# The Webinar Experiences of Higher Education Instructors in the Time of Emergency Remote Education*

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**Abstract:** The global health threat caused by Covid-19 has resulted for schools, colleges, and universities to temporarily shutting down physical operations. The Philippine education sector, in particular, shifted from face-to-face interactions to emergency remote education. However, the question relies on the context that the majority of educators are trained and products of traditional teaching and learning environment. And since there is an urgency to adapt to emergency remote education and implementation of face-to-face in-service trainings, seminars, and workshops are prohibited, the idea of shifting to webinars has been seen as a way for educators to still engage in continuous professional development even at a distance. It cannot be denied that there is also a paucity of research about educators' webinar experiences during this time of uncertainty. Hence, using qualitative case study research, this study investigates the experiences of higher education instructors with regard to in-service training webinars and how this addresses and helps them to adapt to the sudden change of educational context. More importantly, there were three themes that emerged in this study: flexibility in engaging in lifelong learning practices, openness to alternative delivery of in-service training programs, and thirst for digital literacy skills improvement. The paper concludes with the overall findings and its implication to emergency remote education.
*Keywords:* Emergency remote education, Pandemic, Professional development, Teacher training experiences, Webinars.

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## Introduction

Over the past years, technological advancement brought vital changes to education. The integration of technology into education offers new and innovative teaching and learning ways. Interestingly, it contributes pedagogical richness to deliver quality education to stakeholders, especially for students. For instance, some studies highlighted the impact of technology in education towards learning engagement (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Al-Hariri et al., 2017; Hubalovsky, 2019; Tomaro & Muriarin, 2018), the advantages and disadvantages of educational technologies (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018; Rashid et al., 2020), and other educational matters such as the effects of the adoption of conventional textbooks to electronic textbooks (Bickle, 2017; Zhang & Kudva, 2014) or teaching methods and strategies using the technology (Alhajri, 2016; Nasir & Quick, 2016; Ahmadi, 2018).

Although there were some researchers and educational leaders who explored technology in education over the past years, the current pandemic crisis paved the way for them to rethink and revisit the importance of strengthening and integrating educational technology in today's teaching and learning environment. The global disturbance caused by Covid-19 brought inevitable changes and challenges to everyone. When it hit the whole world, technological innovations in education became the number one used resource for continuing education. However, educational leaders continuously face these challenges since the situation in the context of education is different from what is practiced. This phenomenon left them to make tough decisions on what to do and act (Data Quality Campaign, 2020).

The higher education instructors, on the other hand, have to be updated on the recent innovations to adapt the emergency remote education. However, the conduct of various trainings and seminars cannot be executed in a physical setting. Thus, the use of online webinar trainings have been seen as effective tool to update higher education instructors (Rao, 2019), but the question relies on the context that the majority of educators are trained and products of face-to-face teaching and learning environment (Alvarez, 2020b).

In the Philippine context, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) made different advisories and policies to adapt to the new learning environment (Cuaton, 2020). One is to migrate the traditional face-to-face education to emergency remote education (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020). Due to an entirely different learning environment, higher education instructors have to be updated on the latest trends and information for continuous professional development (Rao, 2019). Although online learning is not new to education, however, the webinar praxis has been observable and maximized only in today's current global health crisis.

Therefore, these reflect that higher education instructors have to re-align their teaching skills with the use of technology in the classroom. The urgency to adapt to emergency remote education, and the need for educators to have in-service trainings and workshops, which cannot be implemented in a face-to-face environment, are some of the present struggles faced by educational institutions. There is also the paucity of studies implemented with regards to educators' experiences of webinars during this time of uncertainty. Hence, this study attempts to explore the experiences of higher education instructors concerning in-service training webinars and how these address and help them adapt to the sudden change of educational context.

**The Benefits of the Webinar in Various Contexts**

The term webinar is a neologism and blended words of web and seminar (Gegenfurtner & Ebner, 2019). Many define it as a web-based or online-based seminar (Ahrens et al., 2016;

Gegenfurtner & Ebner, 2019; Rao, 2019). For example, Rao (2019) defined the webinar as a virtual and live event perform online that includes audio-visual communication. Alshahrani (2019) also noted that webinars established communication through the use of computers and internet facilities. These make technology one of the main ingredients of the webinar.

