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Global technologies, local practices

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LMT Editorial

Introduction

In contemporary times, education technology is undoubtedly a global affair. The increasingly powerful education technology industry is becoming a key site, not only for global financial investment – \$16.3 billion dollars worldwide in 2018 – but also for geopolitical contestations over technical innovations and market shares (Education Technology 2019). Prominent initiatives, such as the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement (discussed in a Brazilian context by Giselle Ferreira and Márcio Lemgruber, and in an Indian context by Lina Andolfini in this issue), have promoted themselves deliberately and unambiguously as global endeavours, positioned to end a worldwide ‘crisis’ in education by ‘making education more accessible and adaptable to the changing needs of the global economy’ (Daniel and Killion 2012). In a similar vein, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (examined by Taskeen Adam, as well as Patricia Arnold and Belma Halkic in this issue) have sought to expand the reach of elite educational institutions to encompass global populations, aimed specifically towards those with the least access to education, or the most economic disadvantage.

Alongside the video lectures from faculty in prestigious universities (largely located in the Global North) that constitute the central resource in MOOCs, a plethora of educational endeavours have also dispatched all sorts of hardware devices to developing countries in recent years, ostensibly with a similar interest in improving local educational practices. Others such as Bridge International Academies have developed highly standardised and proprietary teaching methods that involve ‘scripted instructions readout by primarily uncertified and low-paid teachers using tablets’ (Riep and Machacek 2016, 7), mobilising a de-professionalisation of the teaching profession in countries where it is operational (Riep 2017). Pearson’s initiatives are much the same in its support of ‘low-fee’ for-profit private schools, particularly in developing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa, India and parts of Asia (Srivastava, 2016), largely through equity investments in for-profit technology-driven ‘education solutions for the low-income segment in the developing world’ (PALF 2012). In some cases, the technology has often been gifted or subsidized to schools in developing countries in exchange for loyalty to the in-built curricula and software - such as the One Laptop Per Child project (Ames 2016; Selwyn 2013) - revealing underlying interests in ownership and the control of educational markets characteristic of the growing education technology industry.

Civil society actors are stimulating this global enterprise through a growing alignment with the commercial edtech industry. The Right to Education Project, the Soros Open Society Foundations, and the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to name a few have championed private sector engagement in education and have contributed to the motivation ‘to actively create a global market for the corporate-backed low-fee private sector’ (Srivastava 2016, 251). Representative of broader public-private partnerships, the UK government is purposefully identifying international markets for the UK edtech industry to infiltrate, signalling a further alignment of governments and commercial enterprises ‘to help the UK EdTech industry flourish internationally’ (Department for Education 2019, 30).

The high-profile promotion of such initiatives has continually portrayed a simplistic vision of education as an 'global' endeavour, rooted in economic rationales for workforce training and human capital, and maintaining a universalist discourse that tends to normalise the educational cultures from which the technologies have been developed. Too often this technology is framed as a transparent instrument for educational export, keeping curricula, pedagogy, and educational values intact whilst they are broadcast to a global population assumed to be in deficit. With often alarming ease, this kind of digital education is presented as an agent of liberation from cultural, social, economic, or political restraints, made free by the 'flattening out of hierarchies', the 'boosting of individual freedoms', and the reduction of 'centralized controls' (Selwyn 2009, 92). The discourse of tech-fuelled liberation, and the resulting public-private partnerships, tend to seek an active break with local contexts, often ushering in a 'Silicon Valley narrative' (Weller 2015) of disruption and revolution designed to supplant 'broken' educational practices at the local level. In these conspicuous global education ventures, the most prominent voices are too often those invested in the widespread adoption of the technology, with little insight from those tasked with consuming it.

This special issue of Learning, Media and Technology contributes to a growing need, not only for critical accounts of digital education that resist the global, but also for a more diverse representation of the multiplicitous practices of teaching and learning with technology across the globe. It builds on important work that has examined open education initiatives in the Global South (Arinto et al. 2017) and highlighted 'missing voices' in educational technology development (Davis 2015). It is through such critical enquiry that research can continue to cut through the discursive regimes of simplistic disruption and enhancement from a pervasive education technology industry. This means aligning research in this area, less with grand narratives that portray digital education as an external and universal force capable of radical transformation, and more with accounts that acknowledge an already-present political economy of educational technology, in which specific devices and applications succumb to everyday practices of negotiation, consumption, and resistance, particular to the contexts in which they manifest. This is the orientation surfaced across this special issue, for example in Sue Timmis and Patricia Muhuro's paper on practices of improvisation undertaken by rural students in South Africa, in Monty King, Martin Forsey and Mark Pegrum's discussion of negotiating access to online education in Timor-Leste, and Jade Henry, Niall Winters, and Martin Oliver's exploration of global and local digital practices among community health workers in Kenya.

