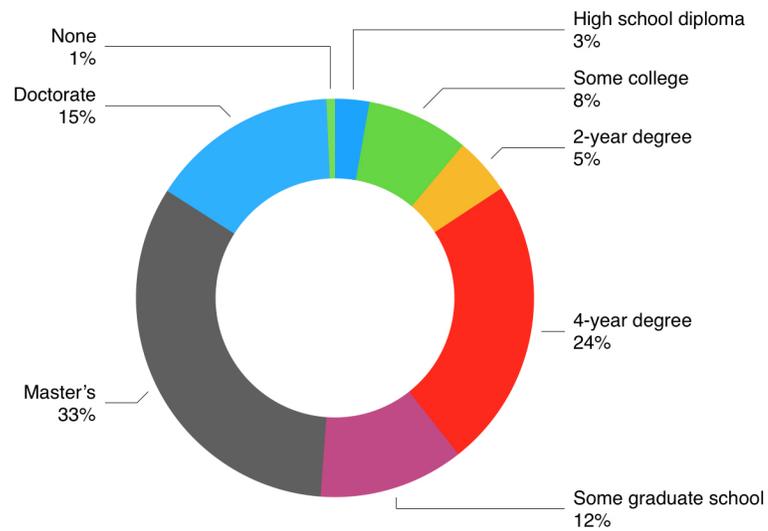


Figure 5. Respondents by education level (n=432).

Distribution by region and country

Pre-course survey respondents were asked to identify both their geographic region and country. Table 3 lists all regions, while Table 4 lists the most frequently indicated countries; the full list of respondents by country is included as an appendix. There were 44 countries indicated by respondents in all, with three countries (USA, Canada, and the UK) together making up the large majority of participants (69.6%), followed by a second tier (Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand) of moderate enrollment.

Table 3. *Survey respondents by geographical region (n=432)*

Region	Respondents
North America	239 (55.3%)
Europe	115 (26.6%)
Asia/Pacific	49 (11.3%)
Latin America	17 (3.9%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	10 (2.3%)
Middle East/North Africa	2 (0.5%)

Table 4. *Most frequent survey respondents by country (n=428). Remaining countries are below 1%.*

Country	Respondents
United States of America	121 (28.3%)
Canada	116 (27.1%)
United Kingdom	61 (14.3%)
Australia	18 (4.2%)
Ireland	17 (4.0%)
New Zealand	16 (3.7%)
Brazil	6 (1.4%)
Greece	6 (1.4%)
Italy	5 (1.2%)
South Africa	5 (1.2%)

Course activity

Of the 1088 registrants, 846 (77.8%) entered the course and reviewed at least some of the module content. The course does not include assessment activities; the primary modes of participant activity is through discussion forums and (optional) small group collaboration.

Forum activity by module

The majority (79%) of module forum activity took place in Segment 1 of the course (March 25 to April 21), with most of that activity in the introductory framing module as participants constructed a shared understanding of the course theory and principles of cooperative commonwealth. Following a short break in the course, a smaller set of participants returned for the final four modules of Segment 2 (May 22 to June 16). This forum activity by module is shown in Figure 6.