With this in mind, one advantage of a webinar is the notion of having high levels of geographical flexibility (Alvarez, Ventura, Opiniano, 2020; Ebner & Gegenfurtner, 2019; Gegenfurtner et al., 2020). Aside from that, it provides an opportunity to expand the content and pedagogy with real-time exchange of information (Alshahrani, 2019; Leiser et al., 2018). Thus, it makes the webinar an efficient tool that offers an opportunity for the presenter and listener to communicate, collaborate, and learn even at a distance (Alvarez et al., 2020).

Additionally, Alshahrani (2019) explored the webinar experiences of students and faculty at King Khalid University College of Dentistry (KKUCOD) Abha, Saudi Arabia. It was found out that the organization of 15 webinars was smooth, flawless, encouraging, and attended by the teachers and less response from the students. Also, the audience provided positive feedback from the webinars.

More recently, Prasetyono & Christian (2020) explored the adaptation of virtual meetings using videoconferencing apps. The video conferencing was combined with the game platform. The results revealed that a shorter event gets more participation and fewer participants leaving halfway through the event. These documentations contribute to the pool of researches concerning webinars as technological innovation. Hence, the advantages of the use of webinars made it accepted by many in the educational context especially during these challenging times.

**Challenges and Opportunities on the Use of In-Service Webinar Trainings**

Previous studies noted some disadvantages of the webinar, for instance, the need for a sophisticated software system, limited interaction, internet connectivity, and lack of technological skills (Ahrens, 2020; Ebner & Gegenfurtner, 2019; Lieser et al., 2018; Wang & Hsu, 2008). Webinars are mostly used for business purposes but suddenly became popular in the educational context due to the pandemic (Prasetyono & Christian, 2020).

In the past years, there were different studies emerged to document the use of webinars. Ahrens et al. (2016), for instance, explored the opinions of higher education, which include 58 educators from the teacher training. The results found that educators' opinions are homogenous. Researchers hypothesized that educators' competence towards webinars in higher education will be enhanced if there is a provision for webinar tools, has technical support, and training.

Additionally, Lieser et al. (2018) described a three-stage process of developing a webinar integration tool to enhance active learning in a blended environment. The findings showed that researchers have led to a practical effort to set parameters of support and best practices. From these aspects, the need for further research is needed to continuously improve the webinar as an alternative way for the professional development of higher education instructors.

Hence, the focus of this study is to investigate the experiences of higher education instructors on the use of webinars as part of their in-service training programs in the Philippine education context amidst the pandemic crisis. The new normal in education entails the necessity to provide evidence-based experiences of higher education instructors about in-service training webinars and how these address and help them adapt to the sudden change of educational context.

# Methodology

## Research Design

The researchers utilized a case study research design to deeply analyze and build an inquiry of understanding towards investigating the webinar experiences of selected higher education instructors in a particular locality or university in the City of Manila, Philippines (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Moreover, Yin (2009) explains that learning from the case of participant's experiences allows researchers the opportunity to understand meanings from a certain group of people. As such, our role, as researchers, involves immersion to look into the experiences of the selected higher education instructors in a particular university (Creswell, 2005). We also served as the key instrument in gathering our research data and in interpreting and analyzing the findings of the study (Stake, 1995).

## Participants and Locale

Merriam (1998) and Yin (2009) characterized a case study as having a zone of focus or concentrated on a particular locale of study. Thus, this research study was conducted in one of the top-tier universities in the Philippines located in the City of Manila. The said institution caters to various degree-granting programs that are accredited by the government and external accrediting agencies both locally and internationally. Moreover, since this is a qualitative case study, the researchers chose to gather its data collection from only one university so there would be a clear focus of understanding in investigating the journey of experiences of ten higher education instructors. Considering also the current physical and social limitations, this also served as a good attempt to revisit and explore timely and relevant issues faced by educators in the higher education context in the Philippines.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Participants

| Participant | Age | Years of teaching experience in higher education | Courses handled | How many webinars have you attended during the time of the pandemic crisis? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 25 | 2 | General education courses | > 5 |
| 2 | 43 | 18 | Business courses | > 5 |
| 3 | 29 | 3 | Business courses | 2-3 |
| 4 | 45 | 16 | Business courses | > 5 |
| 5 | 58 | 38 | Business courses | > 5 |
| 6 | 28 | 2 | General education courses | > 5 |
| 7 | 45 | 16 | Business courses | > 5 |
| 8 | 34 | 7 | Accounting courses | > 5 |
| 9 | 59 | 18 | Accounting courses | > 5 |
| 10 | 25 | 2 | Accounting courses | > 5 |