Part of this shift may involve moving away from a concern for 'digital divides', which tends to privilege the provision of *access* to technology, with the assumption that educational emancipation will automatically ensue once gadgets are distributed, or software paywalls eliminated. Emerging work around the concept of the 'postdigital' is highlighting the relational qualities of technology and suggesting more productive views of the technological divides prevalent in contemporary society. As Jandric et al. (2018) suggest:

To be on the 'worse end' of the 'digital divide' does not mean that you live an entirely 'analogue' life, unaffected by the encroachments of digitisation. Rather, it means that you have less agency in the digital era and that you are undoubtedly impacted to a greater extent by a technology-infused global capitalism. (Jandric et al. 2018, 166)

In other words, it is the quality of one's ability to act with and through the digital that marks the divide between the marginalised and the privileged, which focuses attention on educational practices 'on the ground', rather than simply the distribution of technologies. Further, while this offers a framework to critique the economic rationales that appear to be driving the global educational technology industry, it also leaves open a space to acknowledge everyday practices of resistance, which are needed to enrich our understanding of digital education in context.

Marginalisation

Additionally, this work requires better engagement with educational marginalisation: the process of pushing a particular group or groups of people to the edge of the dominant power structures in local, regional, and international educational regimes through direct or indirect means; an exclusion from resources, decision-making, and rights (Brun & Blaikie 2016). Research and development in education technology has too often portrayed itself as a straightforward means of educational liberation or inclusion, which overlooks the much subtler ways in which the digital simultaneously produces exclusions and barriers. Indeed, it is this coexistence of consequences which the field of education technology has singularly failed to address.

Educational marginalisation in many forms - epistemic, linguistic, gender, economic, and more – is often intensified by technology. Where Eurocentric systems of education (Nyamnjoh 2017) are embodied in technology exports, one might perceive 'a tightly integrated system' of global knowledge production 'reproducing itself indefinitely' (Connell et al. 2018), to the detriment of local ways of knowing. Minor languages tend to be excluded in such systems, which tend to favour those of the dominant Global North, engendering, as some have argued, social inequalities (Soto and Pérez-Milans 2018). This linguistic marginalisation is largely a result of the further coding of Global North values into 'global' systems of communication and education; the 'consequences for languages extend across the full range of what counts as languages, their status, their corpus, and discourse forms, their spatial and sociological distribution and cultural and ideological aspects' (Lo Bianco 2014, 315).

These global systems of communication and education technology perpetuate these marginalisations. Gender marginalisation in the digital practices of education is acute. Increased access to digital technology has not lessened the digital divide but has rather exacerbated marginalisation for women, particularly in the degree that technology is increasingly intertwined in employment, education, and government services (van der Spuy and Aavrit 2018). Access and meaningful use of technology is increasingly tantamount to meaningful participation in society in general and education in particular, a position that increasingly marginalises women (see LIRNEasia 2019 and Research ICT Africa 2018 for more detailed critiques).

Many are increasingly bound in marginalisations of policy and their exposure to the mediation of 'supranational policy pressures' (Grek et al. 2009) associated with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other international instruments of educational progress, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Verger et al 2018, 9).

The educational targets associated with such policies beget an increased alignment with the commercial edtech sector growing to meet them.

Educational marginalisation has reconstituted itself online through the turn to the digital and the commercial activity proposed to implement it. Digital education platforms, mobile telecoms, internet service providers (ISPs), hardware and software manufacturers, the 'global' architecture of education, are increasingly bound in an entanglement which has a direct impact on the autonomy of local educational systems (Kondowe and Chigona 2018) and the meaningful inclusion of those which have been marginalised in its wake. Indigenous technologies are largely marginalised (with some exceptions) in the wake of this commercial activity and the normalisation of technology design towards dominant Global North models that this process begets (Gumbo 2015); technology is 'held up as a panacea, ignoring their limits and marginalising other forms of knowledge' (Demaria and Kothari 2017, 2591). Governance of these technological systems and their lack of meaningful Global South participation further marginalise resulting in an 'opportunistic invasion and diminuting agency' and a marginalising expression of 'techno-power' (van Stam 2016). Digital divides have accelerated a host of attendant marginalisations and amplified the inequalities of societies (Haenssger 2018) and it is critical that we identify the plurality of practices among those who have crossed the digital divide to avoid digitally reproducing inequality (Hargittai 2018) or marginalisation.

