

Hybrid higher education innovation for Syrian refugee learners: Reflections on an embedded community-based research CoMOOC



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Abstract

This paper explores an innovative approach to teaching refugee learners in higher education during Lebanon's economic and political collapse. A connected hybrid learning model was piloted with Syrian higher education learners in Bekaa and Aarsal, Lebanon, during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the core of the hybrid programme was a co-designed massive open collaboration, or CoMOOC, on community-based research. The authors describe community-based research as a fundamental teaching topic for remote refugee learners, due to the added value it provides by strengthening refugee community engagement through collective problem-solving. Advantages to using an online format, beyond reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission, are discussed, including a range of implications for future higher education models in unstable and remote contexts. The authors conclude by considering the value of non-traditional forms of teaching which can strengthen refugees' sense of belonging and agency.

Key Words

online learning, community-based research, pandemic, refugees, Lebanon

To cite this article: Garland, N., Louis, B., Alhalabi, F. and Kennedy, E. (2023). 'Hybrid higher education innovation for Syrian refugee learners: Reflections on an embedded community-based research CoMOOC', *Education and Conflict Review*, 4, pp.81-88.

Introduction

Lebanon is enduring a protracted and multi-faceted crisis. Multiple political, economic, and social challenges are causing nation-wide vulnerability and distress (LCRP, 2022). In a country of approximately seven million, people's daily lives and their well-being are directly affected by the country's degradation and instability. The origins of this crisis are complex, and they trace back to a long history of conflict that has weakened Lebanon's physical, social, and political infrastructures (Ghanem, 2018). In 2019, a mass uprising called for an end to political corruption, but hope for change was soon shattered by the port explosion on August 4, worsened power cuts and unprecedented hyper-inflation. Lebanon's economic crisis has created a vicious domino effect of fuel, water, bread, and medicine shortages. According to a recent report, 40 percent of the population is considering emigrating, with a mass exodus of educated youth already under way (Saleh, 2022).

This paper, situated in the context of Lebanon's complex socio-political milieu, focuses particular attention on the displaced Syrian refugee community living in its neighbour country. Refugees account for nearly one-quarter of Lebanon's population (LCRP, 2022). The authors of this paper, two of whom are part of the Syrian community, reflect on their experiences navigating Lebanon's lucrative humanitarian and research industries, which are inequitably influenced by the interests of the Global North. The authors identify the need to strengthen local research capacities as a fundamental component of supporting the displaced Syrian community over the long-term. Research is considered an essential tool for reducing harmful power dynamics, and for galvanising local activism and community engagement.

This case study details a pilot hybrid programme for Syrian students offered during the pandemic, whose aim was to understand what higher education enrichment can offer displaced learners. The authors specifically reflect on the motivations, experiences, and barriers involved in developing a hybrid co-designed massive open online collaboration (CoMOOC) learning model for community-based research (CBR) in Lebanon. Attention is drawn to the CoMOOC design process, which differs greatly from the normative MOOC framework. The

paper evaluates the pilot programme from the designers' and participants' perspectives, with the aim of offering a model that can be replicated in other contexts of mass displacement. The authors reconceptualise the purpose, significance, and models of quality teaching in crisis settings, emphasising the intellectual needs, interests, and learning journeys of refugees.

The Lebanese context

Lebanon hosts an estimated 1.5 million Syrians. In 2015, the Lebanese government prevented the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) from registering Syrians seeking asylum in the country. Since that time, residency permits are required for all Syrians, replacing UN refugee status documents. To remain legal in the country, Syrians must find a willing Lebanese sponsor—some of whom charge fees up to 1,000 USD—in addition to paying 200 USD per year (HRW, 2017). There is also a cumbersome bureaucratic process, which often entails discrimination. It is thus unsurprising that approximately 60 percent of Syrians in Lebanon lack legal residency (LCRP, 2017).