Furthermore, the ten higher education instructors were purposively selected and confirmed their willingness to participate in this study. The criteria of selection were: full-time instructors, either male or female, who attended various webinars of the university's in-service training programs in preparation for emergency remote education, and willingness to participate in this study. Looking at the demographic information of the participants, it was observable an equal distribution of the age groups. At the same time, all the participants have more than a year of teaching experience in the higher education context. While most of them were handling businesses-related courses, and the majority have already attended more than five webinars since the outbreak of the pandemic crisis.

**Data Collection and Ethical Considerations**

Since the entire Philippine archipelago was placed in strict community quarantine measures and regional lockdowns, especially the National Capital Region, due to continuous surge of Covid-19 cases in the country, we utilized the use of various communication mediated tools and applications, such as Zoom and MS Teams, to interview our participants. We asked the participant's time availability and platform preferences so we could plot ahead and strategize well for the actual interview. All necessary documents, such as the approval for the conduct of the study, were all secured to ensure a smooth flow of data collection engagement. Meanwhile, before we started the individual interview process, we introduced ourselves to establish rapport with the participant. In this way, it created space for an organized flow of conversations and facilitated in gaining their trust and confidence in sharing their insights, thoughts, and experiences (Patton, 1987) about their webinar experiences in this time of emergency remote education.

The rationale and purpose of the study were explained thoroughly to provide the participants the opportunity to picture out and have a deep sense of understanding about the research being conducted. We also pointed out that during the interview process it will be audio recorded as not to miss essential information (Merriam, 1998). It was also clear to them that the entire interview process will be audio recorded to ensure participants' accurate verbatim statements. After we discussed everything with the participants, we explained the content of the informed consent such as the overview, purpose, flow of data collection, and benefits, and risks in joining this study. It is essential to ensure that informed consent was secured prior to the actual collecting of data because the subject of our study involves the experiences of human beings (Zahle, 2017).

Moreover, the data collection was guided with semi-structured interviews so that the participants can freely share their webinar experiences (Merriam, 2002). At the same time, it facilitated an open exchange of conversations which are essential in deeply understanding their experiences to a particular phenomenon (Esterberg, 2002; Kvale, 1996). All information collected, like the profile and insights shared by the participants, were treated with confidentiality and privacy. Each participant's name was replaced with pseudonyms such as P1 or participant 1 to ensure their anonymity.

**Data Analysis**

Strauss and Corbin (1994) highlight the importance of involving continuous interaction from data collection to data analysis. It simply supports the notion of engaging in to open coding process which requires intensive work in identifying data categories and eventually comes up with a set of themes (Esterberg, 2002). Similarly, immersing from the start of data collection creates an intimate point of data (Esterberg, 2002) which provides an interactive data analysis (Creswell, 2009). Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2013), the codes were organized into categories in which these were presented back to the participants for credibility checking (O'Brien et al., 2014). From the set of categories, it was refined into themes and presented as well to external peers to increase its trustworthiness (Elliot et al., 1999; Nowell et al., 2017) and discussed the findings to various lenses of literatures for discussion.

## Findings

There were three themes that emerged in this study. The first one highlights the idea that despite the distance brought about by the pandemic crisis, the use of webinar in-service training programs paved the way for educators to continuously engage in learning anytime,

anywhere, or having the idea of flexibility in engaging in lifelong learning practices. The webinars served as a realization in bridging the need for higher education instructors to prepare for the new normal in education through the webinar. P3, for instance, shared that "engaging in webinars gives me ideas and knowledge on how to cope up easily with changes." Additionally, P1 emphasized that:

> "With the help of webinars, new learnings are easily attained as physical movements and interactions are prohibited. A lot of educators in the Philippines are conducting webinars for free and this is [a] big help to the education sector as paying would become more of a hindrance rather than a help" (P1)

The statements of P1 and P3 were also supported by P7 and P9 were both claimed that webinars provided a wide range of learning flexibility since they no longer need to physically report to the university's professional growth and development programs. The comforts of their home provided them a safe space to continuously hone their remote teaching knowledge and skills amidst the challenges brought by the pandemic crisis.