This special issue might be seen as part of a move to surface these entanglements through critical accounts of educational practices with digital technologies that challenge global narratives of normalised technology use. We see this work as an attempt to create a space to unpack and scrutinize different kinds of marginalisation, define different assemblages of practice that might constitute a counter-narrative, and chart trajectories within and through these digital spaces.

Editing and Academic Publishing

As two white male academics from an 'elite' UK university editing for a prestigious and paywalled journal, our role as editors of this special issue was problematically juxtaposed against the accounts of practice we were looking to explicitly surface, a juxtaposition of which we were aware at the onset of this journey. The rationale for the special issue itself emerged from our respective work in digital education in divergent spaces: Jeremy's critical work on open education and increasingly datafied educational futures; and Michael's work in digital education in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Northeast Asia, and the civil society and commercial organisations increasingly structuring education in these regions. From both these perspectives, it seemed to us that accounts of practice were being positioned as outliers in a broader normalised rhetoric of globalised education. After many years of informal discussion about these issues, and in particular Michael's published research surfacing these accounts, we felt it necessary to bring the themes of local practices with educational technologies to Learning, Media and Technology. While such research is certainly not new to a journal of this sort - Kelly's (2018) work on snapchat and critical resistance serves as an excellent example - a specific themed issue allowed us to, not only focus attention on marginalisation and local practice in this field, but also highlight the range of different approaches and understandings that might be brought to this discussion.

While acknowledging that we were working from what one might argue is the centre-ground of education technology research, and certainly not the margins, this position allowed us to engage a broad range of networks in soliciting contributions, and surface these important perspectives within a prominent and high-ranking educational journal. In particular, we strove to move beyond existing networks, noting the tendencies in academic research for consistent citation patterns within core networks with often marginalising results (Dion et al. 2018). We solicited contributions with an interest in regional representation, and engaged networks both within and outwith higher education. Identifying appropriate peer reviewers was also considered a crucial part of this process, and presented considerable challenges in terms of finding expertise both in regional contexts and a critical awareness of education technology challenges. This was a slow yet necessary process.

The many intractable challenges we faced throughout this process are intertwined with academic publishing itself. As Murray suggests, academic publishing is not a 'passive medium for transmission of ideologies but is itself inextricably implicated in maintaining and/or challenging ideological structures' (2006, 15). Systemic constraints in academic publishing undoubtedly contribute to marginalisation in this field. Economic marginalisation precludes many from publishing in journals with article processing charges (APC), while institutional subscription fees impede many educational institutions and independent scholars from accessing academic writing. These are the material resources and 'nondiscursive requirements' that prohibit many from participating in formal academic publishing (Canagarajah 1996).

There is the rigidity of the 'knowledge production' machine and its control by a disciplinary 'community of assessment' that shrouds this process in inaccessibility (Appadurai 1999). There is the dubious association of 'international' and 'higher quality' in research reinforced by editors who insist that work has relevance in the 'international context' (Lillis et al. 2013), supported by SSCI and other indexes (Kang 2009) creating marginalisation for those who fail to conform to the genres of scholarly writing and discourse perpetuated in these predominantly Global North and predominantly English (Trahar et al. 2019) academic outlets. There are research cultures at work in particular regions that don't readily align with what is thought to be quality academic research as defined by Learning, Media and Technology, ones more readily responsive to local contexts. There are the linguistic marginalisations of non-native speakers of the publication language that mask a range of factors ultimately mitigating diversity in academic publishing (Hyland 2016). Gender marginalisation exists throughout the process of academic publishing as women's representation among published authors isn't commensurate with overall representation in the academic field (Williams et al. 2018). Further, women generally receive less citations when the lead authors are women (Bendels et al. 2018). All conspire to structure a deep marginalisation that cannot simply be overcome by any one individual, or indeed a pair of guest editors, no matter how well-intentioned they may be.

