Online Learning: The Current State of COVID-19 and Educational Instruction

Philip Nguyen

INTRODUCTION

Online learning was conceivably going to be integrated with many primary, secondary and tertiary levels of academia worldwide. A number of universities and prestigious schools publicize their online class components as a selling point of the curriculum (Czerniewicz, 2020). This includes areas such as advanced learning management systems (LMS), seamless cloud-based collaboration, accessible online testing with prompt feedback, and a more manageable medium of communication. However, in light of the spread of COVID-19 and its destructive and disruptive outcomes (WHO, 2020), it became evident that several institutions were either unprepared or lacked ICT training. Online classes became the primary instruction method for many schools and a necessity to help society minimize risk and exposure to the virus (CoSN, 2020). It is now clear that the world needs flexible and adaptable education curricula. This exploratory paper will look at the recent history of COVID-19 and its effect on educational institutions globally. This analysis will explore some of the benefits and challenges that coincide with the movement to online classes. These findings also provide a strong platform for further research and study as the pandemic continues to evolve and change the world's educational landscape.

THE GLOBAL EFFECT OF COVID-19 AND ACADEMIA

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified the virus as a global pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Many countries followed rigorous protocols and regulations to slow down the epidemic and prevent people's exposure to the virus, including lockdowns and facilitating social distancing. Quick and timely solutions included flexible working hours for companies, working remotely, or closing institutions altogether (Adams et al., 2020). Including schools and universities, this forced all educational facilities and institutions virtually to move to online

classes and remote learning. As a result, educational institutions have little choice but to adapt to emergency remote teaching (ERT).

According to UNESCO, more than 1.5 billion students worldwide are affected due to schools and colleges closing their facilities and moving online (UNESCO, 2020). Because the United Nations deemed education a fundamental human right (ibid.), this can be considered a critical global issue. There was a pressing need to resolve this quickly; governments and international organizations campaigned for schools to embrace remote learning (Saavedra, 2020). However, what many advocates and proponents of this movement fail to realize is that teachers are the ones to execute the plan, and many were unprepared or not given enough time to integrate remote learning into their coursework or curriculums.

TEACHER CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING ONLINE LEARNING INTO THEIR COURSEWORK

In today's academia, technology's role in improving or assisting in quality education cannot be underestimated. The integration between teacher and technology has grown much more potent and may have unsequentially created dependency among each other (Becta ICT Research, 2006). With each passing year comes exponential growth in technology usage and reliance on the internet (ibid.). This has created a need for studies in ICT. However, with each generation of teachers comes a different set of ICT skills. A teacher's attitude and exposure to technology usage are perhaps one of the main criteria for achieving meaningful use in the classroom (Dang, 2011). Dang explains that the more a teacher has been exposed to technology in their earlier years, the more inclination they have to utilize it in their own classrooms. The reverse may also apply.

In light of this, many people were not expecting to see this growth of ICT dependency almost instantaneously; technology has exploded onto the scene this past decade, including the rapid advancing of smartphones (Jesse, 2015), social media (Whiting, 2013), and even digital textbooks. As a result, many older teachers who were not exposed to these advancements often avoid implementing ICT integration into their classrooms (Stadler-Altmann, 2015). As a result, students may lack ICT skillsets or exposure to technology. This creates more complications when facing online learning; many of these

teachers may be woefully equipped to use technology not used previously. Whether it is due to lack of time or unwillingness to adapt (Golden, 2020), ICT skills can be considered a practical problem that needs to be addressed with COVID-19 continuing to reshape how instructors are involuntarily forced to teach online.

THE BENEFITS IN THE SHIFT TO ONLINE LEARNING

Online classroom learning has become a popular topic of discussion since the pandemic began. When utilized correctly, online learning can help students flourish; the best integration of this combines both in-classroom instruction and outside-classroom practice, whether it is remote communication among other students or easily accessible content. While the health benefits of staying remote during the pandemic are apparent, and beyond this research paper's scope, there are significant benefits and challenges of an online classroom setting from a teacher's perspective.

a. Greater Student to Teacher Interaction

Online classrooms enable teachers to explore and engage students through richer content. With most students becoming more adaptive and receptive to technology consumption (Beldarrain, 2006), different tools and resources should be utilized. One of the most common and popular methods is real-time screen sharing, where teachers can interact instantaneously on virtually anything shown on a student's desktop (Marshall & Kostka, 2020). In addition, feedback or assessment of online in-class work can be given at a more rapid pace with a few mouse clicks; instructors can communicate with students quicker when compared to face-to-face lessons with a large number of students.