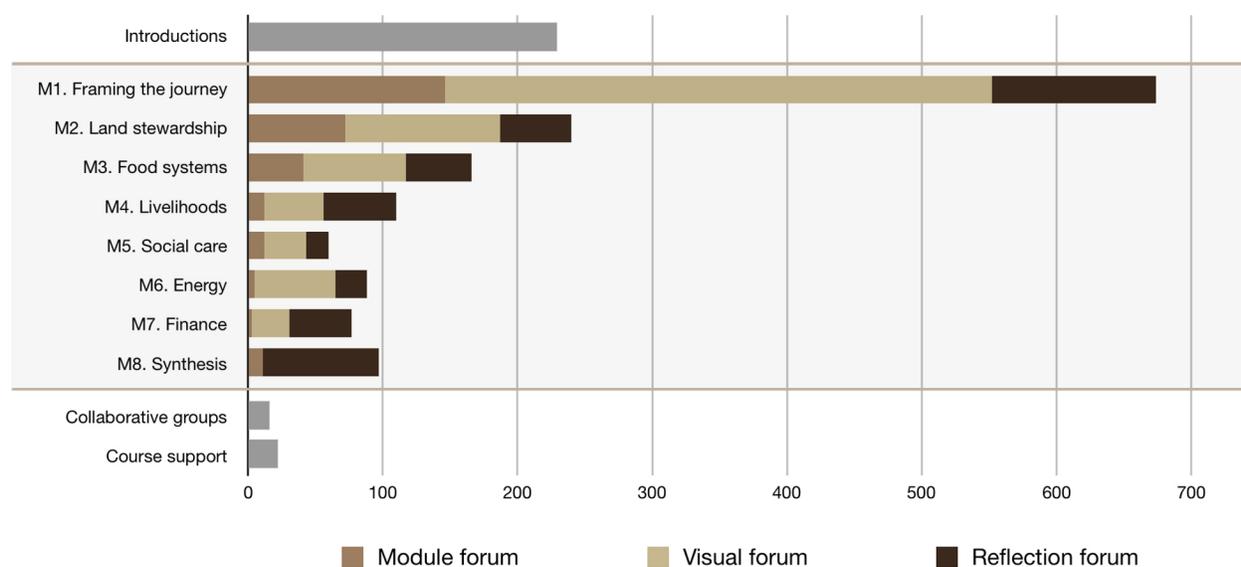


Figure 6. Discussion forum activity by module.

While the in-course discussion for the small collaborative groups remained limited, it is expected that most of the discussion within these groups occurred through their own networks or in person, rather than taking place through the course management system.

Forum activity by interaction type

Each module includes a general forum to discuss the module topic as a whole, as well as forums specified as “visual” and “reflection” exercise forums.

Visual exercise forums ask participants to find or create a visual representation (photo, diagram, or other image) related to the forum topic and then provide a written explanation of their visual; a sample visual exercise response is provided on the next page. This exercise in visual literacy is described as “the power of pictures” and explained to participants in the Module 1 visual exercise forum:

A graphic is condensed knowledge; a model that strips away details to reveal the key elements and patterns of an issue. Like a flash of insight, however, a graphic image can stimulate new ways of thinking in the viewer.

Reflection exercises are more structured activities, asking participants to reflect on a specific issue as it relates to the overall module topic:

Central to becoming an effective change agent is scanning the context of any issues or set of issues that engage your focus.

As can be seen by the bars in Figure 6, visual exercise forums proved to be popular throughout the course, prompting substantive original posts and threads of replies. The overall proportion of discussion activity by forum type is shown in Figure 7.

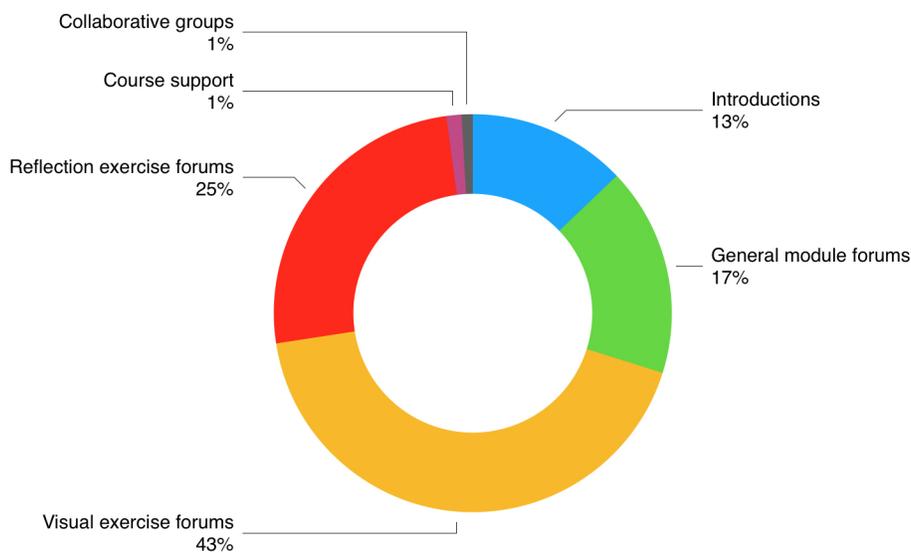


Figure 7. Discussion activity by forum type.

