

BOOK REVIEW

MOOCs and Open Education in the Global South: Challenges, Successes and Opportunities

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Many Western educators live under the mistaken impression that Massive Open Online Courses are a waning fad that never lived up to the disruptive potential claimed by its early evangelists. However, even so-called educational experts are often unaware of the long-term impact of educational technologies after the initial glow and flush of venture capital has faded. MOOCs certainly fall into this category. Class Central reports that in 2019 some 13,500 MOOC courses were delivered to over 110,000,000 learners worldwide (an annual increase of over 18%).

The *MOOCs and Open Education* book promises to be an important resource for educators globally. It not only provides concrete examples of MOOC and OER use in countries throughout the Global South but also deals with instructional design, effects of government policy, adoption issues, faculty and student perceptions of value, the state of research and more. Thus, it is an important and a timely publication.

But first let me get two issues out of the way — if not resolved. It is both ironical and disturbing that an important educational text dealing with openness is itself distributed in closed format. The text retails for a \$140 (US) in hardcover and \$50 in paper. Doubtless, the inability to not make this work available in open access will considerably reduce its impact on the very educators, administrators and policy makers it is designed to aid.

A second irony is that the text (on the Global South) is edited by four academics from the USA. And six of the 28 chapters are authored by North American authors — though, to be fair, all have some reference to the South.

Having gotten those concerns off my chest, let's clarify a few definitions. The term Global South has emerged as a more acceptable successor to terms including "developing countries" or "3rd world" in part because it gives room for the development of South-South partnerships and knowledge sharing, without a sense of defining one's identity or economy in terms of other wealthier nations.ⁱ Next, we need to be clear that the term MOOC itself has evolved since it was coined in 2008 by Dave Courmier. In this text you will hear of MOOCs that are not open (some charging students tuition and one cannot assume that the course content in a MOOC is openly licensed). We also have examples of MOOCs with compulsory face-to-face tutorials, and great variation in the length of courses and whether or not the course is available continuously or follows strict calendar dates. We find examples of MOOCs that



encourage and reward collaborative learning as well as those that celebrate the personal choices allowed by independent study. This lack of precise definition illustrates the way that the content and the technology of delivery can be, and is, morphed by users to fit specific cultural contexts — and this in itself makes the book worthwhile.

The chapters in the book shift between a focus on Open Educational Resources (OER) — used in mostly formal education contexts, to MOOCs which are actually just online courses offered for credit and with credentialled examinations, through to what has become the classic MOOC with free entry but no formal accreditation without payment. Again, these diverse applications make the reader well aware that something is happening with the affordance of the Net to deliver quality educational content and support (limited) interactions all near zero cost. However, it doesn't happen the same way in all countries — even those in the same “Global North” or “South” classifications.

Many of the chapters are case studies of implementation in either formal higher education or professional education contexts. I was especially impressed with the case studies that are backed with strong data sets or provide a detailed look at research literature output from their geographic context. I also liked the diverse outlook of the authors. As expected, some chapters are authored by formal education leaders of established and mostly open universities. Others are authored by instructional designers looking for ways to surmount the challenges of student-student and student-teacher interaction, while maintaining scalability. Others focus on the impact of open resources on the organisations, as to who develops and delivers these open resources.

At 358 pages, I won't attempt to provide a summary of each chapter in this brief review — in any case the editors do so at the beginning of each of the sections — these sections (of three to five chapters) range from historical perspectives, current practices and designs, professional development collaboration policies and organisational innovations.

A few of the chapters provide data on course enrollments and completion and, not unexpectedly, completion rates of these MOOCs are lower than courses given on campus. However, we read examples of professional development courses in which well over 50% of the students complete the course and the assignments. The editors even speculate that completion rates on MOOCs are much higher in the Global South than elsewhere. While I am not convinced that there is a generalisable difference, we see that courses designed to meet specific audiences, that are well designed and that are supported by government and by employers can achieve very respectable completion numbers.

The multi-national contexts highlighted in the book allow for comparison of instructional designs (from those countries with a strong tradition on content dissemination, to those struggling to retain strong student-centered interactions). We also can see quite clearly the differences when MOOCs or OER that are mandated or at least supported by government policy and funding. In some countries the Ministry of Education funds particular MOOC courses and decides on the delivery institution and delivery mode. In others, contexts initiatives are led by single academics or internal university departments. Finally, we see marked differences in the use of national or even local languages of instruction versus countries in which exposure to and competence in international languages (notably English) is paramount. These cultural differences give strength and value to the work and helps us appreciate that MOOCs and OER are very malleable tools that can be, and are, used for many different purposes.

I'll conclude with a brief comment on the value of the editors' contributions to the work. I do so at risk of offending at least two of whom I regard as friends. As a book editor myself and a series editor of the emerging Issues in the *Distance Education* series from Athabasca University Press, I have come to learn more than I really care to about the role of the editor in a scholarly edited text. As expected, the editors introduce each section and summarise in a few paragraphs the main contributions of each chapter. The editors also set out an initial list of questions that hopefully are answered in the text in their introductory chapter. Unfortunately, the final chapter (by the editors) does not revisit nor answer these questions. Instead it continues the usual educational technology "we're off to the future" rosy scenario in which technology answers all educational problems (at low cost of course!) with little critical analysis of emerging issues of surveillance, growing poverty, inequality, and the environmental impact of technology production and use and other social challenges. Yes, MOOCs and OER offer opportunity but they are unlikely to be a panacea for many of our emergent concerns — in the Global South and North.

Notwithstanding my minor concerns, this is a very useful book that will serve to both inform and inspire educators and administrators and policy makers struggling to make effective and affordable education available to all.

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ⁱ See <https://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/workflow/index/397/4> for further discussion.