> "My family and I have to temporarily leave our house in Manila because of unpredictable increase of [Covid-19] cases. And the new normal of professional trainings, which is now done through the conduct of webinars, are amazing. Technically, it provides us to learn more since there are lots of learning opportunities maximizing the use of technology. At the same time, it does not compromise our health." (P7)

> "I have hesitancy about webinars at first considering my age, however, I find it very useful because I am learning anytime even, I am in my home. Before the pandemic crisis, we must go to physical venues for professional growth, but the pandemic [crisis] opened new opportunities to learn despite time and distance especially that community quarantine is being implemented in several parts of the country." (P9)

Meanwhile, the second theme that was revealed talks about the notion of openness to alternative delivery of in-service training programs. Since becoming an educator equates with the idea that one has to engage in lifelong learning practices, educators also felt the need to adapt to the present context of new normal in education. Likewise, the participants realized the importance of webinars as new and alternative ways of upscaling their in-service training skills. To wit, P8 claimed that:

> "I believe that as an instructor at tertiary level, I have the responsibility to learn to become open and adapt to changes. What I mean is that looking at the situation, physical mobilities are being prohibited, and so as teachers, we also must engage in trainings, but the question is how? With my webinar experiences, I have learned to appreciate its openness to deliver professional trainings. I believe it helped me to develop [a] sense of appreciation regardless of the circumstances. The webinars that I have attended, as part of our in-service trainings, are a testament that professional learning can also be done alternatively. That we can continuously enhance our profession by learning to appreciate to other modes of professional learning delivery like webinar trainings." (P8)

Also, P3 and P4 both agreed that, in time of the pandemic crisis, the idea of willingness to learn regardless of its approach or delivery is an essential aspect to consider lifelong learning practices. They both expressed that:

> "Since the Covid-19 problem broke out in early 2020, I have many whys and hows in my mind. I have personal doubt about webinars simply because, prior to this pandemic, I have a lot of engagements attending various local and international conferences. But one thing this pandemic taught me is to learn to have patience, coping up with new challenges, and developing new ideas to continuously enhance my field of profession regardless of the situation we are experiencing. Indeed, my

> experiences in attending webinars gave me a new realization about professional growth and development which is alternatively at par [with] traditional trainings and seminars." (P3)

> "I am not a techy type of person, and with my age, I guess I am a bit of a traditional teacher and a learner. But I have no choice but to attend the university's in-service trainings since as an educator I am bound to engage with various professional trainings to enhance my teaching skills. And one thing that I realized about engaging [in] various webinars is the fact that it is flexible enough that help me to facilitate learning in unconventional way. From hesitancy to no doubts at all, I can say that webinars are a great way of opening new learning delivery whenever you are. You just need to learn to accept it." (P4)

The last theme highlights the concept of thirst for digital literacy skills improvement. This emphasized the need for educators to learn the basics of technology-enabled tools in order to sustain and address the needs of 21st-century learners, especially in this time of emergency remote education. Considering that prior to the pandemic crisis, the Philippine education system relies heavily on the traditional way of teaching and learning delivery. However, with the current temporary shutdown of face-to-face classes, educators have to become digitally literate as well so they could adapt to emergency remote teaching. P1 shared her learning experiences from the in-service training webinars that she attended prior to the opening of the school year. To wit:

> "I think the webinars that I have attended for the past seminar-workshops and trainings helped me develop my capability and skills for digital adaptation. These trainings, in fact, helped me to address the needs of my students in an online setting." (P1)

> For P10, he claimed the need to recalibrate his digital literacy skills so he could immediately attend to the concerns of his students even in a remote class set-up:

> "The webinar trainings that I attended helped me to understand more how Canvas works as our remote classroom. Despite the situation, in-service webinar training-workshops like these were very helpful to learn our digital classroom that we will be using for our remote teaching class. Just to share with you, some of the webinar trainings that I attend had break-out sessions so we could practice navigating the Canvas platform in small groups." (P10)

Through the exposure in webinar trainings, some participants were able to envision the virtual classroom scenario in the emergency remote education context. For instance, P6 realized that attending webinars "helps me to anticipate problems and provide solutions to virtual classroom concerns." Hence, some participants shared that their exposure to this type of in-service training program made them prepared for the new normal in education.


