



Distance Learning Education: From New Normal Challenges to Post-Pandemic Opportunities

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Abstract

Almost a year ago, the world was stunned by the sudden outbreak of an unseen enemy – the COVID 19 Virus. Almost all public and private business firms have closed in order to stop the quick transmission of the virus from one person to another. The Education sector is not an exception to this. Schools have also closed to protect the students and other stakeholders from this virus. Consequently, the closing of schools had a great impact in the teaching-learning process. The usual face-to-face or in-class mode of learning delivery shifted drastically to pure distance learning. Distance Learning Education is characterized by a situation where there is separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or in both time and place. This mode of learning delivery has become the foremost way of transmitting knowledge at this time of pandemic where face-to-face instruction is not allowed. The unprecedented implementation of such mode of learning, however, gave rise to many challenges among teachers, students, and parents, as well. It is in this light that this study attempts to look into the challenges of teachers in implementing the Distance Learning Education for almost two years already, while at the same time gathering their insights about how these challenges opened opportunities for new ways of delivering learning even in the post-pandemic education. To realize the objective of this paper, qualitative-descriptive design was utilized particularly employing Key Informant Interview method of gathering data. From the responses of the teacher-respondents, the following themes were culled out. Module writing and managing online classes were seen as big challenges due to lack of teacher training. On the other hand, opportunities that came out, if this DLE will be adopted in the post-pandemic education, are expanding students' accessibility to education, reaching to marginalized students and making developing 21st century teachers.

Keywords: Distance learning education, alternative modes of delivery, new normal education, post-pandemic education

1. Introduction

Almost a year ago, the world was stunned by an unseen enemy – the COVID 19 Virus. For a moment, the world seemed to stop. People were forced to stay in their homes for a while in order to lessen the contact with other people who might be a carrier of the virus. People stayed at home. Almost all business firms have closed because of the absence of clients who are afraid to get out of their houses.

One of the agencies that is most affected by this pandemic is the education sector. In the earlier times of this pandemic, face to face classes were cancelled. Hence, schools have to adopt some methods or modes of instruction that will allow continuity of learning while students and teachers are at home.

In the Philippines, it was on March 17, 2020, when President Rodrigo Duterte placed the National Capital Region and other regions under

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Enhanced Community quarantine (ECQ) through Proclamation No. 929, s. 2020, for the protection of everyone from COVID 19. In the same memo, the president also ordered the suspension of classes for the safety of students and all school stakeholders. Such suspension of classes was lifted after a month, but schools who need to complete the number of school days continued school without face-to-face instruction already.

In the School Year 2020-2021, schools started to embrace a new normal educational set-up. Due to the continuing threat of the COVID 19 virus, schools resumed without face-to-face or in-class instruction. In the Philippine Basic Education, DepEd Order No. 12, s. 2020, provided guidelines on how the K-12 program would conduct classes under the New Normal Education. The said issuance provided the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) as the overall framework to govern the School Year 2020-2021. The BE-LCP spelled out clearly that all public and private schools must shift to Distance Education and adopt the most practical and appropriate method for their students. This instructional mode, according to Keegan (1986), as cited by Padolina (2007), is a quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process: This distinguishes it from conventional face-to face-instruction.

Further, distance education is also a broad approach characterized by a high degree of variation. Such variation includes the types of media or technology used (print, radio, computer); the nature of the learning (workshop, seminar, degree program, supplement to traditional classroom, levels of support); institutional settings; topics addressed; and levels of interactivity support (face-to-face, online, blended, none) (Fillip, 2001).

In the BE-LCP of the Philippine Department of Education, three types of modality were introduced. These are the Modular Distance

Learning (MDL), Online Distance Learning (ODL), and TV/Radio-Based Instruction (deped.gov.ph).

Modular Distance Learning involves individualized instruction that allows learners to use self-learning modules (SLMs) in print or digital format whichever is applicable in the context of the learner, and other learning resources like learner's materials, textbooks, activity sheets, study guides, and other study materials.

Online Distance Learning features the teacher as facilitator, engaging learners' active participation through the use of various technologies accessed through the internet while they are geographically remote from each other during instruction. The internet is used to facilitate learner-teacher and peer-to-peer communication. Online learning allows live synchronous instruction.

TV/Radio-Based Instruction utilizes SLMs converted to video lessons for Television-Based Instruction and SLMs converted to radio scripts for Radio-Based Instruction.

To date, Philippine schools are consistent with the use of Modular Distance Learning since it is the most accessible to the students, especially in the far-flung areas where internet is not yet available. In cities, online classes are being implemented. But no matter which mode of distance learning had been implemented by schools, these have posed challenges to the teachers who were caught unawares of this drastic change in the teaching-learning process. But difficult as it may seem, after a year of implementation, teachers got used to this system already and gradually seeing some advantages of such change.

