

Experiences of Timorese language teachers in a blended Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

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Abstract

This paper details the experiences of a group of Timorese English language teachers from Lorosa'e English Language Institute (LELI) in Dili, Timor-Leste, who participated in a professional development MOOC entitled *Teaching for Success: Lessons and Teaching* between March and April 2017. Drawing on the pedagogical principles of blended learning; participants engaged with online course content, and once a week met as a study group to view some video content together and discuss issues arising from it. The authors draw on participant observation, individual and focus group interviews and post-course author reflections to outline the benefits and challenges of doing blended MOOCs in Dili, and propose that they can provide local English language teachers opportunities for subject area knowledge building, language literacy development and more general lifelong learning.

Key Words: Online learning; MOOC; global South; developing countries; Continuing Professional Development; teacher training; Timor-Leste

Introduction

This paper is part of a participatory action research project investigating the potential for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Education Resources (OER) to provide low-cost, quality learning experiences for learners in Timor-Leste. MOOCs have been proposed as a 'game changer' for higher education in the global South (Warusavitarana, Dona, Piyathilake, Epitawela, & Edirisinghe, 2014). Critics point to the neo-colonial potential of MOOCs from the global North supplanting Southern higher education (Altbach, 2014; Godwin-Jones, 2014; Head, 2015) and the lack of contextualised content (Czerniewicz, Deacon, Small, & Walji, 2014; Nkuyubwatsi, 2014). Key barriers to uptake in countries of the global South include limited access to the internet and the requisite information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as low participant literacies (Liyaganawardena, Williams, & Adams, 2013). Despite these limitations, recent reports conclude that MOOCs can provide scalar opportunities for higher education in the global South (Laurillard & Kennedy, 2017), and help progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 - quality education (McGreal, 2017).

Research suggests that there are benefits to group learning within MOOCs (Bayeck, 2016). Facilitated MOOCs, known as 'MOOC+' (Liyaganawardena & Williams, 2015), 'MOOC camps' (Maitland & Obeysekare, 2015) or 'wrapped' MOOCs (Jaffer, Govender, & Brown, 2017) can leverage the affordances of blending MOOC resources with face-to-face learning via co-located viewing of course content (Li et al., 2014), tutorial-style group discussions (Bulger, Bright & Cobo, 2015) and the

formation of local communities of practice (Firmansyah & Timmis, 2016). Maitland and Obeyesekere (2015) argue that MOOC study groups allow participants to accumulate cultural and cultural capital in and through the facilitated MOOC experience.

MOOCs are a relatively new phenomenon in Timor-Leste and the lead author's earlier research into online learning participation in Dili (King, 2016) identified isolated examples of individuals and small groups of 'early adopters' taking advantage of online learning resources, including MOOCs. Studies elsewhere suggest that MOOCs can contribute to professional learning (Laurillard, 2016; Milligan & Littlejohn, 2014), including in teacher professional development in the global South (Batchelor & Lautenbach, 2015; Fyle, 2013). A report into the applications of MOOCs for professional development in Colombia, the Philippines and South Africa found that these courses provided quality training opportunities, and recommended they be incorporated into existing government workforce development programs (Garrido et al., 2016). The authors also identified a dearth of research into the lived experience of MOOC participants from countries of the global South (see also Nti, 2015) and this paper aims to make a contribution to this field.

Context

Monty King (author 1) facilitated a British Council course on the FutureLearn MOOC platform entitled *Teaching for Success: Lessons and Teaching*

(<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/english-language-teaching>) for four weeks from March to April 2017, and seven Timorese language teachers at Lorosa'e English Language Institute (LELI) participated in the course. Participants accessed the resources- a combination of videos, articles, printable worksheets, short quizzes, surveys, and comments pages- for six weeks from the day they enrolled. LELI offered to subsidise the cost of a course 'upgrade', giving participants unlimited access to the course resources and a printed certificate. The course encouraged participants to reflect on their own teaching practice and adopt some of the strategies and approaches presented and modelled through the course in their teaching. Each Monday morning during the course the facilitator downloaded the approximately 10-15 weekly videos and copied them to a USB file, then to the LELI shared staff computer, allowing participants to watch content offline. Participants then worked through the course resources in their own time. The study group met for 1-2 hours each Thursday morning, watching 2-3 of that week's videos, unpacking more difficult language, and discussing the application of these ideas in the Timorese language classroom.

