

**TEACHING AT A DISTANCE: LEARNING FROM THE EMERGENCY
REMOTE TEACHING EXPERIENCES****Abel Jr. ALVAREZ** (Far Eastern University, PHILIPPINES)aalvarez@feu.edu.ph

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Abstract

Indeed, all of us are vulnerable in these trying times. Teachers, like students, are also experiencing various challenges as they face the call for continued learning of students at the time of emergency remote education. While some literature pointed out that remote teaching and learning is already happening even prior to the pandemic crisis, it is also necessary to understand and investigate the experiences of teachers who were suddenly immersed in teaching at a distance. Hence, a qualitative case study research design was employed to examine the emergency remote teaching experiences of ten higher education facilitators handling National Service Training Program course in one of the top-tier universities in the Philippines. There were three themes revealed in this study: teaching with care and empathy, teaching in a digital divide society, and teaching in an emergency world with pressure and anxiety. Interestingly, while teachers also experience a variety of emotional and behavioral challenges, it is also undeniable that they ensure to have a safe space and a meaningful learning environment even teaching and learning are separated by time and space. Learning from the voices of the teachers is as important as students' voices. Thus, it is vital to recognize and appreciate the efforts exerted by teachers amidst the pandemic crisis.

Keywords: *Distance Teaching; Emergency Remote Education; Online Teaching; Pandemic; Teaching Experiences*

Introduction

The disruption in education which was caused by Covid-19 resulted in temporary closures of schools, colleges, and universities globally (Bozkurt et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). This phenomenon did not only affect the students learning but also challenges educator's way of delivering their instruction. Some studies emphasized that remote teaching has been happening even before the Covid-19 pandemic crisis happens. In some geographical areas affected by natural disasters have to resort to alternative ways to ensure that learning still continues (Joshi et al., 2018). Another literature illustrated that the decades of war and conflicts, such as in Arab countries like Syria, created a catastrophe in the region which also affected the children's way of learning, thus, addressing these problems through remote teaching (Ramadan, 2017). These contexts presented provide a picture that emergency remote education is happening endemically to address learning gaps and circumstances. Moreover, it cannot be denied that the impact of Covid-19 to the lives of not only of the learners but also to teachers have resulted to a catastrophe in adopting to teaching at a distance (Bozkurt et al., 2020). In this Philippines, for instance, the mandate to ensure that learning continues serves as an oath that, despite the odds that the education system is facing, Filipino educators are adaptable and flexible in providing quality emergency remote teaching to its students. However, the challenge of urgency in shifting to emergency remote measures (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020) paved the way for some educators to become confused and hesitant to handle teaching roles in a remote classroom setting (Giannini, 2020).

There are also educators who questioned their self-readiness on to the use of technology-based platforms for instructional delivery, assessment, and evaluation of students' learning performances. In fact, this phenomenon has been described as "most educators seemed to be learning online and remote teaching strategies and tools while teaching online or remotely aka building the plane while flying it" (Whalen, 2020, p. 193). This reflects the laxed of educational agencies and institutions in investing and providing professional training and development focusing on technology-based teaching programs has become a present ill problem of teachers teaching with technology (Foulger et al., 2017).

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No wonder that educators faced various stressors and barriers brought about by emergency remote teaching and learning environment since there was lack of preparation and supports provided prior to this pandemic crisis in the Philippine education system.

While these studies are much concerned about the preparations and readiness of educators in the time of emergency remote education, there were also scarcities when it comes to the teaching journey of educators in emergency remote teaching. One must remember that, although the students are the center of the teaching and learning process, the teachers also play an essential role in the classroom environment. There is really a need to understand the journey of educators who are teaching at a distance considering the challenges presented by various literatures even prior to the current educational situation brought about by the pandemic crisis. It cannot be denied that all of us are vulnerable, and that is the fact. Teachers are also susceptible in these trying times (Talidad & Toquero, 2020) and, as human beings, they also need psychological and emotional support to make teaching and learning continues. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the journey of educators who were teaching remotely in one of the top-tier universities in Manila, Philippines. Their shared reflexivity serves as a way of giving them a voice about their remote teaching experiences, insights, and stories that are worth being given attention and interest.

Methodology

Research Design

Since this study aimed to understand and investigate the teaching journey and experiences of educators in a particular higher education context in the Philippines, the researcher employed a qualitative case study research design to deeply understand a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) also identified a case study as a bounded system which in this study focused on higher education teachers handling NSTP courses in a specified university in Manila, Philippines during the school year 2020-2021. Through utilizing a case study research design, I was able to grasp and make sense of the shared reflexive experiences of the participants (Yin, 2014).

Research Participants and Locale

The locality of this study lies in the capital city of the Philippines – Manila and is considered to be one of the top-tier universities, not only in the district of Manila’s university belt but in the entire Philippine archipelago. Interestingly, this university was one of the proactive universities in the Philippines that have invested prior to the pandemic on Learning Management System to make learning accessible beyond the traditional classroom set-up.

