

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM A YEAR OF REMOTE LEARNING

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When the Philippines was plunged into lockdown last March of 2020, the educational system was initially put on standby. All ongoing classes were suspended and academic terms that were about to start were postponed. The idea was to ride out the worst of the outbreak, and once it was dealt with, then classes would just proceed as normal. The pandemic of course turned out to be worse than most people imagined, and as weeks in community quarantine turned to months, our academic institutions decided they had to find a way to continue the education of the country's youth. A year on from this decision, what have we learned about education from a distance? What has remote learning taught us.

First: Zoom classrooms. The seeming ubiquity of smartphones with broadband connections gave us hope that, even if not in the same room, students and teachers can all still go through lessons and activities together. Fast forward to now, we realize that phones, computers, and high-speed internet are not so commonplace after all. Learners who live in rural areas most of the time do not have the best cellular tower coverage. Those who are in the city where the signal is stable, might not have the means to procure a dedicated gadget for use in studying. They might also struggle to connect to classes when sharing Wi-Fi with their siblings, or even their parents who could also be working remotely. Clearly the synchronous learning method can only be applied effectively if all students have similar capabilities with regards to internet connectivity.

Another approach taken was asynchronous, module-based learning, where pupils were provided with combination reference and activity booklets (i.e. modules) that they

had to accomplish more or less independently within a set period of time. The upside of course was flexibility. Students were free to learn at their own pace so long as they complete and submit the accomplished module within schedule. There was also minimal need for internet-enabled devices, which evens out the playing field even more. Turns out though, independence could also bring about isolation and loss of interest. Without encountering their peers in a structured classroom environment, learners who lack drive and focus tend to fall behind on their studies. Missing a couple of module submission deadlines more than likely meant that the student would not be able to catch up. Given, the Covid-19 pandemic was the first time that this type of learning was implemented on a national scale, and most shortcomings can be alleviated with improvements on module and curriculum design.

Combining online classes and independent learning activities would probably give the best of both worlds. Students can be engaged as a class like traditional face-to-face learning, but because there are modules there would be less of a tendency to suffer from "screen fatigue", which makes it harder and harder for students to process what their instructor's words the longer they are forced to stare at their devices. Still though, there will always be areas, such as laboratory and physical education classes, where any form of remote learning is a less than satisfactory substitute.

As we delve deeper into our second year of gathering restrictions, and with the end of the pandemic still not in sight, the country's leadership needs to assess what worked and what didn't work for our students and teachers during the academic term that just concluded. It is essential that we improve our remote-learning methods and find the best delivery mode whether online, via modules, or something in between.

References:

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