

Lived Experiences of Faculty Members in Institutes of Higher Education Amidst Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

With the current onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions in most countries have shifted from the traditional to online mode of delivery. This study reports the findings of a survey examining the online teaching experiences of faculty members in HEIs and how the pandemic impacted the faculty work within the higher education setting. Participants consisted of selected faculty members from a local college in the City of San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan. Findings reveal that there were various techniques and preparations employed by the faculty members in order to conduct an effective and efficient remote and online learning experience for their students. Remote online learning also offers faculty members more options for engaging instructional activities. It allows them to be more resourceful considering that they cannot meet in person with their students as with the traditional teaching mode. Despite the constraints and restrictions in conducting classes online, such as poor internet service, restricted contact between teachers and students, to name a few, most of the respondents, nevertheless, assessed themselves to be still efficient and effective as teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that broke out last December 2019 in Wuhan, China, its infiltration to other countries took only a matter of few months. According to the Department of Health (2020) and the Center for Strategic & International Studies (2020), the Philippines has the most cases in Southeast Asia with a total of 388,137 as of November 5, 2020. In an attempt to contain the spread of the virus, the government placed Luzon in enhanced community lockdown last March 16, 2020 (Merez, 2020). This resulted in not only an imminent threat to public health, but also brought other impediments to the country.

The pandemic also disrupted education as it forced schools and other learning institutions to resort to shift to remote online learning. In observance of safety precautions, such as maintaining social distancing and adherence to government policies, the community quarantine imposed by both the national and local governments, shifting to online learning seemed to be the ideal option to keep students and school staff safe and healthy without compromising education. In essence, COVID-19 redefined learning as a remote activity with a limited interaction between teachers and students (Harris & Jones, 2020).

However, while it seems to be the ideal option, in terms of prioritizing both public health and education, the public however raised concerns as to the competence and efficiency of the shift to online learning. While it is a practical resort to these precautionary measures to mitigate the threat of the virus, there are many Filipinos who prompted the Department of Education (DepEd) and Commission on Higher Education (CHED) for “academic freeze,” or to put a halt on school until the public health situation in the Philippines somewhat becomes better. DepEd and CHED, however, dismissed calls for an academic freeze, stating that it was merely a shortsighted solution (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020). However, insisting to push through with this academic year may have its own repercussions, affecting the most vulnerable children. They experience the worst consequences brought by the temporary school shutdowns, especially if they rely on school for educational, nutritional, and health needs due to their socioeconomic disadvantages (Colao, et al., 2020). The shift to a digital or cyber classroom may also be a problem to the teachers themselves.

To develop long-term online learning strategies is an important issue that institutions need to address to deliver sustainable and high-quality education throughout the duration of the pandemic. With the current threat to public health forcing schools to hold online classes instead, how can faculty members of HEIs in the Philippines prepare and promote quality and efficient education? What techniques are the faculty members using to deliver instruction online and what modifications have they made to their teaching

practices? What would be of most assistance to institutions and faculty at this time?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Using the Grounded Theory, this study aims to provide a synthesis following an inductive methodology. Sociologists Glaser and Strauss, the proponents of the Grounded Theory, said that this theory is a systematic and qualitative procedure in order to generate a conclusion (Research Methodology in Education, 2016). It is a process of an action or an interaction about a critical and substantive topic (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Furthermore, Glaser (1992) said that by using this theory, the researcher should make use of components such as data collection, coding, analysis, memo writing, and theoretical categorization. With that, this study will make use of data collected from faculty members of a local college in the City of San Jose del Monte, Bulacan. There would also be review of related literature conducted during the health pandemic that is COVID-19.

As schools were also forced to make the abrupt shift to online learning without much time for preparation, this study will also employ David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). According to Kolb (2009), the ELT cycle undergoes four steps, to wit: 1) abstract conceptualization, 2) active experimentation; 3) concrete experience, and 4) reflective observation. Applying the ELT, the study should be able to assess the current situation about online teaching and learning and identify problems that may arise or arose during such observation. With that, the study could also be able to provide pragmatic and empirical solutions for the problems encountered in this kind of teaching mode.

This study would be able to identify and determine the problems faced by the current academic setup. It would take multiple factors into consideration, such as the socioeconomic landscape of the Philippines at present and during the height of the pandemic. By doing so, faculty members could address these problems and find a viable solution to provide a more conducive space for themselves and students despite holding classes virtually and remotely.

In a well-functioning society, education is considered a primordial priority by the government. Therefore, this study also aims:

1. To determine the online teaching experiences of faculty members in select HEIs;
2. To determine how the pandemic directly impacted faculty work within the higher education setting, or its potential impacts on faculty culture and instructional practice; and
3. To identify the best practices of faculty members in addressing the challenges brought by the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

In determining the answer to the research question formulated in the previous chapters, the researcher shall apply qualitative survey research. It provides for a systematic procedure of gathering information from a sample of respondents for the purpose of being able to arrive at quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members(Harris J. , 2010).