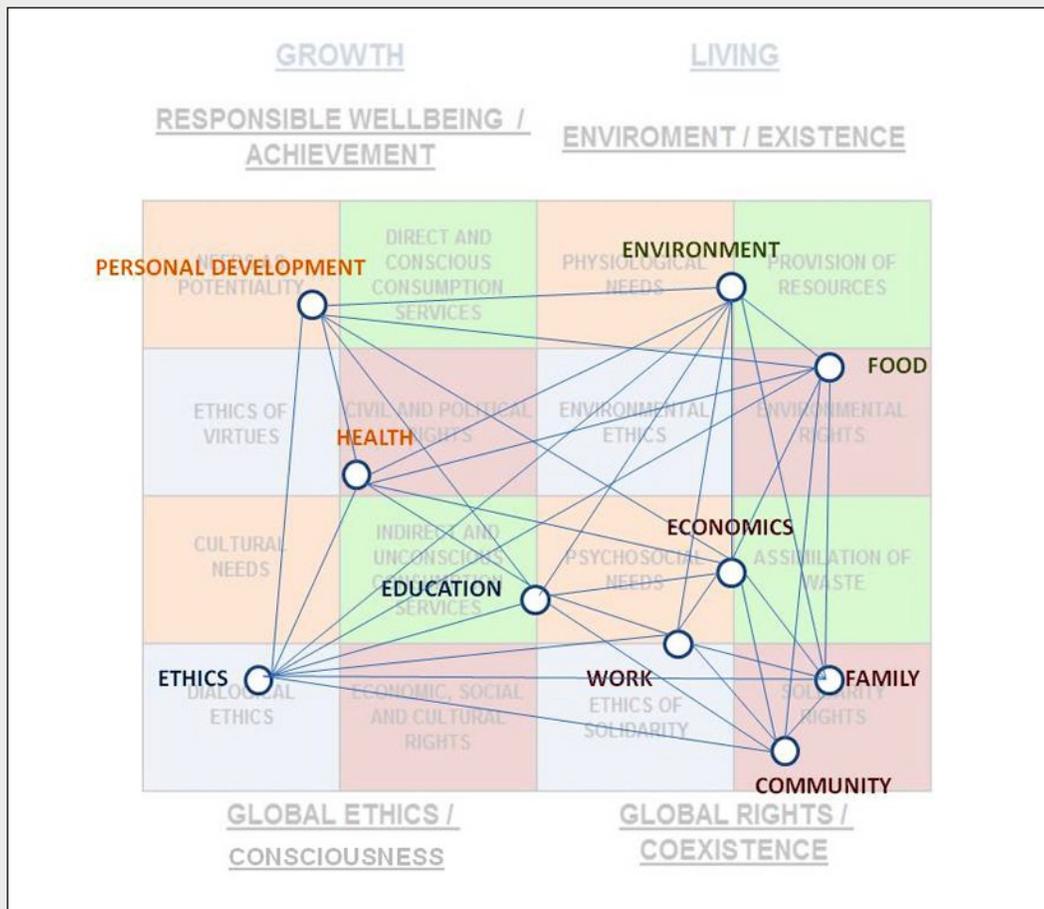
It is not possible to capture the wide diversity of responses to the visual exercises throughout the course, including photos, cartoons, captioned images, diagrams, and videos. However, the following two examples from the Module 1 visual exercise forum demonstrate the power of visuals to contextualize and reconceptualize the module topics.



I chose this image because it condenses a lot of the tensions and ambiguities we are facing today in Brazil. We didn't live the industrial revolution as the Europeans did. Rather our economy was developed strategically to serve the industrial revolution (supplying coffee to British factories, for example). We had a different kind of transition from a mostly commons based way of life to a capitalist one, with a very complex entanglement of indigenous communities (rather different than what happened in USA, with some indigenous partnering with the Portuguese, French and others), the Portuguese monarchy, local "Barons" (coffee, gold, sugar, slave-traders, etc) and foreign investors.

Some centuries have passed and now scenes such as the one in the photo are very common. Are they also desirable? I used to think that in order for the traditional cultures of our land to be cultivated/preserved, they needed to exclude themselves from every occidental aspect of life. Now it seems clear to me that there is no choice, and more importantly, without many of the technologies that were developed outside their culture, they will not survive.

This photo is, to me, a good representation of the paradoxes we live through, and in some sense shows how some of the products that were created during/for the marketization of the world are now being used to demarketize it. The double movement reciprocally creating itself.



Although I have posted a picture before, I have forgotten this image that could be relevant for this module. It is big picture of a model for sustainability/wellbeing that I created years ago. I remember meeting Kate Raworth in 2013 when she was presenting everywhere her “doughnut economics”. At that moment, my model had not name (neither now) but it surged on my mind the name of the “waffle of sustainability” because of the square shape and its 16 small quadrants. Basically, the 16 frames could be divided in 4 big frames. Existence (environment) (UPPER RIGHT), Coexistence or conviviality (global right) (LOWER RIGHT), Achievement or development (responsible wellbeing) (UPPER LEFT) and Consciousness (global ethics) (LOWER LEFT). The right side of the model is the external side and the left is the internal. It was quite difficult to design a graphic in 2D (static) and at the same time trying to show it that was a kind of holography. I mean what happen in a small quadrant has connections with the others. In 2014 I put the “topping” or the lines (invisible liquid) that connect all the 16 quadrants of the “waffle” through 10 key nodes.

Regarding this module 1, issues like neoliberalism, women, food, commons, social inequality has some similarities with the nodes of economics, family, food, environment, community and work. All of them mostly with a more external perspective. I don't know exactly why, but in general, western perspective is looking most of the time for external solutions. In my opinion, with an 80/20 perspective, I mean, putting more energy (80) in the internal quadrants (THE GROWTH SIDE) where less key nodes are (20); health, personal development, education and ethics, would be a more long-term solution. However, according to Donella Meadows's systems thinking and their leverage points to intervene in a system, to change the mindset or the paradigm where we live by, it is the most difficult of them. In fact, this MOOC (mostly with a focus on education) is a leverage point for changing the paradigm from the internal side.