Teachers can also assign online videos or clips during an online class and watch it in real-time together with students, providing seamless transitions to group or class discussions. This can be advantageous as in-person classroom issues can arise like choppy pausing and inaccurate time-scrolling while playing a video clip.

b. Easier Accessible Resources

Arguably one of the more critical advantages of online learning,

classroom resources can be easily accessed further. Teachers can provide students both a live lesson online and also record it for additional practice or review. It can be challenging for students to grasp a concept the first time around, but having access to a lecture online for reviewing can potentially increase comprehension (Aspillera, 2010).

Having an LMS system integrated with online classes can further assist students in their additional practice or studies. Instructors can offer a variety of different resources or articles to supplement their lessons; this can provide extra convenience and flexibility to access material that may be unavailable in an in-person classroom setting.

c. Personalization of Online Classes

The diversity of teaching styles in a face-to-face setting at many institutions can also be applied to the online classroom. Teachers who are well-versed in an ICT environment can bring this skillset into the classroom, providing additional content layers. This can include virtual backgrounds with presentations, the ability to go from a lecture-based activity to a group-based one with easy transitions, and the capacity to remodel or change styles to accommodate students quickly.

THE CHALLENGES IN DEPLOYING AN ONLINE COURSE

When it comes to ICT skills, Orlando and Attard (2015) stated that "teaching with technology is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum content being taught" (pg. 119). Indeed, many variables within technology can be complicated for instructors to cope with within their classrooms. One of the main problems with a "one-size-fits-all" for technology is that teachers have been exposed to different evolutions of its advancement. This paper will highlight some of the key challenges when implementing technology and online learning in the curriculums while considering it.

a. Infrastructure Support And Insufficient ICT Resources

Technological advances and further software advancement have perhaps outperformed key decision-makers' ability to transition into online classroom deployment and general technology equipment (World Bank, 2020).

Administration staff members have been reluctant to realize that the migration from in-classroom instruction to online requires either an upgrade to existing infrastructure or purchasing additional equipment (ibid.). In most institutions, a significant amount of the ICT resources in schools are insufficient for the sudden change to remote learning. The expectations are that the teachers will utilize what is readily available for them. As a result, a student's learning environment has been significantly diminished, with perhaps little relief in sight. Committees and key personnel should consider providing additional resources and infrastructure support to assist in online learning.

b. Lack of Training Modules and Support

Just as teachers need to embrace remote learning during this pandemic, school administrators and ICT staff members should equally provide adequate training and support to ensure teachers are equipped with the skills and tools needed for their classrooms. However, many education staff members are wary of technology, whether it is due to lack of exposure (Cznerniewicz, 2020) or lack of training themselves. While many institutions continue to embrace the shift to online learning, school administrators have this lack of confidence. Consequently, this trickles down to teachers to the point where training becomes a chore rather than a vital tool for online learning platforms (Ali, 2019). Ali then points out that students will be negatively affected if staff are unwilling and do not provide support and training resources available. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank (2020) heavily stresses that both staff and instructors be trained together and supported by the administration.

c. Confusion about "Hybrid" Learning

As ERT continues to transition and COVID-19 guidelines for education institutions start to relax, there seems to be a growing confusion and frustration on how hybrid learning is being deployed. A hybrid learning approach to a course or class combines face-to-face classroom instruction with online activities or additional resources to view. Most course activities are performed online, but a limited number of classes are required for the in-person classroom. However, this method is confusing for teachers to simultaneously integrate both in-classroom and online-classroom if their

institutions bring students back to face-to-face instruction. Accommodation for online learning should be made available to accommodate students who do not wish to return to in-person instruction. As a result, a teacher has to split their attention to both environments, and advocates will argue that this is not a sustainable solution (Arnove, 2020). The onus goes onto the teacher to provide seamless instruction, but this causes additional stress and pressure to deliver. While there is no simple solution for this, there should not be confusion regarding what hybrid learning is supposed to provide. Instead, online teaching models such as asynchronous and synchronous learning should be utilized.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has enormously shifted the way education is being delivered. With ERT in full swing and adaptation of online learning as the instruction method, it is essential to consider teachers the primary target for continued ICT development. Much like teaching in a face-to-face setting, the instructor's role is critical in ensuring that online instruction is well-designed and learning outcomes are achieved at a similar level. As Garrison (2016) points out, "teaching presence is not possible without the expertise of a pedagogically experienced and knowledgeable teacher who can identify worthwhile content, organize learning activities, guide the discourse, offer additional sources of information, diagnose misconceptions, and provide conceptual order when required." Teachers are mainly responsible for providing students ample opportunities to succeed. After suddenly transitioning to online learning, more support is needed. The immediate and long-term future of educational instruction remains uncertain; however, technology will most likely continue to take on a critical role in the classroom, whether physically or virtually.

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