It is in this light that this study would like to investigate the challenges teachers have experienced in implementing Distance Education in this new normal education and their insights about opportunities that have been opened by these learning modalities that can be adopted in the post-pandemic education.



2. Purpose (Rationale)

Change always poses challenges to people. More so, if it were an unprecedented and drastic change, just like the change in the educational set-up brought about by this COVID-19 pandemic. However, as human beings, people would always find a way out.

In this new normal education, all school stakeholders have encountered so many difficulties. Many research talk about how students are very much affected by their new school set-up. Parents, too, are affected since they need to stay at home to guide their children in their schooling. Teachers, on the other hand are also impacted by the sudden shift of educational set-up -- from the usual classroom face-to-face instruction to modular.

It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to investigate teachers' challenges in the implementation of Distance Education, specifically with the modular and online modes of deliveries. It also aims to collect insights of the teacher respondents with regard opportunities for learning and instructional development in the post-pandemic education.

3. Concepts, Theories and Related Research

This pandemic brought about by the COVID-19 virus changed people's way of life. All sectors were affected – private and public alike. During its initial phase, the world was stunned for a while, but eventually, it managed to get by. The pandemic necessitated a sweeping transformation, which is likely to influence our life for the foreseeable future in the way people interact and operate in their daily routine lives as well as workplace (Griffin & Denholm, 2020; Sahadi, 2020).

All sectors in the society all over the world are in fact experiencing this now. The education sector is not spared from this transformation. One drastic change that all schools experienced, especially during the first months of the pandemic, was the shifting of instruction from

face-to-face to Distance Education, whether modular or online. The studies that follow present the advantages and disadvantages of Distance Education.

Mclsaac and Gunawardena (n.d.), in their study claimed that developments in technology allow distance education programs to provide specialized courses to students in remote geographic areas with increasing interactivity between student and teacher. Such programs are particularly beneficial for the many people who are not financially, physically, or geographically able to obtain traditional education. With the implementation of lockdowns in different areas in the Philippines, distance education is, indeed, very beneficial. It helped schools reach out to their students even in the most remote area in the country.

A study conducted by Oliveira, Penedo, and Pereira (2018) expounded that among the numerous advantages brought by distance education to students are:

Flexibility. Many students look for distance education courses just because they cannot or do not want to expose themselves to the rigidity required in physical classroom courses; b) Content availability: in most courses offered on site, the student attends classes that are offered only once and must write down and find other means for the given content is saved for future reference; and c) Low cost: you can find on the market courses offers in various levels of education with much lower prices compared to the prices of traditional classroom course.

Although these advantages were experienced by pre-pandemic students, it is a given fact that even students this new normal time share the same experiences.

Another study that focuses on modular distance education highlighted this benefit. Print-based distance education courses have proved the least expensive, and sometimes the only, feasible

model of teacher training in countries with difficult terrain; poor infrastructure; highly dispersed or difficult-to-reach populations; and little budget, infrastructure, and human capacity for more multimodal means of distance learning (Burns, 2011). In fact, one of the reasons why print or modular distance education is the mode of learning delivery being recommended by the Department of Education is that not all students in the Philippines have access to the internet and that not all have the necessary gadget for the online delivery mode. The MDL answers this concern.

Francisco and Barcelona's (2020) study on the Effectiveness of an Online Classroom for Flexible Learning explained that accessibility, time management, promptness and challenge are the advantages of ODL revealed by their respondents. Accessibility in the sense that open resources are available online, ready to be accessed by students. Time management refers to the personal or individual manner of students to maximize their time in accomplishing their online tasks. Promptness requires the learners to practice following scheduled submissions due to deadlines and challenge pertains to the effort and determination of both the instructor and learners in preparing and answering online tasks.

4. How to do it (Methodology)

This study employed qualitative descriptive research design, particularly, interview as method of data-gathering. According to the Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing of Research (2012), the goal of qualitative descriptive studies is a comprehensive summarization, in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals.

In this study, the challenges experienced by teachers about the sudden shift from face-to-face instruction to distance education were taken into account. Also, their insights about

opportunities that the new normal education opened for teachers and students were extracted from the respondents. Axial coding was used to cull out themes from the respondents' answers. This is a qualitative research technique that involves relating data together in order to reveal codes, categories, and subcategories ground within participants' voices within one's collected data (Allen, 2017).

Participants of this study were teachers in one private high school who were randomly selected. A written informed consent was given to the target participants and those who gave their consent to participate were the ones considered.