Participant experience

Participants were asked to provide information and comments on their experience of the course in an end-of-course survey. 105 responses were received, included 27 from members of the small collaborative groups.

88 respondents indicated they had fully explored at least one module; 17 respondents indicated they had not. Of those who did not complete any modules, 14 (82%) indicated that “life intervened” while 11 (65%) listed time constraints as the main reason for not continuing with the course. One respondent who did complete a module later withdrew, feeling the “information was geared toward deeply-involved professionals,” while another indicated, “My browser was too old for your system.”

Respondents were asked to rate the overall value and practical relevance of the learning they acquired through the course, on a scale of 1 (no value) to 10 (high value). The range of the ratings are shown in Figure 8; of the 85 responses, the mean rating was 7.5.

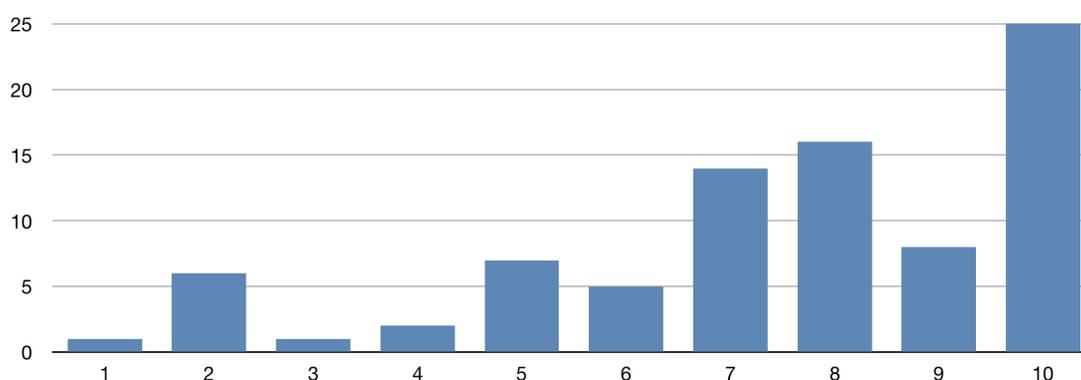


Figure 8. Overall value and practical relevance of the learning acquired through the course.

Most respondents provided explanations for their ratings. Representative responses - three from the most frequent rating and one each from the next six most frequent - are given below.

As mentioned previously, systems design requires thinking across themes. Individual transitions in in food, water, energy, housing, land tenure etc. are all well understood and well underway. The examples you offered testify to this. The question is, how do we bring them together to create a new political economy? [rating: 2]

There were many good ideas and methods that were explored, but I think that the focus was generally towards reformist means, while it overlooked underlying realities. I understand that change must be made incrementally within the context of our current social, cultural, economic, and political paradigms, but if those paradigms are bankrupt and fundamentally contradictory to objective physical reality, they are of limited use. Broadly speaking, I think that the course failed to adequately address this dissonance. [rating: 5]

There was a lot of material packed into a short amount of time; for someone already engaged in a PhD research project there was not a lot of time to incorporate all of that learning. Maybe over an extended period that will change. I don't think that kind of learning is short-term. [rating: 6]

Categories were in the exact area I have been researching. So it was good to review material and see what others have been using. I learned new approaches, was exposed to areas I would never have gone into and found the resources very consistent with module topics and objectives. I was hoping there would be others involved in rural issues from more than just the small scale "lab" approach that is very challenging. I was hoping for more interaction on exploration. It seemed more on explain what they were doing. [rating: 7]

You have provided so much valuable information that will take me a long time to read and absorb. For the areas I understand, I intend to share with my rural communities, though it will likely be an uphill journey. Maybe about 1-2% of them will "get it". Who knows... from little acorns....! [rating: 8]

The course helped me to see more examples in a global scale and to enrich my knowledge, to combine the proposed solution them in a local problem and give people hope that out there there are people that fighting for a better future. [rating: 9]

Value: Knowing that there are a few hundred people around the world who are actively interested and are now very much connected and on the same page is very heartening. The learning resources provided have removed many hours of sifting through lesser quality materials. The framing will be useful in communicating my work to more folks. Practical: Having access to a pool of ideas is essential for all of us to exercise our imaginations, through taking a dip whenever we wish. I will definitely recommend the resource to others, very useful for getting a group of people on the same wavelength to create further works. [rating: 10]

It was fantastic, excited me, brought together lots of reading I had been doing already and practical experience and helped me to make more sense of it and feel part of a bigger movement. I felt disappointed each week that I was falling further behind until I stopped doing it because it felt too much. Other people that I enthused to engage with the course followed a similar cause. [rating: 10]

It is high value because the learning is still continuing long after the MOOC has ended. I was able to identify gaps in my learning/systems thinking from taking the course. Resources were bookmarked to return to and more fully digest once other foundational learning was done. This was one of the best MOOCs I've ever participated in. [rating: 10]

Shifting thoughts and priorities

Respondents were asked to rate from 1 (not active) to 10 (very active) their own active involvement in systems change and transition-related issues as it stood prior to taking the course. Most participants selected the middle- to high-range of active involvement, suggesting that participants were already highly active in their sectors or communities, as shown in Figure 9.