This, in turn, provided the university to adapt smoothly to the emergency remote situations. However, it is noteworthy to investigate the experiences of ten purposively selected NSTP higher education facilitators who have been immersed with asynchronous teaching during the COVID-19 situation in the Philippines. They were selected based on their inclination to share their reflexivity paper about asynchronous teaching journeys during the school year 2020-2021.

Data collection and ethical considerations

Since health protocol measures, such as limitations on face-to-face, wearing of masks, and observance of physical distancing, were in place in the entire country, the researcher decided to gather the data by collecting the semester-end reflexive paper of the NSTP facilitators. Through this form of data gathering, it allowed me to examine their reflective asynchronous teaching journey by looking into their reflective practice.

The use of reflective practice served as leeway to critically rethink their teaching strategies, assessment practices, and at the same time, to rethink as well with regards to their own learning journey as educators especially in this time of uncertainties. I was provided by the office to examine and analyze ten reflective papers. This process gave me the opportunity to look at and explore their reflective insights with regard to the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2014; Sonesson et al., 2018). All raw data from the reflective papers were anonymized (e.g., P1 or participant 1). In this way, it served to protect the identity of the participants, and their answers were stored in a password protected database to ensure confidentiality of their shared reflective information.

Data analysis

The transcripts of the reflective paper were read and re-read to better grasp the reflective insights of the participants, thus, it provided to make sense out of these data. The data were manually coded (Basit, 2003) and the transcripts were transferred to Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for better visualization and easy identification of codes. The phase of re-reading the transcripts made it substantial for me to deeply understand their reflexive information as it employed rigor in analyzing qualitative data.

Moreover, the use of Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis facilitated detailed phases of codifying the data where a chunk of codes was identified. From these chunks of codes, I presented the initial results with other colleagues and experts from the field to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and increase the credibility of the future findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). It was then refined and categorized into a set of themes and discussed the results of the study from the lenses of empirical and related studies.

Findings

The first theme reflects the untiring journey of the higher education facilitators in providing the act of caring and understanding to their students. The theme of *teaching with care and empathy* portrays the notion of going the extra mile to ensure that students are learning, and, at the same time, they are also being provided with proper emotional support considering the vulnerability brought by the pandemic crisis.

“Being a facilitator during the pandemic is very challenging. I have to deal with every student's concern, and I really gave all my patience and consideration to all of them. As a facilitator during this time, we need to show empathy to our students.” (P4)

“Since this pandemic, I have given them a lot of extension in submitting the task, just because I understand what they are feeling right now.” (P7)

This phenomenon resulted as well in the need for educators to ensure timely feedback. P1 shared that attending religiously in answering the queries and concerns of students is one way to ensure efficient delivery of asynchronous instruction. Thus, it entails that having a well-communicative space and an emphatic learning environment supports having a caring learning experience in a virtual classroom environment.

“It was really hard for me also to look at some of the students without any submissions. So what I do is that I consistently remind them and message them individually to submit the required assessments. I try my best to be for my students as necessary as possible and I am thankful that this semester has been great for me as it allowed me to be the facilitator my students need – compassionate and understanding.” (P2)

“While we aspire for inclusivity, we also forget that there are students who were being left behind because of these challenges. As a facilitator, I ensure to provide a caring and understanding learning environment by attending immediately to the concerns of my students and providing timely feedback to their submitted outputs. Lastly, I also allowed them to voice out their queries and concerns to address the teaching and learning gaps.” (P5)

While the first theme focuses on teachers as care providers of pedagogical aspects, no one escapes with the idea that teaching in these trying times creates a dystopian reality of digital division. This theme about *teaching in a digital divide society* showed that not only the students are experiencing accessibility issues and internet connectivity problems, but educators who are teaching asynchronously also experiencing the same dilemma.

“Communication was difficult for all us facilitators and students, also the recent calamities have pushed the resiliency of fellow students.” (P3)

“Communicating with students is most challenging because not everyone has a stable internet connection, including myself. Many of my students sent me a text message informing me that they do not have an internet connection so they cannot submit the requirements.” (P6)

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Additionally, the need to have open and constant communication plays an important role in dealing with the students learning at a distance. These educators are looking for other communication channels to ensure that the concerns of their students were being promptly attended to.

“A lot of adjustments have to be made, with the ever- problematic intermittent internet connections in the country, many of my students were not able to comply with the set deadlines in passing the requirements needed to pass the course. Constant communication and reaching out to these students through the use of social media, canvas, and MS Teams are just some of the tools I’ve used.” (P8)

“As a facilitator, you need to do everything to reach out [to] your students because sometimes they need thorough instructions to be able to understand their course requirements. If I did not message him directly, he will really have an F grade.” (P4)

Lastly, the journey of educators in this time of the pandemic crisis depicts that they are not heroes, hence, they are also vulnerable to stress brought by the COVID-19. They also experienced burdensome and feeling of hopelessness. Thus, the theme of *teaching in an emergency world with pressure and anxiety* represents educators’ survival instinct. The need to act their roles as classroom teachers coincide with the emergency remote education situation and emerging roles they play in their families. P9 emphasized the challenge brought by the emergency remote teaching, which was not limited to connectivity issues, but teachers are not exempted as well with the anxiety they feel due to the COVID-19 phenomenon.

