

Critical Essay/Commentary

**EDUCATION: RE-EXAMINED
IN TIME OF PANDEMIC**

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In this essay, I would like to share my insights about education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is almost a year now since the start of the lockdown, and it looks like this situation will continue indefinitely, especially in those areas where the vaccines have not yet been rolled out. The virus continues to evolve, now with different variants from England, South Africa, Brazil, and other parts of the world. The ability of the virus to mutate means we will be living with it for years to come, needing corresponding vaccines as it morphs. The pandemic put the world in a defensive mode, restricting personal movements, locking down families, communities, and businesses. Consequent to the public health and work challenges, the economy continues to go down, and more schools are closing down. Academic communities are forced to rely on online learning modalities. There is a need to reflect, think, and re-appropriate teaching, which was initially conditioned and molded in the classroom. The situation requires quick adaptation of the curriculum and learning styles to a digital platform. In a dramatic manner and scale, everyone has to grapple with educational change, digital technologies, pandemic pedagogies, online teaching platforms, among others. It presents a daunting hurdle for every learner, teacher, administrator, and all other school sectors.

This thinking piece examines the time from the viewpoint of a pracademic who firmly believes that the role of education is to make life better, not just for individuals but also for the world. Educators must not just survive the time, but also play a philosophic part in the evolving situation. Let us take time to observe, reflect, and act on our philosophy and practice of education. Following the simple observation-think-act process, I present my insights from 1. my existential angst as a learner, 2. my awakened role as a teacher, and 3. the phenomenal reality of information technology. I conclude with my renewed resolve to educate.

Teachers as Learners

I first struggled before I embraced the shift to online teaching. In March 2019, the pandemic blew when we were almost done with our face-to-face classes, only four weeks to finish the term. Due to the lockdown, I spent most of those four weeks using e-mails, messaging, texting, and using De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde's BigSky for submission of final course requirements.

Just like anybody else, I was not prepared for this Coronavirus. Home-bound and afraid, I groped on what to do. I joined the world watching: how many are affected,

how many are dying, worrying what will happen to my work, how many will be laid off, and how many will be leaving work. And this continues as of this writing. Who is not afraid anyway? I am a believer in face-to-face classroom teaching, personally teaching forty students each class for the past three decades. Our school is advanced in information technology, with BigSky as our learning platform. But I rarely used BigSky. I only found it useful for getting class lists and doing online makeup classes. In short, I was not used to teaching online. I found the attention to it unnecessary, even annoying. Not until the lockdown and classes were disrupted, then suspended for weeks, and the school finally announced that we would have to do full online classes. At first, I thought there was no light, no hope in preparing myself for this difficult challenge. I expected extreme difficulty in preparing for my online classes.

I had no other recourse but to study online teaching. Thankfully, the school offered the faculty members a training program, even providing mentors to guide us. The Benilde Online Learning Term or BOLT was a program that familiarized us with the basic features of BigSky. With the training, we started to adjust with varied facilities and difficulties. From zero knowledge, I started using the technology. I was glad to be one of the first batches to be trained. In two weeks, I had to know the basic workings of online teaching. I spent some sleepless nights, encountered some happy problems, gathered some happy memories with my teaching colleagues, some frustrations and realizations, and some successes. Thank God I made it. Slowly but surely, I started to appreciate online teaching. The school used technology for us to learn online technology.

Immediately after that, we had our on-the-job training by handling online classes in an 8-week term. It was my first time teaching fully online classes. We had to learn well. We had to transform our 14-week syllabi, rethink the activities, quizzes, and exams. We had to prepare video presentations, slide presentations, and record lectures. I had to experiment, explore and discover new applications and more educational methodologies. There is no young or old in learning or teaching. I continually adjusted and adapted to the new normal. Relearning pedagogy is my ongoing quarantine work from home.

When the school went back to the regular 14-week classes, we only had to expand the 8-week program. It seemed easy since we had smaller classes, ranging from 10-25 students per section. Everything was manageable. I adjusted and varied my activities. I prepared more lectures using video recordings for each week. Then, I uploaded all the lectures on YouTube. It was difficult at first, but as days went by, it became very natural to teach. One difficulty that I experienced was poor connectivity. I went through it with my students as well as my children. Poor or inadequate network connections was a key challenge, part of adjusting to the new normal. I had to “oversubscribe” to solve the problem.

