MOOCs and open education in the Global South: Challenges, successes, and opportunities

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Published online: 13 Feb 2020.

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BOOK REVIEW

MOOCs and open education in the Global South: Challenges, successes, and opportunities, edited by Ke Zhang, Curtis J. Bonk, Thomas C. Reeves, & Thomas H. Reynolds, New York, Routledge, 2019, 392 pp., US$48.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-367-02577-9, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429398919

Since you are attracted to this review of the Routledge book *MOOCs and Open Education in the Global South: Challenges, Successes, and Opportunities*, you most likely fall into one of two camps: a detractor who loudly declares the MOOC just another education fad or the undecided other who considers the MOOC as an immature idea struggling to win over academic relevance. Chances are, if you fall into either camp, you reside in the Northern Hemisphere. If so, read on and see how the other half of the world provides valuable lessons.

Disagreements over best practice and whatevergogy tend to polarize, as has been the case. Even more so with MOOCs. In scholarly outlets and public media, the battle rages. For example, in 2013, Professor Jonathan Rees announced that "The MOOC racket ... will be disastrous for students—and most professors". His proclamation was premature. Then, and now, we are duty bound to remind our friends and colleagues that educational technology takes time to mature.

Rees and his kind have characterized the MOOC as the artificial intelligence (AI) raider of an academician's income stream, an absurd pedagogic crutch, and a waste of institutional resources. In fairness though, many have conceded that my view of the MOOC as a substitute for the dreadful massive face-to-face lecture hall has merit. My disgust for the 300-plus–seat auditorium filled with general education requirement students ill-served by a mainly absent professor, disinterested teaching assistants, and the inevitable, pedantic PowerPoint is manifest. That course does not serve the student, their program, nor the institution. It does get rid of that pesky prerequisite and makes the registrar happy.

The new-improved MOOC, coupled with open educational resources (OER), should take on the Global North Academy, again.

The Global South demonstrates that once potent AI, OER, and meaningful analytics enter the picture, the face of MOOCs changed. Not only has the new-age MOOC become an excellent candidate for the dreaded massive face-to-face lecture hall, it offers more—much more. Some of the deployments described in the book under review take the grumbled-about platform out of its infancy and propel it into a potent instrument of change. No spoiler alert here. You must read on to see what is happening south of the equator.

This book proves emphatically that the MOOC is not a failed experiment. In fact, this important work does two things: it clearly demonstrates, first, the elastic nature of the MOOC, and, second, the potent results derived from thoughtful application. The chapters present manifold successes and propose future promise. The stories are not hyperbole; they are curated by pioneers, visionaries, and thought leaders—Ke Zhang, Curtis J. Bonk, Thomas C. Reeves, and Thomas H. Reynolds. These professionals do not lend their names, or reputations, to failed experiments. In fact, this is a follow-up to their award-winning effort in 2015, *MOOCs and Open Education Around the World*, also published by Routledge, and edited by Bonk, Reeves, and Reynolds, along with Mimi Miyoung Lee, who appropriately wrote the insightful foreword to the present volume. As you shall see, a lot has happened in the wonderful world of MOOCs during the past 5 years.

The book is divided into seven sections: Historical Perspectives; Current Practices and Designs; MOOCs and Open Education for Professional Development; Multi-Country Collaborations and Collections; Government Policies and Strategies; Organizational Innovations; and the Future of MOOCs and Open Education. The titles make clear the diverse nature of this collection. It focuses on education to be sure but pulls in literacy development, training, and as the editors propose, the "cultural, political, and economic challenges and issues facing various stakeholders in open education environments. Different chapters will highlight pressing issues and controversies where there presently is impassioned debate and controversy." (p. xxvi). They deliver on that promise.

Right out of the starting blocks, Section 1 offers "A Historical Journey Into K-MOOCs Leading to Possible Collaborations with North Korea" by Yong Kim, Ock Tae Kim, and Jin Gon Shon. Although the chapter title alone begs a read, what the Global North reader immediately sees is an unfamiliar academic landscape— that of a nation-state forming a robust partnership with universities. A highly successful initiative, the Korea Open Course Ware (KOCW) matured quickly, serving both the academic and corporate worlds with rich content. The K-MOOC became the delivery system of choice. The authors argue, effectively, that the K-MOOC would be integral in the unification of North Korea and South Korea.

Also in Section 1 is the "Current State of Practice and Research on MOOCs in Mainland China: A Critical Review" by Professors Jianli Jiao and Yibo Fan. China, like its neighbors North Korea and South Korea, brings a major governmental presence into the MOOC arena. Although the administrative structure seems potentially unwieldy by its sheer size, the research con-ducted by Professor Jiao and his assistant Yibo Fan speaks to the same issues familiar to those in the northern hemisphere.

