

Doing MOOCs in Dili: Studying online learner behaviour in the Global South

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Abstract

This work in progress paper is part of an ethnographic action research project investigating the potential for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to provide learning opportunities to students in Dili, Timor-Leste. A systematic review of academic literature on MOOCs and Open Educational Resources (OER) in the Global South¹ identified key emergent themes: The infrastructural barriers to Internet access; the literacies required to participate in online learning; the new, often unfamiliar pedagogical approaches; and the context of content. This paper examines these themes in Dili as they play out in practice. A fifth theme in the literature is also discussed; the imbalance of knowledge flow from global North to South, leading to accusations of academic neocolonialism. This paper proposes that qualitative learner behaviour research is crucial to understanding how online learners in places like Dili negotiate the conditions which constrain and enable learning in MOOCs, and concludes that MOOC platforms need to acknowledge postcolonial critiques and give greater voice to academics in the Global South.

Keywords. MOOCs for development, Ethnography, User behaviour studies,

1 Introduction

Since MOOCs first appeared in the higher education landscape, they have been touted as a means of providing quality education at scale to a global audience, including learners in the Global South, broadly defined as 'regions outside Europe and North America that are mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized'². Early claims of MOOCs being a panacea to global educational inequalities appear premature and naïve. A recent systematic review of the literature on MOOCs and Open Educational Resources in the Global South³ revealed five emergent themes: The infrastructural barriers to Internet access; the literacies required to participate in online learning; the new, often unfamiliar pedagogical approaches adopted; the context of content; and the imbalance of knowledge flow from the global North to the South. This paper

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1. King M, Pegrum M, Forsey M (2018) MOOCs and OER in the Global South: Problems and potential. *Int Rev Op Dist Learning* <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v19i5.3742>
 2. Dados, N Connell R (2012) The Global South. *Contexts* doi: 10.1177/1536504212436479
 3. King et al. op. cit.

situates these themes in the context of field data collected in Dili Timor-Leste, to examine how they manifest in and influence learner behaviour and practice.

The author conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, interviewing over 100 university students, academics and other higher education stakeholders, facilitating five MOOCs as a form of blended learning with face-to-face study group meetings with Timorese learners, holding drop in sessions introducing MOOCs with approximately 50 students, and “hanging out” on higher education campuses, notably the Universidad Nacional Timor Lorosa’e (UNTL) and Wi-Fi hotspots dotted around the city. This data was collected, interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded, then grouped and related to the themes identified in the literature.

2 Results

2.1 Access to the Internet

The first and perhaps most obvious barriers to individuals in the Global South learning through MOOCs is the ability to access a stable internet connection using information and communication technologies (ICTs) that are affordable for the learner. This is particularly true for women⁴ those living in rural areas⁵ and people living with disability.⁶ The literature on learning with mobile ICTs (M-learning)⁷ is burgeoning⁷ and mobile access to MOOCs and OER is becoming a key element of efforts to meet the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, quality education⁸.

In Dili, Internet access has been significantly improved by the liberalization of the telecommunications industry in 2012, which has introduced two new telcos to the market. Internet-enabled mobile ICTs and cheap laptops, often purchased across the border in Indonesia, are now common sights across university campuses and in Wi-Fi hotspots around Dili where people can prepay Internet access starting at USD 0.06c for 15 minutes. Sites such as the Timor Plaza shopping mall offer free Wi-Fi, however the limited strength of the connection combined with the number of people online meant accessing MOOC content such as videos proved impossible. In travelling around Dili, it is not uncommon to see groups of young people on various mobile ICTs stationed near the boundary

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4. Perryman, L-A, de Los Arcos, B (2016) Women’s empowerment through openness: OER, OEP and the Sustainable Development Goals. *Op Prax* <http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.8.2.289>
 5. Liyanagunawardena, TR, Williams, S, Adams, A (2014) The Impact and Reach of MOOCs: A Developing Countries’ Perspective *eLearn Papers*. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2007.11.013
 6. Altımay, Z, Ossiannilsson, E, Kalac, M et al. (2016) *Turk On Journ Ed Tech* 15(3) 68-72.
 7. Traxler, J M, (2018) Learning with Mobiles: The Global South. *Res in Comp and Int Ed*. doi: 10.1177/1745499918761509
 8. McGreal, R. (2017) Special Report on the Role of Open Educational Resources in Supporting the Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education Challenges and Opportunities. *Int Rev Res Op Dist Learn*. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i7.3541>

fences of office buildings, looking to gain free access to the Wi-Fi. UNTL had at least two Internet hubs, sponsored by the Australian and United States government, offering desktop computers with access to on- and offline educational programs, usually related to English for academic study. Online access is restricted to 30-60 minute sessions and connectivity was intermittent at best, and students could spend their entire session unsuccessfully trying to load a course page. Some learners were able to join MOOCs, but the time limits on completion of free courses often prevented learners finishing courses before their access expired.