5. Study Results

After reading and analyzing the respondents' answers, axial coding was employed and the researcher arrived at the following themes:

A. Challenges of the new normal education

Lack of Training on Distance Learning Education

Although Distance Learning Education (DLE) has been in place in the educational system for quite some time, it was only being implemented by schools granted permit to offer such. Generally, all schools in the Philippines conduct classes face to face during the pre-pandemic period. This is the reason why many schools were caught unawares when the government announced a no face-to-face classes in the entire country. As one teacher respondent claimed, "I was not prepared for the Distance Learning Education since I never had a training on this. I could not imagine how I may monitor the students, how I may assess them and how I may know if they are submitting authentic projects or not."

Another teacher respondent mentioned, "I was actually surprised to know that learning is still possible even if students are not present in the school, through Distance Learning Education."



These responses clearly reveal that the teachers were not really familiar about DLE and its methods prior the new normal educational set-up.

Module-writing

One type of Distance Learning Education is modular or printed. Modular Distance Learning features individualized instruction that allows learners to use self-learning modules (SLMs) in print or digital format/electronic copy, whichever is applicable to the learner (Malaya, 2020). The difficulty in writing or preparing modules was unanimously mentioned by the teacher respondents. In the Philippines, MDL is the common type of DL modality that has been adopted by the Department of Education since there are a lot of areas in the country which do not have internet connection yet.

Some activities mentioned as challenging in relation to module preparation are the writing process itself and researching for content. According to one respondent, “many teachers are not familiar with the technicalities of writing, especially those who do not belong to the language department and they have to write their own modules.”

Another respondent said, “module writing was really a big challenge to us at first because we were not trained how to do it. We never had trainings on Module writing.”

According to Burns (2011), print-based correspondence courses are the oldest existing form of distance education. In some parts of the globe, most notably Africa and South Asia, print remains the most common form of distance education for upgrading the skills of unqualified or under-qualified teachers (Indeed, globally, text2 in one format or another is still the main distance learning medium).

Online distance learning (ODL)

Another challenge that the teachers mentioned during the interview was the implementation of the ODL, both synchronous and asynchronous.

Digital Education has been very difficult since you have to email all materials to students, assess them online and check online. It was difficult since we were not prepared for this. Skills on knowledge about digital tools in relation to lesson presentation, online assessment and checking are so foreign to me (Respondent).

Another teacher respondent uttered, “online class for me is so awkward (referring to the situation when he get to see his face on screen). This was supplemented by another respondent when she said that they are used to the conventional way of teaching.

Other areas of challenges under the ODL, as mentioned, by the respondents, are the following: 1) non-familiarity with digital applications; 2) intermittent net connection, 3) students’ poor attendance.

Opportunities for post-pandemic education

Expanding students’ access to education

Adopting the full implementation of distance learning education even after pandemic is an opportunity for schools to expand students’ access to educational services. In the Philippines, one of the Department of Education’s mandates is to make education accessible for all. To wit, “The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all (deped.gov.ph).” According to one respondent:

This distance education allowed our school to cater to students coming from different

regions. We have students from Region 3, Region 2, and even abroad. I think adopting this mode of delivery even after this pandemic will make our school services reach far places. Also, students who live in other regions and provinces can still enroll with us if they like to, not necessarily physically attending their class here.

This was supplemented by another respondent when she said:

During the pre-pandemic time, some students leave or drop in the middle of the school year when the family has to move to other places. If distance education will be implemented as part of the mainstream education, I think the number of school leavers will be lessened. Students need not to drop because they can still attend their classes through modules or online (Respondent 5).

The above-cited thoughts of the respondents about fully implementing distance education in the post-pandemic world are indeed opportunities not only for the school to improve their enrolment but most importantly for the students who want to enroll in a particular school far from their residence.

Reaching the marginalized students

Marginalization in education is a form of acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities. It represents a stark example of ‘clearly remediable injustice.’ (UNESCO, Education for All, Global Monitoring Report 2010). In the same report, UNESCO came out with categorization of marginalized students such as: gender-related, culture-related, location-related, poverty-related, and special groups such as disabled, gifted, orphans, etc.

From the respondents’ answers, the following were culled out:

During the initial stage of this pandemic, we, the teachers are the ones distributing the modules. For remote areas, we

asked help from the barangay officials for the distribution of modules.

This Distance Education, whether print or online, is a big help to our students. I am imagining that when this pandemic will end and modules will still be allowed to be used, students who do not have enough money to pay a boarding house here in the city, they can just stay in their provinces and continue their studies through modular method. They can even save their food and personal allowance. In this case, money will not be a hindrance to their education anymore.

During the pre-pandemic when Face-to-face was the accepted learning modality, students who belong to the poverty line or even below it, usually face challenges like accommodation, food, and allowance. Also, those who are living in the remote areas need not to travel miles and miles daily just to attend classes physically. If DLE, particularly, the modular mode will be implemented as an accepted alternative learning-teaching modality, there will be more marginalized students who can be accommodated. These students will be able to enroll in schools of their choice without necessarily spending more money for boarding, allowance, clothes, transportation, and others.

