

Remote Learning: Challenges and Opportunities for Educators and Students in the New Normal

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The occurrence of the global health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the education system around the world to consider remote learning. This mode of learning involves the use of advanced technology that entails an interactive learning experience in an online educational setup. This study aimed to determine the benefits gained and the challenges encountered by the teachers and students in remote learning. Findings showed that the respondents perceived several advantages ranging from personal benefits to improving overall performance while enjoying personal freedom to explore other things aside from academics. Although they had several challenges encountered, the opportunities it has brought to both students and teachers outweigh them all, which provide a prospect for a better student outcome having remote learning set up in the new normal.

Keywords: challenges, new normal, opportunities, remote learning, educators, students

INTRODUCTION

Remote learning refers to any educational procedure in which the teacher and the student are separated geographically (Moore, 2005). The acquisition of information is through methods other than the traditional ways of teaching and learning. The learning materials are sent through mail including exercises and assignments which are then expected to be accomplished by students at a preferred time. The conventional definition of remote learning implies learning that does not involve interaction, but some recent definitions refer to it as a new development, involving advanced technology that entails an interactive learning experience in an online educational setup.

The occurrence of the global health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the education system around the world to consider this mode of learning. While previous literature supports the idea that remote learning in the Philippines has long been practiced in tertiary (Arinto, 2016) and maybe in some secondary levels; however, it has been very rarely practiced in elementary education.

The Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) had struggled to embrace this sudden pedagogical approach transition needed for the academic year to proceed under the new normal system. This sudden shift has brought much educational burden to the country, which has long been lacking in physical classrooms, teachers, and educational equipment (Alipio, 2020). Thus, this has led most parents and guardians to act and serve as co-teachers or tutors for their children at home. The unavailability of computers, gadgets and internet connection are among the common problems of the

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remote mode of learning, not to mention the incapability of some parents and guardians to teach the subject matter to their children as some of them were not even finished in primary education (Alipio, 2020). But then, despite opposition from some stakeholders due to several issues and concerns regarding the delivery mode of learning especially to families who belong to poor and rural communities, this national educational shift to remote learning was pushed through.

The DepEd has provided several learning delivery modalities upon reopening of classes for the school year 2020-2021, in which schools may choose the appropriate modality to adapt depending on the COVID-19 restrictions and context of the learners in respective areas of school or locality. The province of Laguna, among other cities and localities having the highest covid positive cases in the country, has adopted the three types of remote learning modality, namely, modular, online, and radio or TV-based instruction (DepEd Order No. 13, 2020).

As the use of remote learning modalities has significantly become part of the new normal education system, student interactions with faculty and peers are critical to the learning situation now as it sits at the core of any educational situation. It is important to determine how educators and students cope with this mode of teaching and learning. By exploring the challenges and opportunities connected to its implementation, school leaders would have deeper understanding of the existing issues and thereby take appropriate actions to help ease the teaching and learning process in the new normal.

The study reported in this paper specifically aimed to (i) determine the benefits gained by the teachers and students in remote learning; (ii) discuss the challenges they encountered in remote learning.

METHOD

Research Design

The study used survey research design to determine the benefits and challenges encountered gained by teachers and students in remote learning.

Subjects of the Study

The study employed purposive sampling of the grade school and high school students in a private school in Laguna, the Philippines. They were chosen as they all have access to internet and have signified their willingness to participate in online survey. A total of 200 students participated voluntarily in online survey. This accounts for 68 per cent of the entire population of 295 students from Grades 5 to 10. The respondents were composed of 63 students in Grade 5, 62 in Grade 6, 25 in Grade 7, 10 in Grade 8, 22 in Grade 9 and 18 in Grade 10 students. Most of their ages range from 10 to 17 years old. The majority are female, which is about 55 per cent of the sample. Most of them are in Grades 5 and 6, which is 63 per cent of the sample.