As the special issue is largely concerned with surfacing accounts of practice that challenge the dominant ideological structures that contribute to marginalisation, this suggested to us a need to interrogate the editorial position itself as a manifestation of the very marginalisations we were attempting to counter in these accounts of practice. We felt it

imperative to proactively contribute to a burgeoning knowledge base around this topic, thus requiring a sensitivity to 'issues of diversity as to concerns over quality' (Mertkan et al. 2017, 58). From the formulation of the call for papers, to our initial review of submitted abstracts, to the long process of multiple rounds of peer review, to proposed edits and typesetting, we noted the possibility of marginalisation was prevalent. Indeed, it is built in to varying layers of this process, particularly in selection and the value judgments built therein: the choice of abstracts, the identification of appropriate peer reviewers across multiple rounds of review, and the framing of suggested changes. It is built into the levels of transparency that exist in these layers of selection: the transparency of the blind peer review process, the transparency of our criteria for selection, even to the transparency of our sequencing of accepted articles. All of this ultimately influenced how we viewed the position of editor in this process and what we felt was a need for further research interrogating each of these layers of activity.

We felt that merely making the process more transparent would not inherently lead to less marginalisation. There is more to it than that. There is a need to 'draw attention to and raise debate about knowledge exclusion' from marginalised areas of academic activity (Openjuru et al. 2015, 220). There is a need to promote greater gender and national equity in the blind peer review process towards greater gender and national diversity in the actual published works themselves (Murray et al. 2018). There is a need to interrogate the role of transparency in this academic publishing process, to understand how exposure could conceivably accelerate risk, particularly for marginalised voices (Ganesh et al. 2016). There is a need to provide support for scholars from underrepresented populations for networked participation in academic communities (Mertkan et al. 2017), for academic publishing mentoring opportunities (Lillis et al. 2013), or for brokering greater levels of access to academic content, such as projects like the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) and Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems (SRKS) have serviced in the past.

There is a need to amplify the work that regional organisations and projects are performing in this space. For example, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Education for Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA), and Improving Digital Education in Latin America which aims to generate relevant policy knowledge to facilitate more inclusive education and 'build a network of researchers and policy makers to produce knowledge and recommendations to inform policy and interventions in digital education' (IDRC 2019), which can be seen as counter-narratives to globalised accounts of educational practice. There is a need to promote the organisations that work directly with research and publishing infrastructures towards research equity such as INASP (2018) and local, national, or regional repositories of academic work that promote the dissemination of knowledge from and about these locales (IAI 2019). There are many needs beyond this.

There are many aspects of academic publishing that could benefit from reimagination, and this forms the basis of Petar Jandric's contribution to this special issue. Ultimately, our view of the editorial position broadened over the duration of this process from 'research intermediaries' (Mendonca et al. 2018) or arbiters of 'disciplinary values' (Burgess and Shaw 2010: 629) of what constitutes knowledge in this special issue, towards a position of stimulating (if not realising) in some small way the notion of research equity that

contributes to surfacing these accounts of practice that resist global narratives of normalised technology use. We hope to see equity around setting autonomous research agendas of local importance, ones less constrained by supranational policy pressures, imposed funding constraints, or the encroachment of commercial technological entities; we further see the editorial position as serving a role in surfacing the outputs of such research agendas. There is a need for greater opportunity for networking, mentoring, meaningful international partnerships, and exposure to research, building on the work of regional networks like ASREN (Arab States Research and Education Network) and AFREN (African Research and Education Network) and on national research and education networks (NRENs) 'to build local capacity for investigators to define and coordinate their own research agendas' (Chu et al. 2014).

We see the role of the editing as potentially providing space for the development of more equitable metrics for determining the rigour of research, linked to surfacing the hidden labour that adversely affects already marginalised communities, and to programmes of work of relevance to local communities or regions. This includes a critical engagement with applications like Publons (2018), which provides a feature that allows users to track their peer reviews and journal editing work, potentially surfacing some of this hidden academic labour, but also collecting and analysing data on these practices without much critical and ethical reflection on the implications. Additionally important here are international frameworks such as the Leiden Manifesto and its call for alternative metrics 'that measure performance against the research missions of the institution, group or researcher'; 'protect excellence in locally relevant research' and which 'scrutinize indicators regularly and update them' (Hicks et al. 2015, 430-431). We see this as running parallel to this special issue and its critique of global narratives of practice.