As learners, we needed to collaborate, and we thrived in collaboration. I once again experienced that sharing is good. With digital technology, sharing seemed easier and normal. Collaboration tames and quells unhealthy competition. Queen Rania of Jordan observed that in education, technology could be a life-changer, even a game-changer. Indeed, the internet kept us connected to our peers and colleagues in other parts of the world. It helped us translate our syllabi so we could reach our learners in their homes. The experience shattered my skepticism towards online learning. The

Lasallian motto of teaching minds, touching hearts, and transforming lives are still possible in virtual classes. Some of those who were quiet during synchronous meetings found their voice by writing in the discussion forum. I would say that engagement and interaction with the students could be done both in online classrooms and face-to-face meetings, provided that the teacher gives space and encourages it. Some students can ask more questions online without fear of interrupting someone or hogging airtime. In any set-up, the teacher has to have a methodology of inviting them out of their shell and writing the appropriate engagement rules. A teacher must always be ready and willing to learn, readjust, restructure, and be flexible.

Practical Philosophy of Education

Philosophy of education concerns the application of philosophical ideas in education. Each teacher is always guided by theories or philosophic thoughts that shape the overall teaching outlook, and they get expressed in the choice of methodology, approach to the learner, among others. Philosophical ideas, especially when deliberately applied and mindfully evaluated, can help refine educational practices. So, being mindful of the philosophies of education is important in examining one's teaching practice and developing one's teaching philosophy. Through a philosophical perspective, one will be able to see the dynamic interaction among students, the course content, and career goals. Philosophy gives depth and breadth to an educator's personal and professional endeavors.

I have always considered myself a pragmatic educator. The pandemic challenged my understanding of education. I consider the sudden and forced adjustments in the new normal, the BOLT training and the actual online class preparation, as one of the hardest phases of my life. Learning and embracing information technology as an essential component of teaching is such a challenging thing to do. There are fear and anxiety, creating an emotional and psychological disturbance. I experienced existential angst. I am only able to absolve my stubbornness because of Aristotle's assuring words that it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

The new technology requirement emerged as a significant challenge to education in the context of the lockdown. It was clear that to continue teaching, I must be well equipped well with digital technology, specifically online apps. As a pragmatic educator, I am supposed to demonstrate exceptional competence and grasp of the new developments in society, especially those affecting the lives of students. I must provide a supportive environment where students can learn and enjoy learning as the situation requires. The teacher's work is to be able to organize and direct student knowledge and understanding in the new normal.

In essence, the pandemic reinforced my view on the role of teachers. Technology is an essential means to facilitate learning, but it cannot drive education. Technology itself will not cause the learning outcome. It is a teacher's appropriate and creative use of technology in teaching that enables the attainment of learning outcomes. Developing one's distinct philosophical approach to education takes time and a conscious effort. It has to pass the test of time. A veteran teacher can teach in varied ways in varied circumstances, applying available technologies as needed.

Broadened Method of Education

Learner-Centeredness, our school's avowed brand of education, is a process-oriented type of learning where students and teachers are allowed to discover, recognize, and develop their uniqueness as individuals. It is associated with creative methodologies and dynamic strategies and emphasizes creative, innovative, and inclusive community building. Teacher's growth is assumed and has been demonstrated in learner-centered pedagogy (2018). Teachers are expected to be in tune with the times. We are in the age of technology, and most students are adept at using them. We have to be aware of our students' generation. It matters to know the generations they are in, whether Millennials or Gen Y (1977-1995), Gen Z, iGen, or Centennials (1996-2009), and Gen Alpha (2010 to 2024).

I once had a discussion on this with a student in a face-to-face class. He believed that the use of the internet could bring not just knowledge and understanding but also wisdom. I maintained that it is still in the interaction between a teacher and a student when wisdom can be imparted. It was an engaging discussion. Whether there can be wisdom in the use of the internet is still an open debate. If one can have unlimited access to knowledge that matches one's learning style, what is the teacher's value? Teachers must speak a lot less and listen a lot more. This is a desired natural and fundamental change in pragmatic teaching and learning, and technology enables it. For the wise among us, there is a resolution to such debates. One consensus is that technology will never replace teachers. However, in the hands of effective and efficient teachers, technology can become transformational, learner-centered, or any outcome that the teacher aims for the learners.

Due to the advancing information and educational technology, we needed to rethink, reflect, plan and implement some changes in the school. However, like most teachers, I would rather watch the developments than be compelled to re-create teaching. It was the pandemic and our need to continue living despite the constraints that forced us to see the array of possibilities in using digital technology truly. It is not just about using computers or laptops but also about recognizing and learning to use the new information tools and operations in more ways than we cared to explore. Truly, the COVID-19 outbreak made me re-examine my perspective. My classroom teaching experience may have helped and molded me in the principles of teaching and learning. However, it was the pandemic that made me test if they can stand in an upside-down world. My classroom mottos, like "one for all, and all one for one," "no learner must be left behind," remained applicable in fully online classes. I consistently observed the principle of inclusive education in my teaching strategy. I managed to accommodate and counsel those with special disabilities like autism and ADHD, as I did in a regular classroom, plus those students with technical difficulties. I am not fond of technology in the classroom, but I love pedagogy. It is fulfilling to witness people learn and see how learning methods work. If technology can help me do more in pedagogy, I will gladly welcome that technology.