As such, the Syrian community is familiar with restrictions on mobility. Well before the COVID-19 lockdown, checkpoints across the country prevented Syrians without residency permits from leaving their neighbourhoods, out of fear of arrest. Bekaa Valley, the region of Lebanon which hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the country and globally, and Arsal are two geographies in Lebanon with strict government surveillance. Guarded by enforced checkpoints that require paperwork and ID cards for anyone leaving or entering, Arsal resembles an open-air prison. These restrictions on mobility and the lack of state-authorised documents also limit students' ability to travel for educational purposes, and did so even before restrictions were in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

In this paper, the authors focus on Syrian higher education students in Bekaa and Arsal, where three of the authors are based. They focus in particular on an educational innovation at Multi-Aid Programs (MAPs), a Syrian refugee-led community organisation operating in both Bekaa and Arsal. In 2018, MAPs partnered with Southern New Hampshire University's (SNHU) Global Education Movement, which provided Syrian refugee adults from these regions with

access to an accredited online, competency-based connected learning degree programme. MAPs is one of the only humanitarian organisations in Lebanon offering long-term accredited higher education opportunities.

With an expanding higher education programme of 100 students, MAPs has the infrastructure to integrate new educational innovations. Thus, MAPs and the RELIEF Centre—a partnership between University College London, American University of Beirut, and the Centre for Lebanese Studies—co-created a contextualised higher education project with MAPs and other local organisations. This paper elucidates how a hybrid localised programme was designed around the CoMOOC to address the intellectual needs and interests of refugee higher education students at MAPs. The next section discusses the challenges of educational access and engagement for refugees and details the limitations of conventional MOOCs.

Refugee higher education access and engagement

Improving refugee learners' access to education is fundamental to humanitarian missions. Higher education access has increased from 1 percent in 2019 to 5 percent of refugees today worldwide (UNHCR, 2022). However, this rate remains far below the 40 percent of non-refugees accessing higher education. A range of barriers limits refugee enrolment. This includes interrupted schooling, issues with academic credentials and legal papers, mobility restrictions, financial constraints, and the lack of language proficiency (GEMRT, 2018). These challenges, pervasive in the Lebanese context, have intensified with the country's financial crisis and the unprecedented rise in university tuition fees.

Digital tools and online platforms are increasingly proposed as a solution to student enrolment and education access in contexts of mass displacement. In fact, a comprehensive 'connected learning' initiative developed by UNHCR is built on the idea that flexible learning using technology is more accessible than traditional tertiary programmes for refugee learners (UNHCR, 2014). Massive open online courses (MOOCs), which provide free, open-access university-level online education, have also been proposed as a solution, particularly for under-

served populations in the Global South (e.g., Oyo and Kalema, 2014).

While increasing refugees' education access remains paramount, minimal humanitarian action or research addresses the growing barriers around student engagement and enrichment in the context of both digital platforms and universities. Although the flexibility of connected learning initiatives enhances education access, the effectiveness of these programmes varies. A range of student, faculty, and institutional challenges have been documented, including the lack of student motivation, negative interactions with facilitators and peers, a poor sense of belonging to the institution, and students' commitment to the programme (Ghali and Ghosn, 2016). A 2019 study further reveals that most refugee students enrolled in Lebanese universities are not well integrated into the academic community and that they struggle to engage, due to differences in socio-economic backgrounds, lack of support and guidance, and discrimination from peers and professors (El-Ghali and Alameddine, 2019). Challenges around educational engagement have since been exacerbated by Lebanon's road and school closures caused by political unrest, COVID-19, and university strikes. The strikes are due to salary cuts that have caused a dramatic reduction in class time. The recent exorbitant rise in fuel prices presents a tangible barrier to face-to-face education, while online learning is made more challenging because of power cuts and weak internet connections (Hammoud and Shuayb, 2021).

Despite optimism around democratising education, research has shown that learners who enrol in MOOCs are usually well-prepared for education (Dillahunt, Wang and Teasley, 2014). Early MOOCs, which catered to already highly qualified and privileged professionals in well-resourced environments, provide minimal support to enhance student engagement (Hollands and Tirthali, 2014; Rohs and Ganz, 2015). In contexts where MOOCs have been successful with refugee populations, it is often because additional in-person support is available, which leads to stronger student engagement (Colucci *et al.*, 2017; Halkic and Arnold, 2019).