Instrumentation

In this study, a researcher-made survey questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument. It was designed based on extensive literature review. It was subjected to face validity by three experts in the field of education and social sciences. The validation procedure results to slight modification of the questionnaire. The instrument is composed of close-ended questions which also includes pre-determined responses and three open-ended questions referring to the students' and teachers' perceived benefits and challenges of remote learning. Student-respondents were also asked to rate each item (from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest) referring to the benefits of remote learning. The responses were ranked according to the frequency counts of each item. In addition to the structured questionnaire, the students were also asked to list down other benefits and challenges they experienced, which were not included in the questionnaire.

Similarly, to determine the benefits and challenges being encountered by teachers in remote teaching, a Key Informant Interview (KII) was designed by the researcher and was administered to all the advisers of the student-respondents. KII is composed of six participants. This KII sought answers to deeper discussions regarding the benefits and challenges faced by teacher in teaching their students remotely. This was done through online interview via emails with the participants.

Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed by the researchers through email or through an online survey (Google form) with the assistance of advisers. An email explaining the survey was sent to the school's administrator for permission, and to all advisers for them to administer the survey questionnaire to all students. The students were asked to click on a link in the email, which gives them access to the online questionnaire. Key Informant Interviews (KII) were also conducted with all six advisers to ask their personal experiences regarding the benefits they have and the challenges they encounter in teaching remotely.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed through descriptive statistics such as means, percentages and frequency distribution. The means of the benefits and challenges of remote learning were ranked, analysed, and explained descriptively and quantitatively. Open-ended responses from KII were subjected to content analysis in which themes were extracted from text by analysing the word and sentence structure.

FINDINGS

Students' Perceived Benefits of Remote Learning

The respondents are composed of 200 students from different grade levels in a private school in Laguna, the Philippines.

Based on the results of the survey (Table 1), 60 per cent of the respondents think that being safe from viral infections and diseases is the most important benefit of remote learning, avoiding pollution, avoiding being absent and having more time with family. Improving computer skills, and easy access to learning materials and online resources are also beneficial for them. However, only about seven to 15 per cent of the respondents agreed that remote learning would be beneficial to help them to learn at their own speed, that they can decide what to learn and how they can learn, and that remote learning helps them speak more confidently and write answers to teachers' questions.

Aside from the ones mentioned, students also listed some of the things that they appreciate from learning remotely. These include the fact that they were being able to have more time to talk with friends, being able to become close to their teachers, being able to eat anytime due to time flexibility. Also, remote learning setup gives them more time for themselves, and in doing their hobbies, which all lead to better time management, less boredom, and reasonable homework. They were able to help around the house in doing household chores, which helps developed better family relationships. They can act more comfortably. They can lie on the bed any time. For the students, remoted learning promotes positive realizations about self and life in general.

Having all the possible advantages of learning remotely, these students who are said to be enjoying self-paced learning and technology-mediated or web-based instruction would appreciate the flexibility of time in studying at home. This gives them more time to perform a number of tasks at a time and gives them more opportunities to achieve as many goals as possible. Having these benefits at hand, the students see remote learning not only as a mean to continuously learn but at the same time to use as an escapeway from containment in the four corners of their home, as they have the view of the world and different local, national, and global events through the internet. Thus, having these opportunities to

learn in the way that is both enjoyable and knowledgeable for them, they are likely to be highly participative in their learning even in the remote setup.

Table 1
Perceived benefits of remote learning

Benefits	f	%
Keeps you safe from viral infections and diseases	120	60
Keeps you from being absent in online classes	94	47
Keeps you away from pollution	94	47
Gives you more time for family	78	39
Gives you more time to rest	62	31
Helps you to improve your computer skills	58	29
Allows you to learn comfortably at home	48	24
Allows you to review lessons instantly anytime and anywhere	48	24
Provides you easy access to learning materials and online resources	46	23
Provides you the ways to learn independently	46	23
Teaches you to save money and energy	36	18
Gives you more time to do other tasks	36	18
Allows you to set your own time to do tasks	36	18
Allows you to learn at your own speed	30	15
Allows you to decide what to learn and how you can learn	26	13
Gives you confidence to speak and write answers to the teacher's questions	14	7

Students' Perceived Challenges of Remote Learning

Though there are many benefits that the students can see from learning remotely, there are also problems and challenges that they have been encountering. Fifty per cent of the respondents think that slow internet connection is one of the greatest challenges encountered by the students (Table 2). This is followed by students' laziness and consistent background noise as challenges in remote learning both having 39 per cent.