Method

The research drew on the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and used an ethnographic approach to data collection within a cycle of observation and informed reflection (Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn, 2003). Author 1 observed the teacher participants within weekly study groups and conducted individual interviews both before and after course completion in addition to a focus group interview at the completion of the course. The interviews were semi-structured and aimed at encouraging the social construction of knowledge among participants and researchers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In the pre-course interview, participants were asked about their education background, their use of the internet (particularly for educational purposes) and their future career ambitions. At the completion of the course they were interviewed again and asked about their impressions of the course and its utility. A focus group interview conducted upon completion of the course provided a forum for the participants to share their impressions and discuss the wider applications of MOOCs in Timor-Leste. The focus group interview was transcribed and analysed separately by the three authors, who then

met and compared codes, identifying the main benefits and challenges to emerge from the data, and applying them to the entire data set.

The interviews were conducted entirely in English, and the participants had a level of conversational English that allowed a discussion of their educational background, experiences of using ICTs and the internet, and their career ambitions, without major difficulty. The second author (Bernadete Luan), who also participated in the courses, has a postgraduate qualification from an Australian university and the third author (Esperança Lopes), also a participant, studied a liberal arts degree at an American university. Three other participants had studied English language education at the national university and another was in the process of writing his Education honours thesis, in English, to complete his studies. The final participant had completed her secondary education and had participated in informal English language training programs in her hometown outside Dili until she had become a trainer, a common story to emerge from interviews with Timorese language teachers. Though all the participants currently reside in Dili, they came from municipalities across the country drawn by opportunities to study and work in the capital and largest city.

Results

Five major benefits and four challenges around facilitating MOOCs for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in Timor-Leste were identified in the data:

Benefit 1: Access to quality learning resources

There was general group consensus that the course resources were of excellent standard with valuable, relevant content and the short lecture videos in particular were well received. One participant commented “it was great because it [the video] contains a lot of new ideas... and I got a lot of ideas which empower my understanding about teaching.” The materials constructively aligned with weekly module objectives, and the logic of the course progression fostered productive discussions throughout the course.

An early activity required participants to reflect on how they plan their lessons, and provided downloadable lesson plan templates for teacher use. This combined with the discussions, both online through the course comments pages and the face-to-face study group meetings, gave the teachers an “...opportunity to go a little bit deeper about how to prepare lesson plan.” The resources were of a high quality, and the group were aware that the British Council is an industry leader in English language education through previous professional development training.

Benefit 2: Sharing and learning from others

The study group appreciated the opportunity to share reflections, opinions and insights from other group members, and other participants around the world. A number of teachers reported using the online comments pages as a resource to mine for teaching tips.

“We see teachers from different countries...post comments...you read some comments... it’s learning from others...”

Another participant added:

“... I had a chance to talk to people from different countries, know about their experiences in teaching... sharing experiences.”

These shared personal teaching experiences nurtured a collegial atmosphere through the course. The participants often recognised something familiar in the reflections of teachers around the world and the challenges they face. This transferred to the group discussions, where participants were asked to identify their Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) and how they encourage reflective learning and professional development.

Benefit 3: Encouraging reflective learning

The *Teaching for Success* courses promote reflective practice, and learners are regularly asked to consider how they can utilise the strategies introduced through the course to improve their teaching. One focus group member summed up this benefit in noting:

“...[T]hey bring up a lot of issues that you are also thinking some teachers might have had that experience before... and then also we recognize what we are facing when we are teaching.”

Collective reflection was encouraged, which compounded the benefits of group learning, both online and face-to-face. Reflective learning was new to some participants, and they took to it willingly, despite early reservations about sharing reflections with more senior teachers. For many it was an opportunity to consolidate previous training, and dedicate some time to consider their future professional development pathways. In all the reflective component of the course challenged the participants to think more deeply about their teaching practice, which they responded to positively.

Benefit 4: Motivating teachers to try new things and develop their teaching practice.

While many of the ideas presented through the course were familiar to the teachers, all of the teachers reported trying new ideas from the course in the classroom. One participant explained:

“[W]ith the videos... when you watch... when you see teachers teaching you think, OK maybe I did this, changing with this one into this one.”