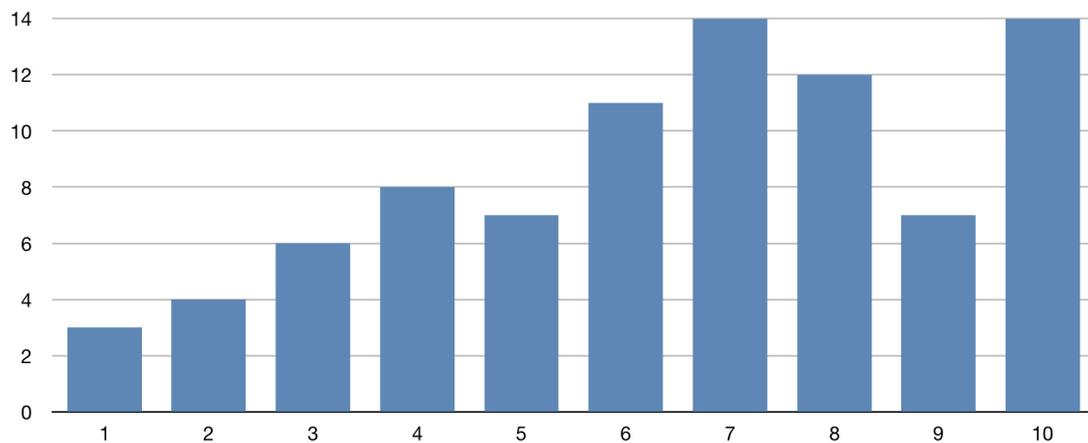


Figure 9. Active involvement in systems change and transition-related issues prior to taking the course.

Respondents were then asked to evaluate from 1 (very little) to 10 (very much) the extent to which their participation in the course shifted their thinking about systems change and their priorities for the use of their time, talent, and resources. Figure 10 shows the response counts for each rating level, with the most frequent response being very little shift.

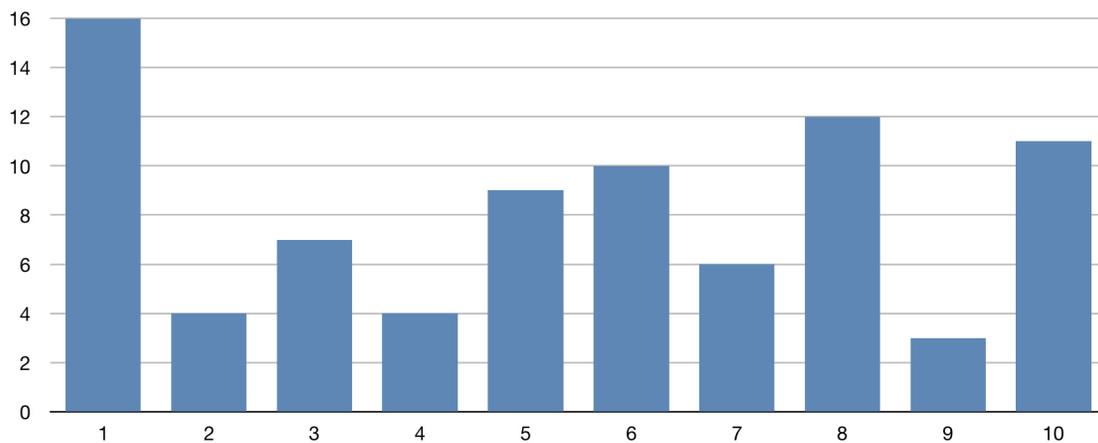


Figure 10. Respondents' evaluations of how their thinking has shifted due to participation in the course.

As shown in Figure 9, survey respondents tended already to be active in their sectors or communities before taking the course and therefore likely already to be committed to many of the perspectives and values presented in the course. This prior commitment to cooperative values may have limited the extent to which the participants' values could be further shifted during the course.

Figure 11, however, examines the mean degree of shift for each of the pre-course activity levels as shown in Figure 9. As Figure 11 shows, the degree of shift in cooperative perspectives and values is relatively evenly distributed across the pre-course levels of active involvement, suggesting that those who were not previously active in their sectors or communities were no more - but also no less - likely to report a shift in their thinking and values towards the cooperative principles presented in the course. All levels of prior activity were roughly equally impacted, and there is no indication from this alone as to whether one group is more likely to benefit from the course than another.

