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Emergency remote teaching amid COVID-19: The turning point

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Abstract: The Philippines is now the leading country in the Asean region with the highest confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of April 14, 2020. It has always surmounted numerous curriculum experiments in the previous years but will continue to do so in the coming years as the COVID-19 pandemic is making massive hits to the education sector. This pandemic has brought a challenging and distinctive situation in its educational system since this developing country has never transitioned to distance education prior to the crisis. This article examines the current state of how the country is facing the challenge in the educational system and provides a glimpse of reflection of the simple application of an emergency remote teaching in an unstructured manner of lesson delivery due to an unprecedented emergency.

Keywords: Covid-19, Philippines, Curriculum, Higher Education, Emergency Remote Teaching

Introduction: Curriculum Experiment

The Philippines has a challenging and distinctive situation in its educational system being a developing country. For example, it was only in 2013 that the K to 12 curricula was officially recognized for the full implementation of the educational program in 2016. It was the only country left in Asia with a 10-year basic education and one out of three countries in the world, Djibouti and Angola of Africa — (Senate Economic Planning Office, 2011) which had not shifted to the K-12 curriculum before 2013. So, in the Philippines, the students and teachers of the education sector have already experienced the winding normalcy of the curriculum experiment system.

COVID-19 presented the discrediting truth that has the gateways of the academe rumbling for strong pillars as the termination of the academic semester ensued in most of the universities. This is just a glimpse of the corporeality in the academe that many Filipino students are unable to access distance education that has never been a parcel in the history of the curriculum of the greater majority of the higher learning institutions in the country.

Focusing on the academic silver linings, the Filipino students are attuned to the utilization of Facebook for virtual relations, news updates, and global trends. For example, based on the January data (NapoleonCat, 2020), there are 73, 170,000 Filipinos who own a Facebook account and this translates for 66.4% of the nation's populace, with 24,000,000 active Facebook users whose age range are between 18 to 24. On the heightening of the confirmed cases in the Philippines and worldwide, numerous Filipino students including academicians have found solace online and created new online Facebook group pages for various reasons. As of April 14, 2020, the Philippines has become the leading country in the Asean region with the highest cases of COVID-19 accounting for 5, 223 confirmed cases based on the Situation report-85 of the World Health Organization (2020). Shifting cultivation through cyberspace, the Filipino people accessed Facebook accounts for daily updates of the global crisis which is a shared similar experience among many nations.

Through Facebook, there were invitations from colleagues to join diverse virtual groups such as a page exclusive for faculty efforts to raise awareness for social development and to provide innovative service to the stakeholders. This group was able to formulate ideas through boundless virtual meetings and chats over Facebook and has raised monetary donations to complement the tangible and intangible provisions for medical professionals, safety and security personnel, and stranded students in the university. Some Facebook pages allowed the leeway for social connections and virtual relations from people to compromise a juxtaposition in curricular interest but subtly convened due to the shared home quarantine and community lockdown understandings.



Cue Emergency Remote Teaching

The pandemic has caused global citizens into enforcing widespread community and school closures that only virtual communication is conceivable to continue learning. Though the government officials of higher learning in the country have opined for alternative modes for the curriculum contingent on the existing resources of the institutions, some universities cannot opt for a sudden paradigm shift due to unforeseen constraints on the educational adaptation to digital technology in the online learning environment.

After regaining momentum from the nationwide class suspensions, but to which online learning is not possible as of this writing, the universities proposed for emergency remote teaching that will hopefully be implemented this coming school year. Emergency remote teaching has the primary objective of providing instructional support that is reliable but easy to create in the time of the crisis (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020), contrary from a regular and comprehensive online learning curriculum that will take long months before it can fulfill for the scholastic endeavors of the students during the pandemic. Using the term ERT appropriately to the context of a crisis is significant since it varies from an online distance education to avoid “wrong assumptions...wrong definitions will make us more vulnerable to errors along the way...when things are settled and go back to normal, what people will remember will be bad examples from a time of crisis, and the years of efforts it has taken to prove the effectiveness of distance education can vanish all of a sudden” (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. ii).