The data collected will be analyzed by incorporating the principles of the Grounded Theory by Glaser and Strauss and the Experiential Learning Theory as proposed by Kolb. These two theories are appropriate choices since the study attempts to draw conclusion from the qualitative aspects of the answers provided by the respondents in the subject survey.

With that, the study limited the survey to a sample of 18 respondents, all of which are teaching in the tertiary level. Four of them or 22.2% are 42 years old. There are two correspondents each for those who are aged 30, 35, and 37. As for the respondents' educational attainment, majority of them, specifically 10, have a master's degree in their respective fields; three have doctorate degrees, and the remaining five have a bachelor's degree and their respective programs. Six respondents have already gained more than 15 years of teaching experience, four respondents between 5-10 years and the remaining has 1-4 years.

Materials

The questionnaire consists of three parts:

1. Informed consent
2. Part 1 deals with the profiles of respondents
3. Part 2 discusses the main questions

It consists of questions designed for faculty members in a higher education institution. There was a total of eight questions, two of which focused on teaching experiences prior to the pandemic. Faculty were also asked of preparations and course modifications they needed to transition from traditional to online modality, and if the said techniques employed added or lessened to their effectivity as a teacher.

Procedures

Data were collected through questionnaires sent via Google forms. All data were checked for completeness. None of the respondents skipped questions. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, results are presented in aggregate and summary statistics.

Limitations

This study faces several limitations. First, the results of the study depended on self-reported data. Second, at the time of writing, little published literature existed that specifically examined the experiences in the higher education sector with COVID-19. Third, due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic and due to time constraints, the researcher has limited respondents, thus, the findings of the study may not generalize in large population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Faculty Experiences

To better understand how remote teaching was being conducted, faculty were asked a series of questions about their practices and approaches during this time. To situate their experiences in context, faculty were first asked what kinds of experiences their institution's mode of teaching prior to COVID-19. There were a variety of experiences reported including having been immersed to blended distance learning and being part of open distance education as masters or doctoral student and several were still into traditional face-to-face modality.

Question 1: What was your institution's mode of teaching prior to COVID-19?

Five respondents answered that their institutions employed blended learning; thirteen used face-to-face teaching modality coupled with classroom interactions, such as recitation and class discussion lectures.

Question 2: What were your preparations in shifting to online teaching due to the pandemic?

There were various techniques and preparations instructors and teachers employed in order to conduct an effective and efficient remote and online learning experience for their students. Among these are attending online webinars, trainings conducted by their respective schools and DepEd, and exploring platforms like Google Classroom. Some answered that their preparations included curating modules and syllabi that are appropriate in the online setup.

Others resorted to logistical solutions in order to conduct a more efficient teaching experience. The respondents subscribed to better internet service providers for better connection. Some even bought computers or laptops for the online teaching.

Question 3: What are the advantages of teaching online?

Most of the respondents seem to agree that the biggest advantage of teaching online is the fact that they can perform their obligations to their students without having to leave their home. To them, remote learning is more convenient as it allows them more time for themselves and other affairs. Also, the stress of daily commute which adds to the stress are no longer experienced.

Remote online learning also offers teachers, professors, and instructors more options for engaging instructional activities. It allows them to be more resourceful considering that they cannot meet in person with their students as with the traditional teaching mode. The utilization of the internet and the cyberspace in education lessens the burden on the teachers. Formative assessments can be automated, allowing more time for meaningful interactions.

Question 4: What modifications did you employ to overcome the challenges you experienced during online classes? In what strategies were you successful?

There are various answers supplied by the respondents. Since online teaching is not a one-size-fit-all experience for students and teachers, some implemented leniency in favor of their students. One respondent answered that his deadlines are more flexible compared to when he is conducting courses online. He also provided that he changed his attitude and approach to his students.

Question 5: Do you think you are performing better in online teaching? Why or why not?

Eleven of the respondents answered yes and five answered no. The remaining two did not provide categorical answers but rather supplied that they are yet to gauge their performance as teachers in this kind of teaching. They also said there are barriers when it comes to online teaching.

For those who answered no, they claimed that the traditional modality of teaching (i.e. face-to-face) is more effective. Practical courses are also more conducive when it is conducted face-to-face.

Question 6: Are you willing to continue with this type of modality? Why or why not?

A majority of the respondents answered that they prefer online teaching to teaching in a physical classroom. Similar to the number who answered in the affirmative in the next preceding question, there are also 11 respondents who said that teaching online is preferable. However, three of those who answered yes said that they prefer teaching online because it is important to keep students, teachers, and the rest of the school staff safe from the risk of being infected.

Seven of the respondents answered that they rather opt for a physical classroom setting. The interaction between students and teachers are among the primordial considerations of the teachers who answered no. Some answered that the restraints of conducting an effective online class are due to economic factors. There are students who cannot afford reliable gadgets (tablets, phones, laptops, computers) to be able to attend their online classes.

