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Neoliberalism Crisis and the Pitfalls and Glories in Emergency Remote Education

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Abstract: COVID-19 has brought terrors to the situations of the most vulnerable countries and marginalized communities on a macro-scale. Not only has this pandemic affected millions of lives that ignited a worldwide crisis in the lens of health care and the economy, but it also outraged social and digital divides that heighten the gateways for neoliberalism to spiral during the pandemic. This article reflects on the dichotomy brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in Higher Educational Institutions in the Philippines. The implementation of emergency distance learning poses unfamiliarity in the education sector given the constraints in technological, logistics, and financial resources. Conversely, the crisis establishes opportunities for online learning to a scaffold in exploring, highlighting, and strengthening new ways of learning post-pandemic. In a nutshell, this crisis has given tons of lessons learned in terms of widening academic horizons for the improvement of online learning integration in the educative process of a developing country in the next normal.

Keywords: COVID-19, distance education, online learning, neoliberalism, emergency remote education

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:
- Emergency Remote Education is a temporary solution for academic continuity amid a crisis, while Online Distance Education entails comprehensive planning of curricular requirements of a well-built online curriculum.
- Technological issues such as lack of devices and signal interruptions are encountered in the implementation of emergency remote teaching and learning.

What this paper contributes:
- Reflections of university students (authors) in the context of a developing country on the heightened neoliberalism in the middle of the great online experiment.
- Disparities such as human, social, economic, and digital divides persist in the familial and educational sphere due to the transition from the conventional settings to emergency remote education.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:
- Intensification of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) in educational policies and government laws for equality, quality, and accessibility to education in the digital ecosphere.
- The educational system is confronted with the challenge to design instruction for students considering human-centered pedagogy, authentic learning, and social engagements in emergency remote education.

Introduction

A year has passed since the novel coronavirus outbreak stole the scene in Wuhan, China (Zhu et. al, 2020) before it eventually turned to be a global pandemic and the prime biological mass annihilation of the decade. The second week of March 2020 will always be remembered as the time when the doors of opportunities for nations started to slowly shut down due to the gradual rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. The worldwide health disaster is potentially considered one of the greatest threats the world has ever seen for decades. While it is certain to note that it is a health crisis, the lockdowns implemented due to the pandemic have prompted people to construe that it is not just a global health crisis but is transforming into a multidimensional crisis as it causes drastic distress on multiple sectors in the society. Draconian measures have also been implemented to contain the spread of the virus.

The ongoing pandemic has also changed people's lifestyles as strict protocols governed daily actions. Today, debates among countries have questioned the COVID-19 response of world leaders as they overlook the important things that should be prioritized and given attention to rebuilding the nation's economy and the morale of the citizens. "The coronavirus pandemic has pulled back the curtain to reveal the power of brutal neoliberalism – and its global financial markets – in all of its cruelty" (Giroux, 2020, para. 36). This system has eroded the democratic ideals of the concept of equality as well as popular sovereignty and has also sparked political and economic constraints not only on the medical workers (Giroux, 2020) but also on the education sector.

Talking about different sectors, one of the most affected sectors in this crisis is the education sector. Many institutions were compromised from their normal operations. For the past few months, educational institutions have decided to close schools and universities as the continuation of its face-to-face classes may cause massive contagion. A report has stated that billions of youth have lost their access to education in person. As indicated in UNESCO (2020) data, the pandemic has caused almost a couple of billion students to be out of schools in more than a hundred countries, equivalent to more than 90% of the world's enrolled students (Toquero, 2020a). At this point, school administrators and policymakers are faced with a dilemma on how to effectively deliver instruction considering the present circumstances. In the Philippines, state universities and colleges, as well as other private higher educational institutions (HEIs) have started to gradually resort to delivering instruction through synchronous and asynchronous emergency remote learning to maintain students' engagement academically while being physically displaced from their schools. Implementation of teaching and learning online was experimented on an unprecedented scale (Zimmerman, 2020). Deterrent to these events is how the education system has been affected by the pandemic under the influences of neoliberal discourse and policies. As a response, this article aims to highlight the reflections on the undeniable pitfalls and the conceivable glories brought by the COVID-19 pandemic on educational institutions.

COVID-19 and neoliberalism in education

When reports of COVID-19 transmission in the Philippines started in early February, it drastically changed the country's economic setting due to the restrictions in transportation as a blocking strategy for the growing cases. The pandemic does not only signify a crisis of neoliberalism based on the standpoint of an economic model, but the COVID-19 itself is a neoliberal crisis that resulted to a greater global vulnerability (Nunes, 2020). Neoliberalism also anchors on the logic of crisis in politics and education (Giroux, 2020). Consequently, this neoliberalism in education subtly offers possible problems on the expedited sense of commercialism of digital learning solutions that are not anchored on the praxis of academic instruction, but rather on the sellers' business model for profit-making (Teräs et. al, 2020). This became a catalyst for economic opportunists in trade and industry to take advantage of the situation to risen the prices of basic essential needs and of the expensive devices for

emergency distance education. Moreover, access to health care such as swab tests for possibilities of transmission and expenses for hospitalizations has only catered to those with a financial advantage. On the other hand, families of low-income economic conditions do not only worry about healthcare accessibility but also worry about daily food consumption and medical sustenance. These events are the gateways for neoliberalism to surface out in this pandemic. Deterrent to these events is how the education system has been affected by the pandemic under the influences of neoliberal policies. Giroux (2020) explains that the current coronavirus pandemic is more than a medical crisis, it is also a political and ideological crisis that is deeply entrenched in the system due to the negligence of neoliberal governments for years. Such negligence denied the prioritization of public health and the public good.