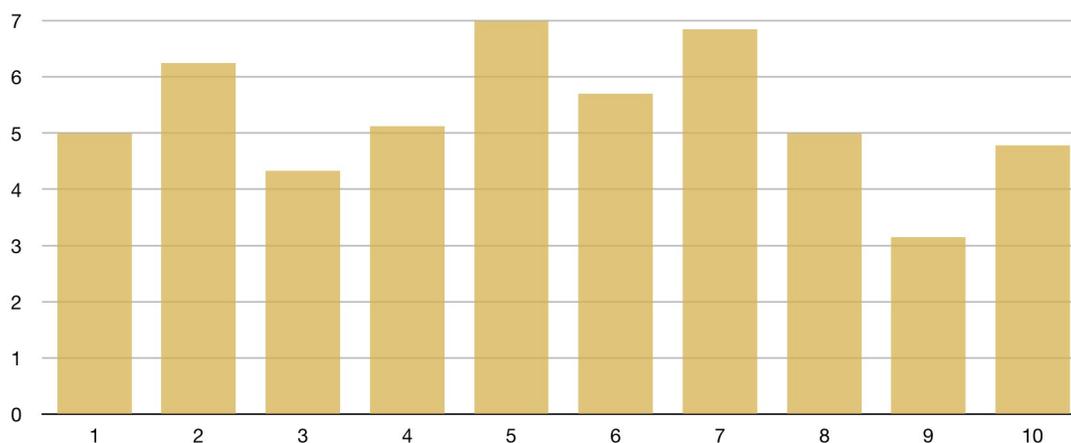


Figure 11. Mean degree of shift in thinking and values due to participation in the course for each level of active involvement prior to taking the course.

One respondent who reported very little shift (1) in thinking about systems change and priorities for his time and effort expanded upon his answer, stating:

Participating in this course has just reinforced that it there are others who think along the same lines and also those that don't. It also has given me the feeling that it isn't a waste of time even if the change seems slow. A most energizing experience for me.

On the other hand, those who did experience a very high degree (10) of shift in their thinking tended to emphasize a deeper understanding of the specifically systemic nature of change and the need to reach across sectors rather than a shift in personal values as such:

I have come to the realization that most problems are systemic. You can make personal choices, but real change is not going to happen until the systems are changed. I have also become aware of groups ie health care and food, working outside the status quo and can look for or help establish such groups in the future.

Basically, my priorities now include redoubling my efforts to work for the environment, and, especially, for a more participatory democracy. So I find myself working harder to enable a shift in our government to a one which would include more proportional representation, less focus on the "Economy," and more focus on social welfare and environmental welfare.

The MLN perspective was a game changer for me (an ahh ha moment). Reflecting on how the complexity of systems plays out & interplays at multiple levels shifted where I plan on now spending my time and social capital to influence change in my region. Grass roots is still key, but more effort needs to be exerted at regional and institutional levels to reduce silos and set expectations for collaboration between multiple organizations if any meaningful change is going to happen.

Overall evaluations of impact

Survey respondents were asked for their evaluation of the overall impact from the course. Several provided useful recommendations, which will be discussed in the following section. The following selections highlight the strong impact the course had on participants' future ambitions and commitment to enact change in their sectors and communities.

After the course, my activism took a new dimension. I had things moving with less efforts. The course was really good. Please keep developing and expanding it. If synergia were to offer a degree program on the subject, I would not have a second thought embracing the idea.

I know this sounds grandiose, but considering, as Greta T has said, "our house IS on fire!"... This course has helped keep alive my last embers of hope (for a "good" fire) that enough Intelligent and Compassionate people may still come together to Unite their knowledge, skills, efforts and resources to reach enough of the rest of that 99% of humanity to actually Unite sufficiently to collectively make Cooperative Commonwealth a reality within the very little time we have left in which to do so.

I regret that I had signed up for another course that took priority at the same time. It really impacted my ability to take in all the information in the MOOC and give it justice. I was also intimidated by the excellence of the comments and insight in the posts and reflections. This course was on a level I had not encountered before.

To be able to take part in something like this even though I have no tertiary qualifications was very uplifting.

Thank you very MUCH for this wonderful initiative (more of this common international efforts needed and we will change the world).

Participant recommendations

Survey respondents were asked to suggest improvements to the course. 71 respondents offered a wide range of rich and valuable recommendations, from detailed technical suggestions for improvements in course delivery to broad structural changes to the program as a whole.

Several respondents highlighted the need for the course to operate on multiple levels, either in terms of workload (intensive versus accessible) or in terms of participant orientation (academic versus applied).

