

DISTANCE LEARNING: IS IT NURTURING ENOUGH FOR AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION?

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As a developing country that has long fought and struggled for self-sufficiency in terms of food production, the pandemic indeed worsened our battle in feeding our people (The World Bank, 2020). When the community lockdowns due to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic were first announced in the Philippines (CNN Philippines, 2021), most of us panicked and rushed to the nearest groceries, supermarkets, and other food selling establishments to ensure our continuous supply of food. This scenario just proved that food is a priority need for every one of us; we need food to survive.

Heightened restrictions and closure of establishments did not only affect the mobility of our food-producing workforce and the farm-to-market supply chain which brings food to our plates. It has also impaired our educational sector. The pandemic pressured our schools and students to rapidly adapt to distance learning. No one expected the pandemic and as a result, we are unprepared for these drastic changes in just a short period. Just like our food-producing sector, our education system also has its share of shortcomings and improvements to be made. Thus, it is not mind-boggling that the country's distance learning system is not flawless, and is more difficult and less effective compared to the pre-pandemic face-to-face classes.

Considering a technical subject of study such as Agriculture, regardless of if it is the one being taught in high school or the complete tertiary degree program being taken in college, Agriculture necessitates hands-on experience for effective learning. It necessitates applying the theory into practice repeatedly to gain the skill required to successfully produce food. Yet, due to distance learning, studying it may not only be harder but could

also be less effective. Imagine being able to finish an agriculture course subject in high school without ever experiencing performing the right way to plant a seed or prepare a seedbed face-to-face. Imagine graduating with an agriculture degree in college through modules and online classes without being able to interact with livestock animals or being able to operate agricultural machinery throughout your study. Assuming other factors (such as incapacity to participate in synchronous classes and to self-study the modules, unavailability of internet access, etc.) did not exist which is not the case, distance learning may still give our students the theoretical foundation, but still, it is not enough to make them effective practitioners, particularly in the agricultural context.

If the pandemic will persist and will continue to be with us in the future and if we will not be able to come up with a better strategy for our educational system, there is a high chance that fewer and fewer Filipino students will graduate to be competent professionals. There will be fewer and fewer agricultural scientists and technicians who can aid our country toward food self-sufficiency in the future. If that day comes, food will surely become scarce and not affordable for an ordinary Filipino. If today continues as it is and if we may be lucky enough to survive COVID-19 in the future, hunger will surely be a greater evil to deal with.

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