Having ERT concept in mind, this is an opportunity to divert responsiveness for the students on the virtual world and institute a system to discuss real-life lessons though freestyle and unstructured due to the ongoing suspension. ERT actually offers academic freedom as the teacher can make instructional decisions based on the context of a current situation to maximize the learning opportunities for the students despite the crisis. Likewise, ERT can allow the teachers to reflect on the consistent need for innovative strategies in remote instruction to encourage all students to build better connections with the teachers and other students in a virtual class. Academically speaking, it is constitutionally integral to a teacher’s discernment to fortify the educational goals and interests of the students based on the democracy of the circumstances made possible through the application of an emergency remote teaching.

Consequently, as a faculty member, the researcher opened up an unofficial group called Quaranteen State University (QSU) using Facebook Messenger since the students are mostly teenagers. The name existed after the university coupled with home quarantine and social distancing measures. Several exchanged of ideas happened on a circadian rhythm even in intermittent hours from morning to the late hours going dawn about life issues from the existential memoirs to the environmental, societal, laws, religious, political, virtual, economic, transnational, etc. aside from chronicles that brought the advent of COVID-19. Giving free consultations and guided learning to the students on the virtual world and reckoning for a day of freedom to associate connections outside cyberspace is a longing for a way forward. So far, based on the Philippine context and the university circumstances, this is what ERT can offer for the students as of this time.

Research amid COVID-19

The conversations with the students about COVID-19 channeled some priorities during this pandemic that rather than allocating time in the Facebook group pages for unnecessary virtual relations, the researcher opted to devote numerous hours for more than a month now, sleeping at the wee hours of darkness to a twilight saga, making research papers on the impact of COVID-19 to the curriculum and the educational system as a whole, studying on the advent of distance education in the Philippines at the mishaps of emergency remote teaching which is the only promising approach at the moment of crisis. Desperate times require desperate measures and ERT can allow for the possibility of collaboration and exchange of concepts and best practices among practitioners, educators, and scholars. From a doctor in Iran to a medical professional educator in Egypt, there were exchanges of emails to ask permission for their articles including one that secludes for open access due to payment restrictions, but they managed to stretch their approval which is unprecedented in this case. Together with a fellow researcher from China, there were great lengths of critical discussions on ways to supplement instruction through emergency remote teaching. From the papers converted from American English to UK English to rejections and acceptance of some articles, these are not happenstance but the sheer determination that after the pandemic, though minuscule, doing research as the crisis happens can help the scientific community in the fight against COVID-19. The Philippines is not as productive in research compared to other countries since the involvement of the faculty for research work is still

minimal (Dacles, Valtoribio, Del Rosario, Matias, & Saludarez, 2016). Not all universities have integrated research courses as mandatory in the system. There is a need to improve the research culture of the country to establish scientific-based results in instruction and circumvent experiments on the curriculum. These experiments are similar to an emergency remote teaching in which a trial and error in remote classes happens because the instruction will be contingent to the existing resources and lenient preparation due to the crisis. Nonetheless, the preeminent ways to document the practices, challenges, and innovations in emergency remote teaching that the universities can provide for the country's educational milieu can be catapulted in research.

Conclusion

On one hand, social, economic, educational, political, and technological challenges and changes have occurred in the Philippines during the pandemic. On the other, the pandemic has been a turning point for the country's educational system. That the Filipino people will have to face the consequences of the pandemic but learn to accept simultaneously that there are going to be numerous turning points. These points are practicing an evidence-based curricular response, establishing a comprehensive online delivery system after the pandemic, and creating a responsive curriculum based on the context of the pressing needs of the Filipino student citizenry to be globally competitive. Those students should be taught not only of being highly intellectual geared with relevant skills to create better change for humanity but also to call them for social action for a democratic society where they will spearhead for humane actions and social justice towards the environment and the global citizenry. Countries worldwide would seem to be starting all over again after this plague. A start to produce educated citizens who care for the entire planet and not just for a specific race, tribe, or country. That after the pandemic, there will be no digital divides nor racial disparity, but inclusive education for all together with those learners who have special educational needs which can be promising through the portals of distance learning. This is a brighter side where the current situation presses researchers, scientists, educators, medical workers, and all people in the society all over the world to work together for a democratic post-pandemic society in which the academe has the biggest role to play. However, prior to that day, this is the time that "emergency remote teaching or re-engineered distance education should collaborate with different shareholders (e.g., psychologists, sociologists, therapists, etc.) to offer better and timely solutions" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. iv) for all students worldwide.

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