Table 2
Challenges encountered by the students in remote learning

Challenges	f	%
slow internet connection	100	50
laziness	78	39
consistent background noise	78	39
overwhelming activities	70	35
insufficient time to finish all the tasks	66	33
social media influences	66	33
uninteresting topics	46	23
family distractions	32	16
lessons difficult to understand	32	16
lessons not related to subject	22	11
limited time to practice speaking and writing	20	10
unavailability of learning materials (gadgets, modules, supplies, etc.)	16	8
lack of knowledge in online learning platforms	16	8
lack of support from family	16	8
no teachers' feedback on assignment/assessment activities	16	8

Teachers' Perceived Challenges of Remote Learning

Apart from the students' perception on the benefits and challenges of remote learning, teachers were also asked about the pros and cons of their teaching remotely. Based on the responses gathered from the KII, there are also benefits and challenges in remote teaching. Some benefits that were mentioned include:

- a. Remote learning would be of great help in ensuring that the health of the learners and teachers especially in the time of pandemic.
- b. Remote learning would enhance the time management skills of teachers.
- c. Teachers can have a quality "me" time, which leads to personal growth and development.
- d. With work-from-home setup, teachers were able to spend more time with their family and do work at the comfort of their homes.
- e. Teachers can make use of the opportunities to attend webinars, online classes for professional development.
- f. Remote learning gives more time to discover other interests (e.g., cooking, baking, gardening, etc.).

Both students and teachers value the importance of ensuring everyone's health and safety in this time of health crisis, as they see it as the ultimate benefit of teaching and learning remotely. In remote learning, both teachers and students are given flexible time to do both the school works and house chores. The situation gives them more time for their personal growth, life skills development, new knowledge acquisition, even non-academic skills enhancement. Staying at home all the time gives them more quality time with family and for themselves, like doing other things that they like and mostly enjoy while learning online which might contribute to the high level of participation among the students. This high level of engagement among pupils gives the teachers the satisfaction and the motivation to strive as well in remote teaching.

Teachers' Perceived Challenges of Remote Learning

On the other hand, while there are a number of benefits that can be identified, there are also challenges that can be encountered while teaching remotely. Some of the challenges that were mentioned include:

- a. The problem with the internet connection was the same for both teachers and the students. There are times that the connection would have a problem even when teachers have backups ready, especially if they are residing in a location with an extremely slow connection or if there are storms.
- b. They are wondering how they can, as teachers, be assured that learning process occurred on the time that they cannot supervise the students, their study habits, and to monitor, whether the works submitted by the students are their own work or something done by others for them. If a student would be on the honour list, do they really deserve to be there?
- c. The credibility of their students works, especially during exams, is not guaranteed as there are students who make up stories like there is a sudden loss of connection or brownout.
- d. Teachers find it hard to think of ways to keep students interested in the discussion, particularly in choosing appropriate websites and computer applications for a specific activity.
- e. It is also difficult on the part of the teachers to ensure that the lessons given to the students were imbued to them mentally and emotionally, and effectively.

f. A major adjustment was made since they have to create everything from scratch. The adjustments are physically, mentally, and emotionally draining for teachers, and might as well to students.

g. Aside from the teaching-learning-related challenges, teachers also are thinking that their electric bill has gone higher as they do all the work at home.