Information technology provides not just add-on or peripheral tools. It enables alternative learning set-ups, an essential requirement for education to continue. It inspires professional educators to make fundamental shifts in their roles and relationships with technology-literate students. Teachers can no longer be the sole knowledge expert and authority figure, but teachers can guide students in choosing

good information sites and materials. The real challenge of this time is information overload. The mind takes time to process. Learners still need guidance. Some could churn out information without much thought. Some are careful and deliberate but too slow. Thus, teachers need to integrate technology as part of everyday instruction as it is now part of everyday life.

Blended Education

Online learning is a necessary feature of the present school system. It will always be a part of the new normal, beyond the lockdown. Technology will now form part of the individual learner's context. We cannot insist on books, pens, and notebooks as the only basics. We have to overcome the fear of technology or technophobia. We also cannot encourage overemphasis on technology or techno mania. While online learning is oversold due to the lockdown and the required social distancing, face-to-face classes are still sought and missed. Beyond the pandemic, I think blended learning is where we are going to end up. Providing online content delivery, allowing online interaction among students, and managing online assessment can be more effective and can save money. However, learners still need hands-on and face-to-face learning because learners are basically social. They enjoy being with one another when they are allowed to engage in talking and solving problems together. One can do some learning online but cannot do everything online.

Not all schools will have the same learning platform. And not all students will have access to the same generation of gadgets. Some schools are advanced and technologically rich. Other schools cannot afford the most recent innovations. There is a want for updated technology in most classrooms and in every student and teacher's hand because it is the paper and pen of our time. More than ever, appropriate learning set-ups are required for those encountering technical and economic hurdles. Besides today's challenge of connectivity is keeping up with the constant upgrading of computers and laptops. Students equipped with the necessary gadgets to participate in a school's learning management system will have the chance to realize themselves. They can work efficiently even in the distance education process. However, those students who cannot afford to buy the updated gadgets remain disadvantaged in the new set up. Much worse, some schools have already closed. Let us continue to invest in developing flexible education for all. There are now more barriers that will keep young people from pursuing education.

Continuing Learning

We have to keep up with the changing times. Old habits must be shed off to remain relevant and helpful. There is a need to reset and restructure our mindset. We need to welcome the new realities but at the same time go back to the basics; among them is learning to be resilient. We need to be creative and innovative to assess our education and make it more accessible. We need to re-examine our education to have a new view, a new perspective, a new breadth of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of education. We need to re-appropriate our work for it to remain self-fulfilling (2020).

There is more to learn from individual experiences in teaching and learning. Writing our stories will contribute to the evolving public conversation and professional

debate among colleagues on the future of school education. There is a need for collaboration and engagement among faculty members in all levels of education. We also have opportunities to use technology to help teachers do more with less. Sharing one's best practices and worst challenges will definitely help improve our common understanding of fully online courses, face-to-face classes, and blended learning. Exchanges among colleagues promote improvement in teaching. Sharing one's education philosophy will surely make education more academic, practical, and useful to all learners. More than just philosophical discussion, peers and colleagues can help in critiquing the work that would benefit the individual through rational discourse.

Whether it is fully online classes, face-to-face classes, or blended learning classes, education must go on. Education is a shared responsibility and a lifelong process. Educators are tasked to contribute by innovating and creating techniques in teaching and learning. Educational technology can be a beautiful tool. It can be a good servant but a dangerous and controlling master if one becomes dependent on it without thinking. For educators, what matters, after all, is the learner, both the teacher and the student. The wise use of technology's heart and soul will allow the learners to discover educational opportunities and enjoy more learning experiences.

Final Remarks

The ancient thinkers' views on education and learning, like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, are worth remembering. We need to continue to wonder, as Socrates would say, wonder is the beginning of wisdom. To discover wisdom, one has to know thyself. That requires examining one's life, and that means starting with the self. Knowing oneself is the beginning of all wisdom. After all, the beginning is the most important part of the work, according to Plato. The manner in which education starts will determine a man's future life. We have to put our whole being into teaching as we consider the learner's whole being. Aristotle reminds us that educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.

It is through acting and re-appropriating all our teaching practices that teachers will remain relevant. Socrates' realization still rings true today, "I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think." Blending the basic teaching tenets with the latest and best technology will continuously improve education and make it practical and palatable for the learners. As an American educator, Laura Arrilaga-Andreessen, noted, "As technology changes the way we communicate, connect, create, consume and innovate, it is democratizing access to opportunity. Education is no exception."

References

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