The only thing I can suggest is maybe offering the course in 2 formats - one for people who have the time to fast pace it and another for people who only have a few hours a week [and some weeks none at all!] they can put into it. I found that once I fell behind I was unable to fully engage.

Maybe there should be two courses - one for professionals, academics, and experts, and one for me (and, of course, people like me) who don't want to know so much detailed information but who hope to help bring systems change.

Personally I need more introductory material, a simple intro into what the following material shows, otherwise I get lost in the detail! The course seemed to assume a level of intellectual involvement in the subject that I don't have.

This course is great for beginners; but the comments sections were overwhelming - too many comments, too difficult to sift for useful stuff. Maybe there should be another course for people already involved in system change - make it clear that it's about building a new system - i.e. a replacement for capitalism, not a way to 'tame' capitalism.

1. My points above are I believe clearly stated. That said, there is nothing wrong if this format worked for a good number of people. However, one suggestion would be to create a module for the time-pressed individual who has other commitments (family, volunteer, professional) on the go. 2. Open this up to a blended-learning format I.e. ability for groups to apply some learnings at the community level that are applicable and appropriate for a 3 hour session X 4 weeks for example. Or something that can be applied to say strategic planning sessions for organizations and their board members or people living in the community who may work long hours and don't have time for this course. 3. Adaptation to various groups and audiences. Less academic more practical. Therefore, more buy-in.

There's lots of the 'what' in the MOOC. That's a large part of why I wanted to do it: to learn about what's already happening and how people are pushing the boundaries and coming up with new ideas of how to do things. I'd suggest adding more of the 'how'. Both 1) what can we learn from the past, ie how have people convinced/mobilised others to join in doing these sometimes quite radical things, and 2) what other opportunities do you see in the near future? (what's the role of culture, norms etc; the role of social media, mainstream media - or not). Social and cultural infrastructure/capital/innovation. Creating new narratives and new normals.

Related to this, there was a strong thread of respondents looking for more immediate practical, hands-on guidance to implementation. Along with a call for greater application for diverse, often non-academic activists in the field was a suggestion for greater diversity in the course team.

Make it less academic. More oriented to the activist.

Perhaps a manual on how certain goals were brought about by the groups that formed organizations. Having the ordinary people instruct us more.

More focus on movements and thinkers from Latin America and indigenous struggles from other parts of the world. Less academic theoretical content. More women and marginalised people involved in actually running and planning the course, and also in the content itself. The mindset that created the current system will not be the one to change it.

Course facilitators were fabulous but not gender balanced.

I'm not here to blast MOOCs. I see the value in various formats for learning. However, if we want more communities to improve their systems-change literacy we need to serve diverse communities and be inclusive in how we deliver this. The we should not be dominated by PH.Ds as I believe some of the best solutions come at the edges of society, just as I am a birdwatcher I find that it is easier to observe more birds at the edge of the forest rather than at the heart of one.

Several respondents were instructors or facilitators looking for ways to bring the course content to their local communities, suggesting more flexible materials or downloadable packages. These packages might be more foundational or broken into smaller chunks. Some respondents would also have liked these packages for their own use.

I would also like to be able to share this information or pieces of it in my community and beyond, both to increase the (pitifully low) level of understanding of co-ops and to generate interest in creating them. I consistently find that people like the idea of co-ops but choose societies because that's what they know. I would love to give a series of workshops on co-ops and would love to have ready-made modules that I could use in them. This is fabulous work you are doing in developing and delivering the MOOC - and rich, interesting content. I'd really like to see a range of modules that people like me who have significant academic, work-related, and experiential background in co-ops and are passionate about the movement and systems change, could just pick up and use to take your work (with credit of course) out into the community.

1. be more realistic about the time commitment 2. potentially trim it by offering a set of core elements with additional readings/watchings for all modules etc OR expand each module to go deeper so participants can choose more of a focus eg to learn a lot about food over x weeks, and skip those they wish to skip (I recognise that the modules inform one another but some people may already know a lot about one or more, or dont wish to dive into a particular subject).

Maybe have less content in each module but have more modules? So it is little bites rather than big ones?

Brilliant! I really do want to share parts of it with so many colleagues. None of whom would have the time. Perhaps another obstacle is that people tend to work in topic silos (housing, food, employment) so they might want one course, but not all. It's a pretty specific crowd of activists and community development types that want to dig into strategies across all aspects of community. My SHIFT colleagues for example are process focused across multiple interest areas and sectors. This was too specific for them (sadly).

I would dearly love to be able to keep the course so I could review it in more depth, follow all the links to resources and consider the content on an as-needed basis. I'm so busy "doing" co-ops and system change, taking a chunk of time out of my week to review information that is not immediately relevant is difficult/impossible.