2.2 Literacies

If people are able to access a reliable Internet connection, there are various interrelated literacies they need to engage with course content. The language literacy required to understand courses is key, especially English, given its dominance as the language of MOOC instruction⁹. The digital literacies required to use ICTs to study MOOCs are also crucial, starting with the basics of using a mouse and keyboard, although mobile ICT access allows Southern learners access on more familiar devices¹⁰. The critical literacy required for learners to engage with and question course content is also important, and these combine into what Pegrum describes as ‘critical mobile literacy’¹¹, which includes learners’ deeper understanding of both the positive and negative impacts of ICTs.

Working with Timorese people participating in MOOCs revealed the plurilingual nature of Timorese language literacy. In a learning activity on a FutureLearn course, learners were asked to construct a sociogram representing the languages they spoke and the social, family and work groups with whom they used those languages. The Timorese participants all produced complex diagrams capturing the diversity of languages, including the national languages Tetum and Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia, indigenous languages such as Makassae, Fatuluku Mambae and Kemak, as well as English. The participants perform various ‘roles’ in these languages depending on their context of use, and English is a primary language for the role of higher education, particularly for those looking to apply for international scholarships.

Observing students in Internet hubs on the campus of UNTL, it was clear participants were often tentative and cautious in their manipulation of the mouse and keyboard, as if they were afraid to break the equipment. Learners on mobiles were much more confident, and some preferred to use a desktop to watch and read MOOC content, then use mobile device to post comments within

9. Stratton, C, Grace, R. (2016) Exploring Linguistic Diversity of MOOCs: Implications for International Development. Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 53(1), 1-6. doi: [10.1002/ptra2.2016.14505301071](https://doi.org/10.1002/ptra2.2016.14505301071)

10. Boga, S, McGreal, R (2014) Introducing MOOCs to Africa: New Economy Skills for Africa Program – ICT. <https://www.col.org/resources/introducing-moocs-africa-new-economy-skills-africa-program-ict>

11. Pegrum, M (2014) Mobile Learning: Languages, Literacies and Cultures. Palgrave MacMillan Ltd., London

courses. The challenges of helping Timorese learners develop critical literacies are exemplified in the prevalence of 'copy paste' culture in higher education, where students will plagiarise online content in assignments, copying and pasting information from searches on 'Mister Google' as one participant jokingly described it. This issue is certainly not limited to Timor-Leste, and MOOCs can play a role in fostering critical and mobile literacy development.

2.3 Pedagogies

The new, unfamiliar pedagogical approaches of MOOCs raise questions about how effectively Southern learners engage with courses, although critics also point out that courses can reproduce didactic, passive learning experiences¹². The onus on self-directed learning assumes learners are able to take this journey independently, which is not always the case for learners in the Global South¹³. A growing body of research indicates clear value in convening MOOC study groups, variously described as "MOOC camps"¹⁴, "wrapped MOOCs"¹⁵ or "MOOC+"¹⁶ where online content is blended with face-to-face discussion. This allows scaffolded peer learning and an opportunity to consolidate ideas presented through courses.

Timorese MOOC participants often needed time to understand how to navigate the various steps in a course such as pressing the 'mark as complete' button on FutureLearn course steps, or following the navigation bar of EdX courses. They were also often reticent to comment on course discussion feeds because of concerns about giving incorrect answers or not having a high level of accuracy in their answers, linking back to the importance of language literacies. While some preferred not to post comments, many ascribed value in reading other learners' comments and looking for new ideas, especially in courses for teacher professional development. The experience of blending course content with face-to-face meetings in this project created opportunities for learners to ask questions among their peers, concept check and gain a better understanding of key concepts by talking them through with others.