Section 2 offers a grand tour: Egypt, Indonesia, Nepal, Latin America, Fiji, Sri Lanka, Chile, and beyond. The topics are diverse—OER, MOOC design, English as a Second Language, trends, and global diversity. The section underscores the editors' earlier claim that MOOCs offer "no one path" (p. xvii). Notable examples in this section are the offerings from Indonesia and Nepal. In Chapter 6, "Massive Open Online Courses: The State of Practice in Indonesia," Professor Tian Belawati rightly argues that a MOOC delivery system to a 17,000-island nation with the fourth largest population on the planet is not only efficient but essential. In contrast, Professors Ghimire and Gautam tell of a much tinier population with "Nepali High School Students in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): Impressive Results and a Promising Future." The authors detail a positive governmental effort to promote the Internet as an educational resource. Chapter 11, "The Emotional Benefits of Diversity in MOOCs: Reshaping Views of Online Education Through Exposure to Global Learners," is a topic rarely touched. Professor Trang Phan, as the title suggests, drills deep into the positive aspects to all stake-holders in the MOOC universe. She makes it clear that not only the students benefit from the diverse international population found in MOOCs but also the professors, and instructional designers, gain great insight into cross-cultural interactions.

In Section 3, Chapter 14, there is a bit of a head-scratcher as some North Americans show up. Professors Cleveland-Innes and Ostashewski hale from Canada's Athabasca University. However, they were not slid in uninvited; they represent a prime example of the international nature of the MOOC. Working in collaboration with Dr. Sanjaya Mishra from the Commonwealth of Learning, an international organization of 53 countries, they apply their skills to assuring that the technology-enabled learning MOOCs deliver. I dare the MOOC doubters to challenge the value of this important platform. These MOOCs are all about training teachers to meet the standards of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4. The stated goal "is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning oppor-tunities for all." (p. 1). Considering the lack of resources of many of the member nation states in

Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific, these MOOCs are a spectacular example of delivering professional development in an efficient, inexpensive, highly accessible, and meaningful way.

In Section 4, Multi-Country Collaborations and Collections, the theme set by the technology-enabled learning MOOCs detailed above is followed on by another incredible public service–oriented MOOC. Chapter 16, "Courses for a Cause: MOOC Contributions to a "Better Place for All"," describes international collaborations to fulfill the title—a better place for all. The authors are a collaborative group from disparate nations including places such as Iran, South Africa, Mexico, China, the Bahamas, Columbia, and the United States. They all see the MOOC as a vehicle for networks committed to public service, environmental issues, and calls to action. This chapter, alone, could give pause to the grumbling MOOC detractor, no?

Next up, Chapter 17, is all about research; Professor Insung Jung and her hardworking research team at International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan, provide a historical context in the development of the MOOC. Impressively, this group purposefully conducted research to describe the development of MOOCs in Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Mexico. All of the countries are members of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Besides a literature review, the chapter synthesizes the common themes and issues. One of the major challenges is that of limited resources plaguing emerging economies. There is, however, a unified opinion that the MOOC will contribute to the further development of the member nations.

Also in Section 4, Chapter 18 ("A Glimpse on how MOOCs from IDB are Impacting Learners in Latin America and the Caribbean") demonstrates how an international coalition of 48 nations, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), is an agent for change. One of the bank's main goals is to assist in improving education in developing countries. The authors (Edgar González, Antonio García, Carlos Macher, and Dou Zhang) detail how- since 2014-the IDB sponsored over 100 MOOCs. The authors tell a marvelous story of how the bank is helping develop MOOCs to improve the socioeconomic aspects of life in both Latin America and the Caribbean. Just like the findings reported in Chapter 16, the IDB efforts show positive results and augur continued success and constructive change.

Government Policies and Strategies are the domain of Section 5. Melinda dela Peña Bandalaria, the Chancellor of the University of the Philippines Open University, offers an executive-level administrator's overview of OER and MOOCs from a different perspective. In Chapter 21's "OERs for Development (OERs4D) Framework as Designed and Implemented in the Philippines," Bandalaria explains how the Philippine academic community saw the possibilities of internationally available MOOCs and OER developed offshore not only as add-ons but as an opportunity to replicate and export themselves. The Philippines was an early adopter of OER in 2006. This was not serendipitous but a measured approach to not only adopt OER but also become an active participant. The same pattern evolved in deploying the burgeoning homegrown OER library online. Based on the Bandalaria's information, the deployment of the MOOC as a delivery platform for teacher training, their unique development model—Online Education Resources for Development (OER4D)—evolved. Graphics presented in the chapter show a robust, sophisticated, and highly accessible space that portends continued success.