These challenges encountered by the teachers in remote learning are like those with the students. Slow or poor internet connection poses the greatest challenge in both remote teaching and learning. Since the teachers and pupils are separated geographically, the learning process cannot be assured, given that students' laziness (in doing school-related works) is somehow caused by different social media influences, pupils are exposed to different online entertainment platforms that may deviate their interests from studies. Students have found leisure from these entertaining and somewhat addictive websites and applications, which have caused great worries and struggles to teachers in assuring that learning is really taking place remotely. The increasing adeptness of these learners in technology adds up to the insecurities of teachers to deliver engaging lessons due to lack of expertise in different websites and applications.

DISCUSSIONS

Remote learning has been the immediate response around the world to cater to the continuous education of the students at the time of the pandemic. But online learning has long existed even before the current condition. Some are saying that remote learning indeed is beneficial and can actually be a much better option. According to Muthuprasad et al. (2021), one of the major advantages of online learning is its flexibility where everyone can attend classes and time can be changed depending on the convenience to both teachers and students, and they would be able to use the remaining time to make other needed requirements. This would also help the students to develop other vital soft skills like time management, digital literacy, responsible use of technology, and remote teamwork. Truly, students' ICT-based skills were developed in this lockdown period (Boonroungrut, Saroinsong, & Thamdee, 2022).

Online learning can also be offered to some students with Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) without having to worry about how they will behave in class. This would also be advantageous to some who are really introverted and do not want to be called much in class. According to Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) and Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), students in this kind of setup have more freedom to participate in learning, requiring limited and changed evaluation.

Finally, though there are real challenges encountered in a remote learning environment, this would actually help the student to learn outside the classroom, not just those lessons from the book but also the learning that they can obtain from their environment which might be of help in their lives.

One of the major challenges of remote learning encountered by the students in the Philippines, internet connection concerns, is a problem not only experienced by the students in the country but also in other countries around the world. According to the OECD data, though there are many countries that have access to high-tech computers and a good internet connection, i.e., around 95 per cent of students from Switzerland, Norway, and Austria, there are still other countries like Indonesia which only 34 per cent of the students' population have computer access to be able to accomplish school tasks (Li & Lalani, 2020).

These challenges being experienced in remote learning by the students pose many ways of distraction to their learning process. Having frequent slow or poor internet connections during online classes drives the learners to turn their attention to other things. There are several downloadable web applications that can be used offline which they may find more interesting than listening to the discussion that is unclear to them. Being able to expose themselves to a variety of entertainment, this

type of learners is getting used to “all by myself” learning, which may have an effect on their participation in remote learning. Similarly, staying at home gives the pupils the routines that they may find boring over time and causes laziness to them, not to mention their study area that is inside the bedroom or on the bed itself. Their laziness to participate and to perform tasks affect their interaction with teachers and fellow pupils.

It is true enough that students have seen the benefits of remote learning and at the same time, there are really many challenges being encountered. But the pros and cons of remote learning do not only apply to students but to the professors, the teachers, and the faculty members as well. Johns and Mills (2021) enumerated some of the advantages of remote learning to teachers. He mentioned something about individual pace. According to them, remote learning solutions help instructors be more productive in the classroom by allowing students to show their unique learning curves and styles. Some educators declared the new pedagogical techniques using synchronous online tools for not only students but also learners in various fields (Boonroungrut, Saroinsong, & Thamdee, 2022). Many online learning platforms provide self-paced learning and allow students and teachers to collaborate to be able to reach certain goals. According to Wannapiroon, Nilsook, Jitsupa, and Chaiyarak (2022), the online learning platforms facilitate greater individual teacher and student interaction by encouraging the students to acquire knowledge, advising them how to find the answer related to their inquiries, and giving them some feedback immediately. This helps the students to become aware of their own abilities and to adjust their own direction, strategies, and performance appropriately (Wannapiroon et al., (2022).