The teachers experimented with a number of the different ideas suggested through the course, including whiteboard management, use of flashcards and activities designed to engage students and keep the classroom student-centred. The course also introduced participants to the concept of the action research cycle and encouraged them to apply it in their work. Overall the course challenged teachers to break old, repetitive teaching habits and try new approaches, which the participants found particularly useful.

Benefit 5: Improving participants' English

Many of the teachers felt that the course was a good opportunity to develop their own English language skills. The *Teaching for Success* course page indicated that participants would need an English level of B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). The study group members all demonstrated English at or above this level, and appreciated the opportunity to practice their English, particularly the language related to teaching.

“... [I]t's also like a time for us to learn some new words that, like you don't know about and then somebody else mentions about it... so we can know more about teaching, know more about what they experience... I think it's also something like improving our English.”

This benefit echoes the principles of content and language integrated learning (CLIL), whereby students learn a language *of, for* and *through* a subject area (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). Research into MOOCs for CLIL is nascent (see for example de Waard & Demeulenaere 2016) but appears an interesting direction for further research.

Challenge 1: Internet access

While internet connectivity has improved significantly in Timor-Leste over the past five years, it remains intermittent at best. LELI has a relatively reliable connection, but periods of slow net speeds and power blackouts were common. The weekly videos were downloaded in an effort to reduce the disruption caused by this issue, but this process was often time-consuming. Participants expressed frustration but also demonstrated a stoic patience, knowing that this was unavoidable.

All of the participants had access to a smart phone and/or laptop, and some downloaded course materials to their personal devices to watch offline. One participant watched the lectures on her laptop offline, but contributed to the course discussions using her smart phone because it was more convenient. Another accessed almost all of the materials through his phone, while others preferred the larger screen and keyboard of a laptop. For some the idea of mobile learning seemed counterintuitive, while others took to it readily. A recent study of a MOOC on research writing for participants from the global South incorporated resources designed for low-bandwidth scenarios (Murugesan, Nobes, & Wild, 2017), which can help learners overcome these access barriers.

Challenge 2: Time management

A very busy schedule at LELI meant that most teachers missed at least one of the study group sessions, but were able to access the videos in their own time and keep up with the course.

“I would love to do it by myself and also with a group as well, it depends with the teachers who have time. At the moment we have, how do you say, very high teaching hours.”

Across the five weeks of the course most teachers regularly taught over 30 hours a week, not including preparation and marking time. Participants often copied the lectures to their portable devices to take home over weekends, and the two extra weeks available at the end of the course to finish off various steps was invaluable. Until late February 2017 FutureLearn courses were open indefinitely for participants to complete once they had enrolled, and this new deadline presents a greater challenge for participants in areas with limited internet access. Further, the everyday time commitments of family, religious and ceremonial commitments, all restrict participants' free time to complete the course. Time constraints have been cited as a factor mitigating course completion in other countries of the global South (Garrido et al., 2016).

Challenge 3: Course design issues

While participants appreciated the clear layout of the course, some experienced difficulties using some areas of the platform. For example, one focus group member found it difficult to follow fellow participants' comments:

“...There are many people on the course put the comment there, and after it's very hard for us to follow them again because we have to scroll all the comments...”

Another design issue identified was the perceived ease of course completion. There was a feeling that just by clicking the ‘mark as complete’ section on each course step you could gain a certificate while having learnt little:

“Anyone can participate in the course but then they can pay for a certificate even though they don’t learn a lot... it’s just like you pay for it get certificate, put in your CV.”

A focus group member suggested that more formative assessments would encourage participant engagement. Other MOOCs offer automatically marked quizzes, as a means of concept checking participant understanding, and the use of this kind of tool would compel participants to engage with course content and assess learner progress.

Challenge 4: Limited certification payment methods and prohibitive cost

FutureLearn offers certification and unlimited access to course materials for a fee, and the *Teaching for Success* course cost approximately USD \$75. Credit card ownership is limited to a privileged few in Timor-Leste and the national bank has only made such facilities available to its customers from July 2017. One participant with a credit card from an Indonesian bank tried to pay for certification, but was unsuccessful:

“...I tried to upgrade my course, I wanted to pay but they won’t allow me to just because the bank that I’m using they don’t work with the merchant for FutureLearn. So it’s good that the FutureLearn they have many people that sign up for that from everywhere but maybe they can expand payment options.”