The pedagogy underpinning the CoMOOC and hybrid model that we present in this paper is the conversational framework (Laurillard, 2012) which

proposes that online learning should support six learning types: acquisition, discussion, investigation, practice, production, and collaboration. Many current digital education initiatives, including MOOCs, focus only on acquisition, which is the most passive form of learning (i.e., watching, reading, or listening). Enriching learning experiences should instead be designed to support learners in investigating and practising new concepts, to engage in cycles of communication between teachers and peers, and to produce individual and collaborative output. The global demand for higher education is expected to more than double to 500 million students by 2030, which means that pathways for scaling access to and engagement with quality and affordable education are urgently needed (Atherton, Dumangane and Whitty, 2016).

CoMOOCs

Considering the limitations of MOOCs, as detailed above, the RELIEF Centre pioneered the development of CoMOOCs. The aim was to foster the development of online communities around knowledge exchange in contexts of mass displacement, where education opportunities are limited and disrupted. This co-design process and the CoMOOC learning design, which embeds the six learning types of the Conversational Framework (Laurillard, 2012), focuses on creating social learning opportunities for participants to exchange their experiences, and builds community knowledge collectively.

There are five stages in the RELIEF Centre CoMOOC theory of change (Kennedy and Laurillard, 2019):

- **Engage:** engage professionals from the community to design curriculum
- **Develop:** co-create the CoMOOC content
- **Extend:** run the CoMOOC to extend community knowledge on a global scale
- **Embed:** local partners blend the CoMOOC within their existing learning programmes
- **Sustain:** further iterations of the CoMOOC are supported by community mentors, and partners continue to update content

For the 'engage' stage, stakeholders were invited to share their needs and curriculum suggestions for a CoMOOC on CBR. The NGOs working with refugees in Lebanon were already engaged in

participatory CBR and were able to identify refugees who could share their research experiences with the CoMOOC production team. For the 'develop' stage, videos interviews were recorded in English and Arabic with community based researchers in Lebanon discussing their research (e.g. in education and urban planning) including researchers from among the refugee community. These videos were combined with interactive and collaborative activities within the learning design of the CoMOOC. As a result, the CoMOOC reflected the culture of the refugees in Lebanon. The video case studies featured voices from the community to inspire learners and teach practical and participatory methodologies. The 'extend' stage opened the CoMOOC to enrolment. The 'embed' stage is the focus of this paper, which explores how and why MAPs 'embedded' this CoMOOC into their higher education provision as a pathway to the final stage, 'sustain'.

Why CBR education?

The interest in CBR education at MAPs stems from its organisational makeup, since it is comprised of members from the community it is serving. MAPs strives to restore dignity through quality programmes that support self-reliance and social transformation. A key objective is to initiate solutions from within the displaced society. This grassroots approach is often challenged by international humanitarian organisations that impose their interests and values onto local communities without listening to or understanding local needs. A well-established body of literature critiques these power dynamics, underscoring exploitative tendencies that exacerbate tensions between aid organisations and the people they are meant to 'support' and 'empower' (Hancock, 1989; Harrel-Bond, 1986; Marren, 1997).

Meanwhile, critiques of Western-led research initiatives are identical, specifically in the Lebanese context, where well-intentioned 'participatory' research can still alienate, exploit, and frustrate communities, and the local researchers who were promised improved livelihoods (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019; Jallad *et al.*, 2022). CBR strives to eliminate these power dynamics by equitably engaging local communities in research to address lived challenges through locally driven solutions (Minkler, 2005). This action-oriented approach

begins with a research topic that has meaning for the community. Scholars are increasingly promoting more engaged and longitudinal ways of working with communities to promote positive change (Jallad *et al.*, 2022). Despite growing progress and awareness around community-based frameworks, there are still significant gaps between methodological theory and practice. In fact, although MAPs frequently collaborates on research projects with academic institutions, outside researchers often approach the organisation with their predetermined research questions and methodological framework. Under a ‘research partner’ title, MAPs assumes responsibility for participant outreach and research logistics, which leaves minimal opportunity for community members to develop their own research projects that have value and meaning for their lives.