At the same time, the crisis is intertwined with a crisis relative to "massive inequalities in wealth, income, and power" (Giroux, 2020, para. 1), nor can it be separated from crises on threats to democracy, quality education, and environmental sustainability. With reference to the inequalities, "the coronavirus pandemic is deeply interconnected with the politicization of the natural order through its destructive assaults waged by neoliberal globalization on the ecosystem" (Giroux, 2020, para. 2). The current times also caused digital disparities, apart from other human divides.

> While the idea of a human divide is not limited to the digital form (it never was), currently it is the digital divide that has been threatening the entire globe. And while we are already well aware of the cultural, religious, ethnic, and economic divides that separate humanity, from an educational perspective, we are now witnessing that the digital divide is far greater than we imagined, as it is responsible for grave inequalities, inequities and injustices (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b, p. iii).

Living amidst what is potentially one of the greatest threats to education, the closure of academic institutions in March 2020 has significantly affected the students in all levels of learning. Both the Department of Education and the Commission on Higher Education resorted to a flexible learning approach to support the continuity of teaching and learning process in the Philippines. However, even though both ministries of education resort to remote and/or modular curriculum delivery, students still have sentiments to share and even intensified their calls in social media for #academicbreak and #academicfreeze during the academic shift to the emergency distance classes (CNN Philippines, 2020, blog). The students' battle cry for the academic freeze in the Philippines is due to their families' shortcomings since some are financially incapable to acquire devices and resources like laptops, smartphones, and internet connection to support their children's schooling.

Moreover, the educational inequality especially during the pandemic is worsened by geopolitics as the population of private and public schools compete for global standardizations. This competition is driven by standardizations that make the education system commercially pleasing even in online learning environments. Students of low-income families coming from public institutions are more likely to suffer because accessibility to quality education becomes a privilege to those who can fund resources for their emergency distance education. Kaiser (2020) stated this global inequality crisis of education is socially and systematically produced. This can bring risk to a broader system of neoliberalism.

Constraints of Emergency Remote Education during the Health Emergency

The pandemic has caused closures in universities that eventually ignited massive online learning experiments (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020a; Zimmerman, 2020). Curriculum transformations materialized in educational institutions across diverse time zones of the global arena. This speed for staggering transition to online instruction presents the inevitable comparison between online distance education

and emergency remote education. "With some of that hindsight as wisdom, we seek to advance some careful distinctions that we hope can inform the evaluations and reflections that will surely result from this mass move by colleges and universities" (Hodges et. al, 2020, para. 3).

Bozkurt and Sharma (2020a, p. ii) argued that:

> Online distance education involves more than simply uploading educational content, rather, it is a learning process that provides learners agency, responsibility, flexibility and choice. It is a complex process that requires careful planning, designing and determination of aims to create an effective learning ecology. In appearance, we are currently engaged in seems like online distance education, however, in essence, this is rather a temporary solution, one that would be more properly named emergency remote teaching. In other words, online distance education is one thing and emergency remote teaching is another thing. Such a distinction is important, because the degree to which educators believe in distance education these days will play a significant role in the prosperity of distance education in a post-COVID world.

In that case, educational institutions would need to be cautious of using terms of online learning instead of emergency remote teaching as appropriately called due to the technological, psychological, curricular, and pedagogical issues amid the pandemic. Moreover, the effects of COVID-19 on the students have caused enormous difficulty in facing the new normal. Students who do not want their scholarly endeavors to be stagnant are left with no choice but to continue. Concerns on educational outcomes have also been exposed because the crucial parts of education are compromised such as authentic learning that requires interactions and community immersions. Areas of learning that need interactions such as collaborative works, panel discussions, and scaffolding approaches in development are done differently. Interviews and conferences held virtually do not fully reach their 100% function as internet connectivity and technological accessibility are some of the long-running issues in the Philippines. In terms of courses that need community immersions, further mastery in any field of education has been hindered by the closure of political borders among places as well as travel ban in many areas. With that, exposure to the real world of learning is terminated. This pandemic has exposed the wide gaps in reaching the global standards of education in the Philippine setting.

As trends have shifted from conventional face-to-face learning to synchronous and asynchronous emergency remote education due to the pandemic (Toquero, 2020b), schools and universities have encountered tons of untoward circumstances upon its implementation. One of which is the perennial problem of internet connection. Based on a report (UNESCO, 2019), over 700 million students around the world have an impermanent to no internet connection which widens equity gaps (cited in Bonilla-Molina, 2020). In the Philippines, it is a great challenge for some students in the far-flung areas to look for elevations in their area to capture even a bar of internet signal. Accordingly, it would be an additional burden to them while studying as they are always in a hurry in taking exams, passing requirements knowing that any time soon, they will lose internet connection. On the contrary, well-off families have all the resources they need for this kind of setting which widens gaps between them and the less fortunate people.