Aside from its being practical in everyday use, online learning may also be an avenue for educational theories to be applied. By embracing the real-world application of theory through multimedia, video, chat, and engagement, online learning allows teachers to enter this domain of ongoing learning. Educators may use commonplace technologies to successfully convey educational theories into the classroom. Also, with what happened, several institutions were able to see that online learning may be a better option in the years to come giving educators more scheduling flexibility and cost-effectiveness, as well as access to new learning platforms and the chance to study from renowned educators across the world via long-distance education. This promotes teachers’ learning and self-development through modern technology, to provide their students with instruction which is useful and scientifically and technologically updated (Jieru et al., 2020). This is how the pandemic reshapes the education services thru accelerating digital education transformation (Boonroungrut, Saroinsong, & Thamdee, 2022).

Like any other mode of learning, online learning has its disadvantages. According to Gautam and Singh (2021), though remote learning is helpful for teachers to have more efficient ways of delivering a lesson, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. One of the greatest challenges is the screen time as both students and teachers would need to be on screen, in front of their laptops most of the time, and too much exposure to these gadgets would really make people uncomfortable. Next to that is the internet connection problem that is experienced by everyone, students, teachers, rich, or poor. Also, teachers understand that honesty during online exams is quite very difficult to monitor and achieve, and therefore, students’ grades might not reflect what they really learned from the class. Aside from those mentioned, online learning requires a teacher to have the most basic knowledge in using modern technology to deliver their lessons. It should address not only the teacher's efficiency but also how they would create lessons and other strategies that would really encourage the students to be involved in the teaching-learning process and to really participate in the discussion.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Stakeholders from different level of educational institutions are doing all the planning, designing, and implementing of all possible countermeasures to the risks and negative effects that this pandemic brings to the students' learning. Different alternatives are offered so that learning would not be stopped. However, there are some specific details in education that either have positive or negative effects on the teaching-learning situations that have not received attention, solutions or have not been addressed unless identified and assessed in the study.

This research was able to provide the students' and teachers' perceptions on how remote learning was beneficial to them, enumerated some of the challenges that must be addressed. This may be considered by educators to plan based on the needs of the students, give inspiration to come to class more often and find enjoyment and appreciation of the remote learning especially if this learning modality would still be implemented as part of the new normal education system. Thus, the researchers recommend the following:

Promote and provide in-service online training, webinars, workshops, conferences, and any other means of professional development for teachers. The school administration should provide the means for their teachers to have, if not more advanced at least enough knowledge of the web applications that would aid them in keeping their students engaged in remote learning.

Mandate specific communication mechanisms to encourage the teachers to communicate regularly or as needed to respond and to address the challenges that both the teachers and the students are experiencing. Considering the findings gathered from teachers, one of their concerns in teaching remotely is not being able to assure the occurrence of the learning process on their students, as different challenges, problems and distractors may exist at home. Therefore, there should be a communication mechanism to address the queries, concerns, as well as the issues and challenges from teachers, parents, and learners on the implementation of remote learning and its learning continuity plan.

Come up with a curriculum plan that would be the basis for teachers in designing instructional materials. In view of the finding that teachers cannot guarantee the lessons they are teaching are being imbued to pupils, mentally and emotionally. As the Basic Education Curriculum has been changed drastically due to pandemic, the provision of holistic development to learners is more likely to be affected, along with the restrictions and limitations of remote learning are the various socio-economic situations and problems of families at home. Curriculum planners should design a curriculum that would provide learners the remote learning experiences that would still cater to their needs, particularly teaching-learning techniques that would not only improve their performance but would also develop the 21st-century skills they need, as well as the knowledge, values, and attitude that they need to acquire as these learners are the next-in-line workforce.

Provide support intervention to teachers in financial terms, as some of the teachers who participated in this study stressed that they spend most of their time at home and conduct the teaching and all the preparation at home, more expenses would add up to their worries and mental stress.

Although this study has limitations, it offers hindsight of the benefits and challenges those teachers and student have in remote learning that could be useful to future research related to this study.

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