The authors of this paper, who are also the designers and facilitators of the hybrid CoMOOC pilot programme, have extensive lived experiences navigating Lebanon’s humanitarian and research industries, which are primarily led by Global North institutions. In response to the colonial legacies commonly embedded in humanitarian and research initiatives (see Jallad *et al.*, 2022), the authors aim to strengthen local research capacities as a mechanism for reducing harmful power dynamics and amplifying narratives crafted on refugees’ terms. The hybrid CoMOOC presents a pathway for local NGOs to engage with CBR education as a way to enhance their programs and teach employable skills, with the added value of empowering the local community through the engaged process.

In week one, the CoMOOC provided examples of how community members have used participatory approaches to identify local needs and establish solutions. The voices of community stakeholders are emphasised, and the importance of local perspectives to initiate the process of developing research questions are under-scored. Case studies, featured in short videos, are complemented with insights from experienced researchers. Week two focused on methodologies, including interviews, observations, mental maps, and participatory techniques (e.g., photo-voice). The combination of practical videos with community-based researchers and readings helps learners develop conceptual knowledge. Week three focused on developing a research proposal and creating impact for CBR findings. A peer review assignment gave learners

feedback on a draft research proposal. The hybrid programme structure is discussed in the next section.

The hybrid CoMOOC learning model

The hybrid CoMOOC learning model aimed to (1) introduce the concept of CBR to interested MAPs students; (2) foster an inclusive space for critical and analytical discourse; and (3) inspire students to develop their own CBR projects to address collective challenges. Here, ‘hybrid’ refers to synchronous Zoom video conferencing to support learners as they progress through an asynchronous CoMOOC. During the first three weeks, learners’ progress was supported by two one-hour live Zoom sessions each week. MAPs intends to apply student-led research to inform and improve future programming for the organisation and the community at large.

The live Zoom sessions were led by one of the authors who has been working with MAPs since 2019, with the support of two Arabic-speaking Harvard University undergraduate volunteer facilitators. The sessions reinforced the material covered in the CoMOOC using interactive platforms (i.e., Kahoot and Mentimeter), break-out rooms, and PowerPoint presentations. Ice-breaker activities helped create a friendly learning atmosphere in which students actively participated and interacted with each other on camera. The contributions of the U.S.-based peer facilitators benefited the programme, as they incorporated lessons of their own remote learning at Harvard.

After the CoMOOC, five additional weeks of live Zoom sessions were held to introduce new topics, such as quantitative and qualitative research, ethics, story-telling, and advocacy. Each week the Harvard facilitators held virtual ‘office hours’ during which students could seek additional support. All assignments were submitted and graded through Google Classroom, and the Zoom recordings were available in weekly emails. To receive attendance credit for missed live sessions, students summarised the lessons they learned and their reflections on the recordings. Attendance was incentivised, as completing the course went towards MAPs’ required study hours for the SNHU degree. Students in the cohort also sought opportunities to obtain accredited certificates, as they were keen to build their academic resumes. The programme concluded

with written research proposals and live student presentations.

Evaluation methodology

The hybrid CoMOOC model was evaluated to capture both designers' and participants' experiences. A key objective of embedding the CoMOOC into MAPs' higher education platform was to understand students' knowledge, perceptions, and future interest in doing research. A quantitative and qualitative online pre- and post-programme survey was conducted, and a focus group discussion (FGD) was held via Zoom to discuss the programme and the learning outcomes. The survey asked about students' self-determined knowledge levels, their research interests, and their motivations for enrolment, and it collected feedback on the programme. A selection of relevant pre- and post-survey results were thematically analysed to identify key themes in students' responses.

To gain a deeper understanding of students' feedback of the learning model, the FGD included six graduates. NVivo was used to analyse the discussion transcript and identify key themes in students' perspectives (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The authors further summarised key findings pertaining to the advantages and limitations of the hybrid model, students' interests, and future learning needs.

Key findings

Student interests and perspectives

Students' motivations for enrolling in the programme varied among the cohort of 25 (16 female, 9 male). Interest in engaging in the community was the most common motivation (15), followed by interest in gaining knowledge about research (12), developing personal skills (7), and preparing for a future in academia (1). The increase in student self-determined knowledge levels of CBR (6 to 8.6 on a 1-10 scale) indicates overall effectiveness of the hybrid programme.