Furthermore, real risks may also be vividly seen on the part of the students. Winthrop (2020) has said that many of the usual online approaches can be very solitary and didactic when teachers are just asking students to sit and quietly watch videos, read documents online, or click through presentations—and such activities are insufficient to engage and motivate students. Emergency online learning or even emergency remote teaching has, in some ways, made the students passive and question their own learning. Emergency online learning is also missing the feature of meaningful

interaction among students. Schooling is not just about advancing the cognitive level, but it is also about developing social relationships and peer-to-peer interactions. Simply put, reinforcing learning in the emergency online/ emergency remote environments would likely miss the sense of authentic engagement which plays a vital role in the holistic development of the students.

The greatest risk that educational institutions have confronted is that academic leaders are experiencing the dizzyingly rapid transition to building an online/remote curriculum. "In the post-COVID world, we can expect there to be negative consequences from the great online experiment, most prominently, digital fatigue, an issue that will certainly surface in the near and distant future" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b, p. ii). In contrast, with longer warnings and sufficient support resources, digital technologies will provide a long-term, corporately mediated solution to crises of funding (Burns, 2020). As Burns already noted, this has been the case for a while and the current context is likely to renew these discussions. Burns (2020, p. 3) also added that a worthy concern are those "range of corresponding problems such as intellectual property of online content, exploitation of instructors who exceed reasonable responsibilities, and the transformation of what we think constitutes 'education' (Kornbluh, 2020)." The threat is latent on how these narrative's indeterminacy can affect the neoliberal educational reforms (Burns, 2020). Kornbluh (2020) has remarked that the academe is confronted with its coronavirus shock doctrine.

Online Learning as Scaffold for Digital Empowerment in Post-Pandemic Period

The implementation of emergency distance learning has never been this vast and is also undeniable that its quick shift from face-to-face learning has led to some troubles that are inevitable in nature. Students will have a high probability of being anxious because everything in the learning scene is changed to something new. Accordingly, long-term problems will possibly arise due to the sudden turn of events attributed to emergency online learning. Although it has faced tons of difficulties, there are actually silver linings considering these circumstances.

Instances like this will furnish a good avenue for different sectors of society to increase commitments to strengthen online learning in the post-pandemic world. It will overlay opportunities for school administrators, ministries of education, and even internet service providers to fully understand gaps and challenges to rethink and strengthen their ties to improve online pedagogies. On the part of the teachers, this condition will let them improve their digital skills in addressing issues on digital/online learning that will expand their role not just as a communicator of knowledge but as a co-creator and evaluator of knowledge. These are the expected opportunities that should be explored for the education sector to be more prepared for future outbreaks. As for the students, they will start to comprehend and appreciate the hardships and dedication of their professors during this educational crisis to deliver quality education even in the time of a pandemic.

In responding to emergency remote education strategies, politicians, private sectors, and educational institutions must make latitude to make long-term investments in learning especially during this time. This pandemic must be a learning ground for the government with regards to the relevance of the digital era in education. Perhaps this may call for an educational revolution as the governments make reforms to empower ICT-based instructions while prioritizing equality, quality, and accessibility for all learners. No students should be left behind as manifested in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015).

Higher Education Institutions should incorporate digital spaces as supplementary to the community that is built in face-to-face learning environments in the free COVID-19 world. Face-to-face instruction is already thoroughly suffused with digital technologies such as smartphones, laptops, and online assignments, and submission consoles, and to presume purity of either digital or traditional misses a

bigger picture. Hence, higher education must embrace change in the new normal since it is inevitable, and continue to imagine and enact better worlds within the virtual classrooms going forward to post-digital teaching and learning practices.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed neoliberal reforms and their effect on Philippine education. As highly commercialized response to bounce back the economy resonates in the current situations, the inequalities faced by numerous students not just in the Philippines but also globally have been overlooked due to competition of priorities between health care, survival, and safety. For the sake of governance, implementers of laws and policies should reconfigure the disequilibrium produced by neoliberal systemic governance in this pandemic especially on the great digital divide and the greater online learning experiments. Educational investigations that target Sustainable Development Goals 4 are needed more than ever. It remains to be seen whether policymakers regulate commercialism policies such as on health and digital solutions to alleviate the neoliberal notions of political stance in education. On a positive note, the magnitude of the crisis offers new possibilities in which people can begin to reimagine what kind of society, world, and future we want to inhabit. Living amidst what is potentially one of the greatest threats to education in this lifetime, the shift and/or transition to emergency online/remote education has been difficult due to the inequalities that detriments the quality of education. Appropriate digital technologies and online pedagogies in the "normal, new normal, and next normal" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b, p. i) educational settings should take into account the disadvantaging situations of those students who are struggling at this pandemic. Such academic prerequisites must also intend to better their situations. And that would only be possible if a system invests in education that promotes the paradigm of equality to all learners.

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