According to Burns (2011), print-based distance education courses have proved the least expensive, and sometimes the only, feasible model of teacher training in countries with difficult terrain; poor infrastructure; highly dispersed or difficult-to-reach populations; and little budget, infrastructure, and human capacity for more multimodal means of distance learning.

Compliance to the 21st Century Teaching Skills

Although this pandemic made it hard for the teachers to get out from their comfort zones and were forced to shift from traditional classroom teaching to blended learning and/or Distance



Learning Education, one of the advantages that the pandemic gave them is the opportunity to grow professionally. All the respondents agreed that somehow, they had to learn they forced themselves to try things that they have not tried before like module writing, conducting asynchronous and synchronous classes.

One respondent mentioned, “I am somehow thankful to this pandemic that I was given a chance to explore outside the box strategies. My creativity was challenged. I discovered my potential in enhancing my technological skills.” Another respondent said,

At first I dread learning how to manipulate the online teaching apps, but when I tried and eventually learned how to go about it, I am enjoying my virtual class. I can say that even in the post-pandemic world where technology will play a very important role, I can manage to get by because of my training at this time of pandemic education.

Teachers in the 21st Century must actually possess literacy skills, Information literacy, media literacy and/or technology literacy. Teachers who do not appreciate professional development will surely be left behind.

6. Debate Results (Discussion)

Lack of training in distance education was generally mentioned by the respondents as their biggest challenge. This encompasses the two methods (print and online) adopted by the school as their mode of learning delivery. Going over some of the modules that the teacher respondents made, it is evident that the technicalities in writing a module were not mastered yet. The non-familiarity of the respondents on the process of module-writing made it more difficult for them to come up with their own module. As observed in the modules, language use, organization, and layout are some of the technical aspect that the

teachers lack. Another observed issue with the modules of the teachers is aligning assessments with the competencies and objectives. These issues definitely would go back to the lack of training as claimed by the respondents.

Considering the issues evident in the completed modules of the respondents, however, these may pose a bigger issue since these concerns are not only related to module-making. Technical writing skills for example are also needed in other academic/professional papers that they are preparing. Alignment of competencies with assessment, which is found to be one of the problematic concerns, is also not for modules only since they are also preparing lesson plans or logs. In other words, regular or series of training in relation to writing, in general, must be enforced.

On the other hand, online distance education, as one of the school’s modalities for learning was also considered by the teacher respondents as a big challenge. Lack of training on digital apps and basics of technological skills were not prioritized during the pre-pandemic education. Although the teachers were claiming that it is supposed to be the responsibility of the school, as teachers, initiative for professional growth should be their own lookout. Also, from the answers of the respondents, it can be inferred that the teachers might have stayed so long in their comfort zone – the traditional classroom.

As part of the group, the researcher had observed that most teachers in the school were not in favor in conducting online synchronous classes. Some of their reasons noted are: they look awkward in the screen, they are worried about Data Privacy, they are not familiar with any online learning platform, and lack of knowledge about digital tools. This is really a manifestation of lack of exposure to other teaching approaches, and lack of updating oneself on the trends and practices of teaching. If they had been using some of these

digital tools during the pre-pandemic period, perhaps the adjustment now may not be that stressful.

As one respondent said “My orientation was more of a traditional teaching and traditional techniques, that is why, this sudden change of learning delivery mode is so stressful for me. How I wish I started learning this before.”

Despite these challenges claimed by the respondents, the opportunities that come with them are also promising. The teachers now know the value of updating and equipping oneself with new teaching approaches, especially technology-based approaches since these are the trends for the 21st century teaching. Indeed, this pandemic opened a lot of doors to schools, teachers and other stakeholders. It has made them realize what do they lack and what do they have at present. The opportunities that the respondents mentioned are really the offshoot of their experiences this pandemic.

Aside from these opportunities, more inclusive and understanding attitudes were developed by the teachers. Some of the respondents revealed that this new normal, they became more considerate to students, and that they can stretch their patience as long as they can.

In general, this pandemic really has given teachers a lot of challenges especially in giving quality education to the students despite the limited guidance of their teachers due to the no face-to-face class policy. On the other hand, opportunities for better access to quality education and embracing the marginalized students are excellent opportunities for schools during in the post-pandemic world.

7. Summary and Feedback

This study dealt with the challenges that teachers encountered in implementing the distance learning education this new normal and opportunities or good practices that can be applied during the post-pandemic education.

The respondents claimed that the challenges that they encountered the most are module writing and implementing online learning modality. These are due to their lack of training on these areas. Side by side with these challenges are the opportunities for a better service to be given by the school. As agreed, adopting the modular and online These are expanding students’ access to education and reaching the marginalized students in far-flung areas, and the opportunity of teachers for professional growth.

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