Changes in perspectives and interests around research were clearly articulated in the FGD. The relationship between research and social change was a new concept to several students; one participant noted how they thought the purpose of

research was to 'write papers'. Another common misconception was that only outsiders leading projects were considered 'researchers'. The idea of a community researcher was novel to all participants.

After the programme, the students were able to conceptualise a community-based approach and understand the significance of their positionality. Students identified topics for their research proposals that included documenting influential people from the community, the effects of unemployment on refugee communities, access to birth control, integrating disabled children in the schools, and refugees' opinions of UN agencies. The diversity of research interests reflects the creativity and subjective nature of CBR. It also further underscores the need to create learning spaces where refugee learners can investigate topics and learn concepts that have meaning to their lives, and to provide opportunities to do so. This demonstrated that CBR was not limited to academic study but could also serve as a framework for gaining agency by helping to amplify refugee perspectives and experiences.

Hybrid advantages

Student evaluations and facilitators' reflections demonstrate a range of the benefits offered by a hybrid learning model that go beyond COVID-19 risk reduction. Firstly, the pandemic inspired connected learning practices that MAPs never implemented before the COVID-19 lockdowns; this was the first project that connected the MAPs' Arsal and Bekaa students. The West Bekaa (14) and Arsal (11) learners expressed excitement about meeting and learning from each other.

The hybrid CoMOOC format was 'extremely helpful' to most students. The FGD participants said that live sessions and office hours helped clarify relevant concepts introduced in the programme. These students referred to the CoMOOC as a helpful 'supplement' to the live workshops and lectures, particularly during the final research proposal assignment, which the students struggled to develop. Students also expressed their enjoyment of class discussions and debates, which are limited in the traditional MOOC format.

The hybrid model further addressed the lack of teachers and filled gaps in academic support, which are key educational challenges in refugee contexts

(Burns and Lawrie, 2015). Zoom sessions with guest lectures by a University College London researcher, MAPs' executive director, and an American documentary film-maker visibly excited students, since live interactions with expert stakeholders rarely exist in standard connected learning programmes in humanitarian contexts. The integration of facilitators further encouraged students to engage, as this peer-to-peer model stimulated open and egalitarian discussions between students.

Facilitators' experiences and reflections

The contextualised hybrid programme supported a move beyond traditional teacher-led educational environments, which strengthened learners' life skills by enabling them to apply their lived experiences to the classroom, and their new knowledge to their daily lives (Ito *et al.*, 2013; Lemke, 2004). However, it is challenging to carve out digital spaces where students are energised to learn and feel comfortable sharing. The programme facilitators had to become 'reflexive practitioners' (Schön, 1983) and engage in conscious, critical analysis of their experiences. Each workshop was adapted weekly based on careful observations and active listening to student feedback. For example, the idea of holding office hours was integrated, assignments were altered, and workshop topics were developed in response to students' needs. Developing trusting and active communication with each student, including approaching learners who were either falling behind or quiet during discussions, became essential to fostering an inclusive environment.

Trans-languaging—the pedagogical use of multiple languages within the hybrid sessions (Conteh, 2018)—was essential during the live sessions. Facilitators and peers frequently translated between English and Arabic, which opened up opportunities for interaction and learning, particularly for learners with weaker English who found the pace of the workshops too fast. Facilitators were conflicted on best practice, as the majority of students were keen to learn in English (the language of their SNHU program). Giving more consideration to the purposeful construction of the hybrid programme as a trans-languaging space, including CoMOOC digital videos and activities, may help put more learners at ease and make the most of the considerable language repertoires of refugee learners.

Conclusion

This paper draws attention to the unmet needs of refugee learners and the ways an innovative education model that is a hybrid in both content and structure can support students by offering guidance, inspiration, and knowledge-sharing as they navigate their academic journeys during a protracted crisis. Experiences from the CBR programme reveal the additional advantages of an online format that moves beyond COVID-19 risk reduction to present a range of implications for future education models in unstable contexts. CBR education is also proposed as an experiential and pragmatic learning tool that can strengthen the refugee community's sense of belonging and agency, while also promoting contextualised and dignified humanitarian programming.

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