## Discussion

The results of this paper highlight the webinar experiences of ten selected higher education instructors in preparation for emergency remote teaching. Interestingly, the findings of this study significantly contribute to the emerging discussion about emergency remote education. The first theme which talks about the flexibility of online trainings in attaining lifelong learning practices synthesizes the idea of accessibility towards learning anytime, anywhere through the utilization of webinar trainings and workshops (Alvarez et al., 2020; Bhawna, 2018; Ulmane-Ozolina et al., 2019).

In a time of pandemic crisis where face-to-face contact is prohibited and social movements are restricted, in-service webinar trainings can serve as a bridge in facilitating their

virtual teaching experience in preparation for their emergency remote teaching (Toquero & Talidong, 2020). This shows that webinar trainings provide new avenues for educators to engage in a new learning environment, such as learning at the comforts of their homes. Significantly, engaging in various webinars provides leeway for professional learners, like educators, to still enhance their skills regardless of time and space. The notion of flexibility that webinar provides is considered to be a game-changer, especially in developing countries like the Philippines, in the area of continuous professional development programs.

Moreover, the educators' response to becoming open to the new ways of in-service training programs delivery, such as in the form of webinars, provide them alternative learning opportunities to experience continuous professional development even in these challenging times (Medynska et al., 2020). No wonder that the majority of the educators and even the students, during the early parts of the sudden shift from traditional to emergency remote teaching, experienced digital confusion, anxiety, and technology gaps (Alvarez, 2020b; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Corcuera & Alvarez, 2021). And through the introduction of various webinar trainings, it paved the way to see the essence of an unconventional way of professional training delivery.

As a response to these situations, the need to look into ways for educators to prepare in emergency remote education resulted in various webinar trainings and workshops which have now become a new normal for educators' training programs (Toquero & Talidong, 2020). This reflects that educators, as lifelong learners, have to imbibe the culture of excellence, which is not confined to knowledge and skills, but also excellence in terms of educator's behavior in becoming receptive and adaptive to the ever-changing landscape of educational delivery.

More importantly, since the majority of Filipino educators are products of conventional teaching and learning environment and are sometimes being left in the technological landscape (Alvarez, 2020a; de la Pena-Bandalaria, 2007), the call for digital literacy is integral to ensure that educators are aligned and prepared with the emergency remote education context (Alvarez, 2021; Corcuera & Alvarez, 2021; König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020). Interestingly, the need to update their digital knowledge and upscale their technology literacy skills are necessary to achieve course objectives and provide timely and relevant academic services to their students.

In this way, they can immediately attend and address the educational concerns of their students. This shows that digital literacy is an essential component of pedagogy not only in today's age of information but also an important element and approach in the time of global health problems. With the current educational situations and underlying phenomena that schools and universities are experiencing, educators have to adapt and move forward towards becoming digitally literate. Through this, they will keep at pace with the rapid advancement of technology as well as respond to the changing demand for education, such as in this time of the pandemic crisis.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the ongoing discussions about emergency remote education in a time of uncertainties and the pandemic crisis. Interestingly, three themes emerged which reflect instructors as life-long learners. Interestingly, the findings of the study revealed the efficiency of the webinar as a tool for the professional development of higher education instructors during a health crisis. In a time of global health threat where physical distancing and wearing of the mask are necessary to contain the spread of the virus, the utilization of technology-based tools and apps is essential in making education a continued process.

Moreover, the study synthesizes with the notion that while schools are still on temporary closures and educators are at the comforts of their homes, the need for continuous professional learning in this time of the pandemic crisis also requires adaptation and alternatives. Thus, the use of webinars serves as an avenue towards ensuring lifelong learning for professional educators and helping them as well to adapt to the new normal in education. Therefore, the results of this study add and contribute to the emerging studies about the phenomenon of webinar experiences for higher education instructors in the time of the sudden shift to emergency remote education.

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