In addition to their interest in sharing the course, in some form, with their colleagues and communities outside the course, many respondents also felt the need for a stronger sense of sharing with peers within the course. The volume of posts in the forums tended to create the sense of a crowd rather than a supportive peer group; several respondents asked for grouping or clustering of participants, in some cases linking it to the networking necessary for change itself.

Personally, I find this degree of multidimensional traffic very challenging. Not autistic exactly! But definitely happiest with smallish groups, communicating in text, with relatively explicit agendas. I may not be typical. But activists come in all shapes and sizes, and for some, the massive MOOC may not serve very well? ... I'm not someone who welcomes crowds. The MOOC felt like a crowd. One way of dealing with that is the group within the MOOC. I convened such a group.... The problem there was that most members were too busy to either study the MOOC or participate in weekly Zoom chats,. With more than four or so Zoom participants, it's very hard to cover anything like the range of the week's module in any systematic way - without acting like a college lecturer, which I wasn't prepared to do. So we had interesting chats, off at tangents, but in no way systematically engaged with the MOOC content. I honestly don't know how a 'visible' student can use the very rich social and political mix of the MOOC in a practicable way, to explore both the MOOC content and the multiplicity of ways that participants engage with it and would wish to mobilise it.

This box is my reason for my filling in the survey. What I lacked was a peer group. If we had all been invited to join with up to ten other participants, anywhere in the world, to meet weekly at an agreed time, I would have felt peer-pressure to get the assignments completed on time, and I would have enjoyed getting to know these new people, and discussing the course together. We could have been self-facilitated, with a set of simple guidelines to follow. My desk is so full of competing demands, and the course assignments always fell off the edge, pushed out by more pressing demands. The pressure of a weekly meeting would have given the course equal status with a bunch of my other priorities, and persuaded me to participate properly.

1. *If it was not already done, try to support students in forming like-minded groups of mutual interest world-wide; encourage them to 'socialize' within the Canvas structure. Believe it or not not everyone chooses or has access to fast Internet, or social media platforms.*
2. *Help students connect with others in their physical locations, as within a city or region of their country.*
3. *Enable an ongoing 'meeting board' for up to two years after the course end, where students can ask questions of each other, or share useful information.*

That is really difficult. One thought might be to see if there was a way to cluster individuals with common interests with a facilitator. And connect with email. It is really time-consuming to go onto the Canvas and then scroll the modules to see who might have posted a new reflection or who had replied to yours. A second might be debate. I actually didn't see any real debate box. For example Drawdown and Friedman really hit a nerve with me but there was little response that I saw. Also Haworth had an excellent presentation on overshoot and yet there was no discussion that "feeding a world of over 7 billion" with the scale proposed by the German project and the community gardens might be a challenge? A third might be to see if there was some way of connecting with others who wanted to connect through a directory based on interest and research or projects.

Despite the challenges described by the survey respondents, they also provide a strong vision of a highly networked, mutually supportive, diverse and flexible program with great potential for working towards global change through local initiatives.

I am considering using the course as a teaching tool in my local area, to get already active people with varying levels of understanding regarding what the group is actually up to to the same level of thinking. I predict this will increase the effectiveness of our creations into the future. I will organise a group next time it is run.

Appendix

Distribution by country

Country	Respondents
United States of America	121 (28.3%)
Canada	116 (27.1%)
United Kingdom	61 (14.3%)
Australia	18 (4.2%)
Ireland	17 (4.0%)
New Zealand	16 (3.7%)
Brazil	6 (1.4%)
Greece	6 (1.4%)
Italy	5 (1.2%)
South Africa	5 (1.2%)
Germany	4 (0.9%)
India	4 (0.9%)
Pakistan	4 (0.9%)
Switzerland	4 (0.9%)
Finland	3 (0.7%)
Mexico	3 (0.7%)
Netherlands	3 (0.7%)
Turkey	3 (0.7%)
Chile	2 (0.5%)
Philippines	2 (0.5%)
Spain	2 (0.5%)
Aotearoa	1 (0.2%)
Austria	1 (0.2%)
Azerbaijan	1 (0.2%)
Bulgaria	1 (0.2%)
Colombia	1 (0.2%)
Costa Rica	1 (0.2%)
Ecuador	1 (0.2%)
El Salvador	1 (0.2%)
Ethiopia	1 (0.2%)
French Guiana	1 (0.2%)
Indonesia	1 (0.2%)
Japan	1 (0.2%)

Kenya	1 (0.2%)
Kingdom of eSwatini (Swaziland)	1 (0.2%)
Morocco	1 (0.2%)
Nigeria	1 (0.2%)
Norway	1 (0.2%)
Peru	1 (0.2%)
Portugal	1 (0.2%)
Romania	1 (0.2%)
Rwanda	1 (0.2%)
Ukraine	1 (0.2%)
Wales	1 (0.2%)



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