Some cannot even connect to a stable internet connection. Because of these factors, their education is compromised.

Question 7: What are your experiences during online teaching that changed you as a teacher?

Various answers are given by the respondents. During this crucial time of need, many teachers said the current situation presented itself as a challenge to them in more ways than one. Many answered that they learned to be more considerate, patient, and understanding towards students, especially to those who are also struggling with online classes. Teaching and imparting education may be their end goals; however, it is hard to disregard the plights of the students.

Question 8: Do you think you are still effective as a teacher given the modality you are currently using? Please explain.

Out of the 18 respondents, 14 of them answered in the affirmative. Despite the constraints and restrictions in conducting classes online, such as poor internet service, restricted contact between teachers and students, to name a few, the respondents nevertheless, assessed themselves to be still efficient and effective as teachers.

According to the answers, the parameter of an effective teacher is not limited to the number of students who attend the class but the knowledge he imparts upon them. Another also averred that imposing positive reinforcement is one of the effective means to motivate students instead of assessing the students' abilities by grades or requirements.

One of the respondents averred that remote learning has its advantages as well. Among these is the comfort provided by working from home. He said that this certain modality proved to be an effective platform for teaching, alongside the consideration the respondent has for the mental health of his students.

Four respondents provided a partial answer of maybe; one of them categorically answered that he felt inadequate as it is impossible to truly assess the students' learning due to the lack of real connection between teachers and students. The virtual classroom hinders the full potential of a conducive learning experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is no question that schools and learning institutions were forced to shift into a new kind of normal when conducting class lectures. And because of that, the preparation faculty members went through in preparation of conducting remote and online teaching may be rushed. The stern insistence of the CHED to push through with the school year had drew flak from the public. They chose not to heed the people's call for an academic freeze and said that students' education should not be disrupted merely because of the health pandemic.

However, ideal as it may seem, there may be some repercussions that the education sector, particularly the teachers, may suffer. According to the survey conducted in fulfillment of this study, many respondents answered that prior to the imposition of lockdown, their schools employed the traditional setup. Most are accustomed to teaching inside a classroom, especially as the interaction between the teachers and students is more manifest. But despite being accustomed to this kind of modality, the teachers are also expected to be versatile, especially during the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While there were many preparations teachers in the higher education had undergone, it cannot be said that it is an altogether perfect solution. The respondents of this study said that although there were enough preparations on their part, the effectivity of remote and online learning are yet to be perfected. According to the pragmatic approach of Kolb's experiential learning theory, the sample respondents would be able to learn if subjected to lived experiences. Applying Kolb's prepositions in the present study would entail that the teachers would only be able to learn the effective teaching approach in the virtual remote learning when putting everything into praxis. Their attendance to online webinars and preparations for this online academic year could only do so much when put into practical application, and that is when they conduct lessons online.

It is undeniable that there may be considerable advantages offered by this mode. For one, working from home is more convenient in terms of not having to leave home. Working from home offers a more conducive work environment as there would be fewer external distractions; one does not have to commute or travel when leaving. Economically speaking, remote learning can help cut off some expenses. Many teachers also answered that the lived experience of teaching online also taught them many things that were not taken away from seminars and preparations. Most of the respondents expressed the fact that teaching online opened them to the socioeconomic realities

suffered by their students, including the inability to access a stable internet connection and procuring a reliable gadget for their online class, to name a few. In response to the question in the survey, "what are your experiences during online teaching that changed you as a teacher?" many answered that the lived experience taught them to be more considerate, patient, and understanding toward their students.

However, it is important to recognize the significant impediments encountered by this kind of teaching modality. And there may be more problems than there are benefits. Among the most common and prominent of these problems is the physical interaction between students and teachers, or in the case, the lack thereof. With the shift online, it can be gainsaid that the cyber classroom brought along with it significant changes in the classroom

dynamics. It is also important to take into consideration other factors experienced by the teachers; these are commonly logistic and technical problems, such as unstable internet connection.

And with these impediments, majority of the respondents still look at this change to online learning as a positive thing. In response to the questions “do you think you are performing better in online teaching?” and “do you think you are still effective as a teacher given the modality you are currently using?” majority of the respondents who answered yes. And so, it can be inferred that most of the teachers are confident that they are still effective teachers despite the struggle of conducting classes and lessons on a rather different platform.

It may be yet premature to come up with a conclusion that would be a one-size-fits-all. Most schools are still halfway the school year. However, with the analysis from the data gathered, it can be said that the efficiency of the teachers is not compromised in this kind of teaching modality. The faculty members are addressing the problems encountered during online classes and are continually finding a viable solution to provide a more conducive space for themselves and their students. Developing sustainable online learning strategies is an indispensable issue that countries like the Philippines need to address to be able to provide high-quality education throughout the duration of the pandemic

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