12. Onah, DFO, Sinclair, JE, Boyat R & Foss, J 2014. Massive Open Online Courses: Learners participation. Paper presented at 7th International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation (ICERI). doi:[10.1007/s11576-014-0405-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11576-014-0405-7)

13. Knox, J (2016) Posthumanism and the MOOC: opening the subject of digital education. Stud in Phil and Ed. doi:10.1007/s11217-016-9516-5

14. Maitland, C Obeyesekere, E (2015) The Creation of Capital through an ICT-based Learning Program: A Case Study of MOOC Camp. Paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development. doi: [10.1145/2737856.2738024](https://doi.org/10.1145/2737856.2738024)

15. Jaffer, T, Govender, S, Brown, C (2017) "The best part was the contact!" Understanding postgraduate students' experiences of wrapped MOOCs. Op Prax doi: 10.5944/openpraxis.9.2.565

16. Liyanagunawardena, T Williams, S A, (2015) Massive Open Online Courses and Perspectives from Learners in Developing Countries. Vist Journ of Hum and Soc Sci. vol 9, 19-37

2.4 Context of content

MOOCs on topics designed for a Northern audience can often lack relevance for learners in the Global South¹⁷, and ideally course resources should be tailored to local conditions¹⁸, which can work counter to the scalar, global aims of MOOCs. There are a growing number of courses on various platforms aimed at Southern audiences. On the FutureLearn platform, courses designed for Southern learner audiences include the Open University's collaboration with Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) 'Making Teacher Education Relevant for 21st Century Africa' <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/teacher-education-africa/>, the University of Cape Town's 'Education for All' <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/education-for-all> and The British Society for Antimicrobial Stewardship (BSAC)'s collaboration with the University of Lagos on 'Antimicrobial Stewardship for Africa' <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/antimicrobial-stewardship-for-africa>.

Currently there are no MOOCs produced either in or for Timor-Leste and learners need to adapt content to their personal context. This was a key part of study group meetings and learners were able to use dialogue with peers to think actively about how knowledge applied to them, which was not always possible and lead to some course attrition as learners felt the content was irrelevant to them. The question: 'So, how does this work in Timor-Leste?' was a regular refrain within group discussions, and further added to the value of face-to-face discussions.

2.5 North-South knowledge flow

The final theme to emerge from the academic research into MOOCs in the Global South concerns the dominance of Northern higher education institutions in the production and dissemination of knowledge, leading to accusations of academic neo-colonialism and the marginalization of Southern academic voices¹⁹. Many learners in the Global South choose to do MOOCs because they are produced in these centres of academic power and are drawn by institutional reputation²⁰. The issue of knowledge, power and the colonial legacy is one that MOOC platforms need to address in the light of these clear imbalances.

Timor-Leste has a wealth of knowledge embodied in traditional customary practices, linguistic diversity, terrestrial and marine biodiversity and a turbulent history of occupation by first the Portuguese empire and more recently Indonesia. Courses based on the report of the Commission for Reception, Truth

17. Wildavsky, B (2014) MOOC Ado About Nothing? Int Ed May/June 74-79

18. Castillo, N, Lee, J, Zahra, F et al. (2015) MOOCs for Development: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities. Inf Tech & Int Dev 11(2) 35-42

19. Altbach, P G (2014) MOOCs as Neocolonialism: Who Controls Knowledge? Int High Ed <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2014.75.5426>

20. Traxler op. cit.

and Reconciliation (CAVR)²¹, would be one way of allowing Timorese to study their history online, while presenting Timor-Leste's history for learners around the world to know more about this country and its past.

3 Conclusion

The periods of fieldwork in Dili have provided an invaluable opportunity to gain rich insights into how learners in Timor-Leste interact with MOOCs, particularly the barriers which constrain learners, and the ways in which learners negotiate these barriers with varying levels of success. Qualitative research into learner behaviour provides a rich source of data to see beyond learner statistics and look more closely at the lived experience of MOOC learners, in order to better understand their educational needs. Further, MOOC platforms need to acknowledge postcolonial critiques and give academics in the South a voice, providing educational opportunities to learners with limited Internet access, in languages they understand, using pedagogical approaches they can relate to, on topics relevant to them. There is tremendous scope for more diversity of academic voices in courses, and for the empire to 'MOOC back' at the global metropole.

21. Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste (CAVR) (2006) *Chega!* The final report of the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation. PT Gramedia, Jakarta.