LELI school offered to subsidise two thirds of the course certification fee so that participants paid USD \$25 and the school met the balance. The school then made payment with a UK credit card and organised for the certificates to be posted to an address in the UK, then brought back to Timor-Leste. This was a time-consuming process, and without significant support from LELI school, certification would have been impossible. Of the seven participants, three opted to pay for certification. Two of those who decided not to pay explained that they were not able to because of financial constraints. One teacher felt uncomfortable asking the school to subsidise the cost and another, mentioned above, tried unsuccessfully to pay with their personal credit card.

Conclusion

The *Teaching for Success: Lessons and Teaching* course study group had at least three learning implications for participants. The first was the sharing of knowledge specific to the course subject area. The study groups allowed participants to clarify, discuss and apply ideas presented through the course and integrate them with previous professional development training. The course encouraged the teachers to take new ideas back to the language classroom in a cycle of planning, action and reflection, and stressed the importance of CPD to growing and improving as a teacher.

The course provided an opportunity to learn about the theory and practice of English language in English, using language specific to teaching theory. Participants often commented about being familiar with a particular idea without knowing the word for it in English. Applying the basic principles of CLIL in MOOC study groups encourages participants to learn the metalanguage around their profession, to help them engage with ideas which can inform and improve their teaching while improving their English language knowledge at the same time. This is not limited to teachers, nor to

English language speakers; Timorese learners can use MOOCs as a means to improve their skills in Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia, Korean, Chinese and other languages relevant to Timorese learners now used in various MOOC platforms.

Another benefit was the introduction of online learning more generally and the range of quality online CPD resources available to teachers. Some participants reported enrolling in other FutureLearn courses in the weeks after the completion of the *Teaching for Success* course. Some enrolled together with colleagues while others began exploring other MOOCs individually. Teachers reported using a number of websites for lesson ideas before the course, but none had previously been aware of online CPD courses. What remains clear from researching the uptake of MOOCs and other online learning resources in Timor-Leste is that public awareness of what is available online is still very low, an issue not limited to this country (Nath & Karmakar, 2014).

These benefits can only be gained if participants are able to access a reliable internet connection, a precondition not often met in countries of the global South, including Timor-Leste. The blending of online course content with face to face interactions was beneficial as a means of scaffolding the online learning experience, however it did limit the flexibility that MOOCs provide. The other challenges mentioned in the results combine to restrict the effectiveness of MOOCs for CPD in Southern contexts and demand a particular form of learner resilience to successfully negotiate these barriers to learning. There is, on balance, an advantage to forming study groups to work around these limitations and gain the benefits of both on- and offline learning with peer support

An issue not raised in the results but alluded to in the introduction is the Northern origins of the course and the attendant imbalance in knowledge production and dissemination. The LELI teachers appreciated *Teaching for Success*' international perspective and felt it enriched the learning experience, yet MOOC producers are firmly moored in the global North and critics argue that MOOCs reproduce neo-colonial, hegemonic educational practices. To address this imbalance more Southern voices need to be heard, and higher education institutions in countries such as Timor-Leste need access to course production platforms. This would allow Southern academics to produce courses specific to their local contexts, using languages of instruction which enable more learners in these areas to benefit from open online learning.

The experiences of this study group suggest to us that MOOCs such as *Teaching for Success* have potential to offer valuable CPD opportunities to English speaking teachers in Timor-Leste, particularly when blended with face to face interaction in study groups. Participants enjoyed the ability to access quality resources and share ideas with teachers both within their Personal Learning Networks and online. They also saw the course as an opportunity to become more collaborative, reflective teachers, and to improve their English language skills. Among the issues facing Timorese learners, internet access remains a major barrier to greater engagement, which is compounded by time constraints for teachers who often work long hours. Design issues such as limited formative assessment also restricted learner engagement, in addition to the cost and methods of payment for certification.

The course ended with a quote for participants to consider: "Change is inevitable, growth is optional". For English teachers, as in other professions, the role of technology in driving change cannot be ignored. The results of this project suggest that MOOCs can support CPD, and course study groups can add the benefits of face-to-face, collaborative learning. This is a major change in the way professional development is provided to language teachers in Timor-Leste, but it can provide valuable, potentially transformative educational opportunities to teachers and other professionals.

Disclosure

After the drafting of this article, Author 1 (Monty King) gained employment with FutureLearn, however no major changes have been made to the final paper.

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