We note continued shifts towards open publication channels and open metrics of research evaluation, however the potential impact of open movements on further marginalisation might also be critiqued. Critical to this is the autonomy of regional or national level bodies to define open research and open education for themselves, potentially aligning with or providing a counter narrative to Global North frameworks such as Plan S, an assertive initiative for open-access science publishing predominating in Europe and North America. Ultimately, we look for further critique of the editorial position itself and potentially a 'more egalitarian sharing of intellectual and editorial responsibilities between scholars of the global North and South' (Thomas 2018). We are open to suggestions on how best to realise this sharing across the academic enterprise.

The Papers

The papers in this special issue contribute towards a better understanding of the diverse, multifaceted, and contested project of digital education across the globe, where technologies conflict and correspond in complex ways to differing cultural, social, and political contexts. These marginalised accounts provide critical perspectives concerning the rise of digital education as a 'global phenomenon', and advance much more nuanced accounts of the tensions, compromises, idiosyncrasies, and obfuscations through which digital media is shaping (and being shaped by) local practices of teaching and learning across the globe.

The issue begins with questioning an oppositional framing of the global and the local. Jade Henry, Niall Winters, and Martin Oliver (2019) challenge the global/local binaries of edtech constituted through disparate transnational arrays of practice in which marginalisation takes place, suggesting a need for emancipatory scholarship to better understand the transnational politics, controversies, and socio-economic disparities associated with educational technologies 'on the ground.' This concern for broadening scholarship is continued in Sue Timmis and Patricia Muhuro's (2019) suggestions for expanding the decolonialisation agenda in universities to involve critical approaches to technology. Drawing from a longitudinal study, their paper examines the experiences of rural students in South African higher education, highlighting practices of improvisation as ways of navigating the 'bewildering technocratic systems' of the digital university. This is followed by a consideration of international education, and the functions of open and distance institutions, through Clare Madge, Mwazvita Sachikonye Dalu, Jenna Mittelmeier, and Paul Prinsloo's (2019) critique of social media practices of international distance education students at African universities. They examine potential marginalisation through varying levels of ICT literacy and uneven technological access, and suggest the need for awareness of the multiple centres from which international education emanates.

The issue continues with some focused ethnographic and case study research. Monty King, Martin Forsey and Mark Pegrum (2019) outline ethnographic fieldwork in Dili, Timor-Leste, focused on structural barriers to digital education opportunities. They develop a notion of 'southern agency' to critique imbalances in knowledge production internationally and highlight local practices of constraint and opportunity in the Global South. Travis Noakes (2019) examines the use of online portfolios by young black women studying visual arts in Cape Town, South Africa. Developing a notion of 'digital disciplined identities' to highlight the constraints of e-portfolio technology, Noakes foregrounds key concerns relating to cultural exclusion, privacy, and infrastructural inequality.

The open education movement has been prominent in recent years, both in terms of a corporatized global vision for education technology, and a more community-oriented interest in sharing information and challenging institutional boundaries. The next four papers take critical account of various aspects of this movement as they manifest in context. Giselle Ferreira and Márcio Lemgruber (2019) discuss the open educational resources (OER) movement in Brazil, analysing prominent discourse across policy, media, and research. They show how key metaphors for OER obscure local contexts of curriculum and pedagogy by maintaining instrumentalist views of technology neutrality. Lina Andolfini (2019) continues the discussion of OER, examining the practice of adaptation and translation in an Indian context, taking to task the idea of OER localisation and the pedagogic marginalisation that may occur. Andolfini suggests that this OER carries with it an underlying pedagogy that may sit at odds with local educational practices. Turning to the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), Patricia Arnold and Belma Halkic's (2019) paper examines refugees' access to higher education through a discussion of the edtech industry and the neoliberal loosening of higher education towards personalised learning. Taskeen Adam (2019) continues the critical appraisal of the MOOC by questioning power asymmetries in their production, and examining parallels between colonial education and the dominance of Western universities and globalised forms of higher education. Adam

connects this to neoliberal and techno-capitalist framings of digital education, to highlight important voices marginalised by the MOOC agenda.

In the final paper in this issue, Petar Jandrić (2019) reflects on the structures of academic publishing itself, and the forms of marginalisation that result from the complex interplay at work within these systems. Interrogating academic publishing in all its tiers of open and closed supports, as well as the broader ecosystem which maintains it, Jandrić suggests the need for a new dialogue to “reimagine these academic marginalities.”

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