“Millions have lost their jobs, not to mention those that were directly infected by the COVID-19 who got hospitalized and the agony to their families, even horrifying to all those who lost their battle with the virus. I can’t imagine the pain it has caused to the bereaved family. They say [the] year 2020 is a difficult

year for all of us but still thankful and motivated because that's the best thing that we need to do to survive.” (P10)

Moreover, these uncertainties make educators worrisome about their teaching responsibilities and their family duties. However, despite the odds, they still tried to manage to ensure in providing quality instruction even in remote context for students' continuous learning engagement by reaching out with their students and giving them the opportunities to comply with all the requirements and backlogs they have to submit.

“All of us have the uncertainty of the future and we still need to find out how are we going to get through with this challenge. As a facilitator, it is hard for me to be strong for my students as I also experience the same as with them...And I thought of being lenient to them and give them more time for them to provide the assessments required.” (P2)

Discussion

The reflective practices shared by the participants represent their untiring journey of teaching experiences despite experiencing vulnerabilities at the time of the pandemic crisis. It also shows the depth of their reflective thinking as they navigate the flow of uncertainties towards fulfilling their roles as educators across time and space. Despite the odds that they have shared, they also saw the light to make learning a caring, understanding, and safe space for everyone. Interestingly, while most of the participants shared that they cannot just sit back and wait for their students to comply, their instincts, as students' second parents, require them to reach out and to look into the wellbeing of their learners by having constant reminder and alternative communication channels.

The theme of teaching with care and empathy shows no boundaries that everyone is vulnerable and can be a victim of the pandemic crisis. Indeed, the call of educational and government institutions to search for alternative teaching and learning delivery to ensure that learning is continued was a great parameter. However, it is also necessary to call for empathic teaching and learning environment where everyone cares and channels

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a supportive and collaborative environment (Alvarez, 2020a; Corcuera & Alvarez, 2021; Bali, 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020a; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b; Bozkurt et al., 2020).

As a developing country where various socio-economic problems, such as poverty and digital division exist are present even prior to the pandemic crisis (Schia, 2018; Warf, 2019). Nevertheless, the challenges brought by COVID-19 made the situation worse as it results in extreme conditions which affect not only the mobilization per se but also had impacted one's emotional and psychological behavior. Teachers, being immersive with the situations, ensure that as much as possible they relate and connect with the circumstances of their students and provide space for emphatic communication. Moreover, as learners deal with the problems of digital division, educators also feel the same dilemma. These challenges are not considered to be new in the Philippine context as revealed by other researchers (Alvarez, 2020b; Alvarez, 2021). In fact, the Philippine internet connectivity is one of the slowest not only in Southeast Asia but also in the rest of the world. This phenomenon lights out the existing issue about access to quality internet connectivity. And while the world is preparing for the new normal in education, some of the developing countries like the Philippines is still struggling in breaking the chain of the digital divide. With this, in turn, educators learned to adapt to the situation and search for alternative communication channels to reach out to their student's needs and concerns.

At the same time, it was highlighted in the findings that educators are vulnerable to the pandemic crisis (Talidong & Toquero, 2020). It also shows that while numerous studies give emphasis to students learning experiences and journeys in emergency remote education, it is also fair to lend our ears and to give voice to the struggles and experiences of educators.

Therefore, educational institutions have a huge role to play by ensuring to provide adequate psychological support and emotional intervention for their educators who are experiencing pressure and anxiety in teaching in this time of emergency remote education. For instance, they can provide psychological assistance hotlines, webinars, and counseling sessions to address the psychological fatigue and anxiety of educators. Thus, this reflects educators' need to survive by addressing and providing support as well in terms of their psychological and emotional behavior which was greatly impacted by the pandemic crisis.

Conclusion

Yes, the primary center of the teaching and learning process is indeed the students, however, we must remember that the one who cares for the students also needs to be given a voice to share and understand their teaching journey and experiences in the time of emergency situation. Teaching in these trying times is not easy as imagined by most of us. While we see emergency remote education as compliance for learning continuity, it is fair as well to deeply understand the efforts extended by educators.

The empathy and understanding they provide are worth to be appreciated since they are also humans who are experiencing life circumstances brought by COVID-19. More importantly, we must remember that the ones who nurture and provide for the learning needs of the students also need a caring and understanding environment. Like anyone else, educators are also victims and vulnerable at this time. Therefore, one must learn to appreciate and recognize the efforts of educators in emergency remote teaching.

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