By contrast, the following chapter in Section 5, Chapter 22, "Disruptive Learning: Inspiring the Advancement of MOOCs in the Middle East" by Abtar Darshan Singh, Sumayyah Abuhamdeih, and Shriram Raghunathan, paints a completely different picture. They face incredible challenges. Not only do Middle East conflicts play a role, but disparate languages, connectivity issues, accessibility challenges, and paucity of delivery mechanisms create huge impediments. The lack of governmental or private sector initiatives to step up in the areas of formal education, non-traditional skill-based, or vocational training, are sorely lacking. The in-

depth analysis of deployment, usage, and acceptance enables the authors to conclude that a positive future is possible predicated on the establishment of an Arab MOOC (AMOOC). The future they envision can only come from a MOOC that departs from what they identify as "Current MOOCs" in Table 22.5. Their model would follow a competency-based learning model, real-world focus, trainee-centric, and supported by a robust AI component. Their proposal is solid, and, yes, disruptive.

Section 6, Organizational Innovations, would have to convert the most strident of MOOC-doubters into ardent advocates. It is difficult to argue against success. Chapter 23 tells of a powerhouse that is heavily invested in MOOCs, not a university, nor a governmental institution, but a financial institution: The World Bank. In the aptly titled "Open Education in the World Bank: A Significant Dividend for Development," Sheila Jagannathan, the Head of the Open Learning Campus (OLC) at the World Bank, describes a vibrant program and predicts an even brighter future. Under her leadership, the digital and blended programs are conceived, designed, and made available to serve a diverse global population. If you think the Open Learning Campus would just dwell in the financial realm, you would be sorely mistaken. It uses the Sustainable Development Goals set forth in 2015 by the United Nations. There are 17; all work toward the betterment of the human condition. While this sounds altruistic, the World Bank takes a very pragmatic approach and is a major contributor to the Sustainable Development Goals being realized.

Another intriguing and societally important piece in Section 6 is Chapter 24, "From OER to OEP: The Case of an OER-Integrated Teacher Education eLearning Program in Africa," by Atieno Adala. This chapter is more granular; the focus is not global but continentally specific. Dr. Adala, an internationally recognized researcher, discusses the crucial topic of teacher training in Africa, the role of OER, and that of open educational practices (OEP). Adala comes to the OER/OEP conversation from experience in many African institutions. Her primary focus are institutions in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Somalia, which belong to the African Virtual University. The chapter speaks to what OER looked like in more developed, and connected, countries 10–15 years ago. That crazy notion of OER flew in the face of traditional formal instruction at that time and, for many, still does today. Adala's research uncovered many familiar findings and reframes, such as "it is essential that OER integration occur at the institutional level, not solely at the individual faculty level." (p. 296). That said, Professor Adala believes, with time, the full value of OER will be realized and implemented.

Chapter 25 also speaks to the promise of MOOCs but this time on the Indian subcontinent, specifically targeting the agricultural sector. Commonwealth of Learning Vice President Dr. Balaji Venkataraman and Professor Tadinada V. Prabhakar from the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur speak of the many challenges encountered, but unlike most readings in the learning technology space, they also eloquently discuss workable solutions in their chapter "Responsive Innovations in MOOCs For Development: A Case Study of AgMOOCs in India." They also address the challenges of poor connectivity but present some intriguing strategies to ameliorate the barriers. The chapter would be an excellent primer for the doubter who shouts about the expense of MOOCs and other limiting factors. The authors offer specific solutions; not platitudes nor unachievable promises. Do check out the mooKIT—it's free!

Section 7 is aptly titled "The Future of MOOCs and Open Education." There are only two chapters, one by Dr. Paul Kim and Jieun Lee and the other by the co-editors of this book. First, let's deal with "Evolution of Online Learning Environments and the Emergence of Intelligent MOOCs"—it is riveting. The fact that they disclose the existence of an AI teaching assistant should be enough to secure attention. This project grew out of Stanford University's Mobile Inquiry-based Learning Environment (SMILE, https://gse-it.stanford.edu/smile). The system's ability to quickly generate as well as rank four levels of questions from a database of millions

should have everyone reading this smiling. Tools like SMILE have the potential to take MOOCs and open education from surface skimming and passive consumption learning to enormous depth and active engagement with the content. In the final chapter, "MOOCs and Open Education in the Global South: Future Opportunities," the co-editors make the observation "Accordingly, if the present volume is any indication of the present state of MOOCs and OERs, then a celebration of our progress is definitely warranted and perhaps overdue." (p. 342). Zhang, Bonk, Reeves, and Reynolds, as well as the 64 other contributors to this new book, deserve a victory lap. Many are true pioneers of the digital age, and many more should have been mentioned above.

Read this book; it is illuminating, timely, extremely relevant, and full of adoptable strategies.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2020.1727290

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