Online Learning Issues and Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study at a Private University College

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of the world's daily activities since it was officially declared as a pandemic at the beginning of 2020 by WHO. As a result, the term new normal has been coined for all daily activities including teaching and learning process. From face to face interaction, the new normal approach has forced all teaching learning process to go online. Even though this approach is not new but it is now being practiced more rigorously as it is deemed the only approach available and most practical to prevent the virus from spreading even more. Since it is now being practiced more rigorously there will definitely be issues and challenges as a result. This study explored those issues and challenges faced by the students in the process. The responses for this study were collected using a questionnaire on google form shared on WhatsApp application among the students at a private university college and 370 data were analyzed. It was found that the majority of the respondents 36.2% stated that they had difficulties in learning online and another 37% stressed that the access to the internet was an issue to them. In addition, the speed of the downloading of materials and videos are also a problem. Therefore, efforts have to be made to meet the students' expectation when implementing the online teaching and learning system.*

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1. Introduction

The world has been plagued with COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of the year 2020 unexpectedly starting from a few cases from Wuhan, China spreading into a pandemic throughout the globe known as Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCov) (WHO, 2020).

The pandemic impact has been so devastating that it has brought the world to a state-of-paralyses. Since no vaccine has been created to stop the spreading of the virus, WHO has stressed that the best cure to fight this pandemic until a vaccine is found would be social distancing. Another effort taken to further keep the virus under controlled, governments around the world start take extreme pre-caution by implementing the lockdown (Gonzalez et al, 2020). This is seen as the most effective way to fight the virus. Some countries implemented the lockdown for three months like Wuhan and others depending on the seriousness of the pandemic faced by the country.

Since it has been the most effective way to control the pandemic, the Malaysian government took the same measure by announcing the implementation of the MCO (Movement Controlled Order) on the 18 March to date this article is written with RMCO (Recovery Controlled Movement Order).

The implementation labeled as the new norm has impacted the daily lives of all Malaysian including tertiary level students where they are not allowed to return to their universities as all the universities were all closed from operation until they will be fully opened in October 2020 (Malaysia Kini.com, 2020).

Even though the universities will be fully opened and operational yet the teaching and learning will still be conducted online for the universities as the number of active cases is still rising and this has force the MCO to be extended furthermore. As a result online teaching is going to be best available option.

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new norm for the teaching learning process to embrace. Unlike being the H1N1 breakout, only a few universities took the measures of going online for the teaching and learning process (Meyer & Wilson, 2011).

With the lockdown the administration of all the universities around the world would have to embrace online teaching as the main delivery medium to teach the students. In reality this new norm will definitely pose new administrative and pedagogical issues to the university's administrators and lecturers. An academic staff has only a short period of time to critically engage in the theory, pedagogical reasoning and learning design associated with online and distance learning (Cornock, 2020).

If the administrators and lecturers are posed to face problems in embracing this new norm, more is the expected from the main focus of the process itself that is the students. Ever since the CMO introduction, students have to brace for a totally different learning environment that is online and it has to be done at their respective location.

It is important to provide an efficient learning support system to make sure such endeavor succeed as stated by Sang et al. (2011) support for student learning is the key element in optimizing students' learning experiences in any learning environment.

Research Objectives

Since the requirement of online teaching and learning has to be implemented at its fullest capacity, the research focus on exploring the issues and challenges face by the students in embracing the new online teaching and learning norm.

The main areas of focus are their experience and their preferences on the online teaching and learning itself. A part from that the acceptation of the overall online learning concept, the learning material, the learning platforms and also the overall experience of online teaching and learning are being assessed.

Research Questions
1. What is the students' overall experience on students online teaching and learning?
2. What are the students' preferences in making online learning more meaningful?
3. Is the online teaching and learning concept being received well by the students compared to conventional teaching and learning?

2. Literature Review

Online and offline sources are flooded with articles, papers and studies about effectiveness of e-learning. But considering the scope and usefulness of the topic, there is less research on analysing the applicability or suitability of e-learning for the students.

There are gaps in the existing researches which may be covered through involvement of the views of the students and analysing the effectiveness of e-learning with respect to adding value to the lives of the students instead of focussing on just the technological aspects of it.

Online learning has become popular because of its potential for providing more flexible access to content and instruction at any time, from any place. It is imperative that the researchers consider, and examine the efficacy of online learning in educating students. Online learning has become popular because of its potential for providing more flexible access to content and instruction at any time, from any place. It is imperative that the researchers consider, and examine the efficacy of online learning in educating students.

In higher education, e-learning is gaining more and more impact, especially in the format of blended learning, and this new kind of traditional teaching and learning can be practiced in many ways. Several studies have compared face to-face teaching to online learning and/or blended learning in order to try to define which of the formats provides, e.g., the highest learning outcome, creates the most satisfied students or has the highest rate of course completion. However, these studies often show that teaching and learning are influenced by more than teaching format alone. Many factors play significant roles, and this literature review will look further into some of them.

The findings from the research papers included in the review show that among the many factors some seem to dominate more: educator presence in online settings, interactions between students, teachers and content, and designed connections between online and offline activities as well as between campus-related and practice-related activities.

As for the students, research indicates that a number of factors influence their learning experience in e learning/blended/online courses. The factors that are highlighted by the literature reviewed to be of specific importance for professional education students' learning experience and their learner identity include the presence of appropriate teaching and learning spaces online as well as off-line and the presence of engaging and meaningful learning communities that support the students' social relations.

An effective online teaching and learning is subject to the development of a student presence that enhances supportive and productive interactions that mediate the learning process across the presences.

The impact of online learning programs, approaches, or specific resources as tools to enhance the effectiveness of issues connected to the teaching-learning process, particularly from the

perspective of teachers, student teachers and teacher educators' perceptions or experiences (Carmen and Maris, 2020).

The ability of learners and teachers to interact, collaborate and build relationships with other members was a source of satisfaction for students (Biasuttie 2011 Biasuttie, M. 2011). The interactions among peers and educators were key to promote collaboration and relationships but not enough to ensure the establishment of a social presence (Mumford and Dikilitaş 2020).

The connectedness of participants, their affective and effective responses to one another, and their interactions through sharing their ideas enhanced a social presence (Jones and Ryan 2014). Moreover, the creation of supportive learning environments and learning communities characterized by high levels of social presence were the result of strong collaboration, interactivity, mutual respect and interdependence (Cullen, Kullman, and Wild 2013) as well as shared values (Holmes 2013). These spaces provided emotional support, helped alleviate feelings of isolation (Baker and Watson 2014) and increased confidence and enthusiasm for work (DeWert, Babinski, and Jones 2003).

3. Methodology

The main focus of the research was to determine the challenges faced by the students engaging on online learning practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research samples were students from a private university college affected by the spread of pandemic which has forced the online learning approached to be applied.

The questionnaire was shared to the respondents through Google form and a total of 371 students responded to the Google form shared on WhatsApp.

The questionnaire was divided into four (4) sections which are Section A for demographic, Section B for online learning perception among the respondents, Section C is the students' opinion on the actual online learning process and lastly, Section D on the respondents on the preferred learning format.

With the four (4) section questionnaire, it was hope that the research will capture the overall reaction from the respondents on their experience of the subject understudy which is the online learning activity applied during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Depending on the question, some items in the questionnaire required the respondents to label the respond while some required the respondents to grade the level using Likert Scale.

Since the research focused on determining the challenges faced by the students in an online learning approach, the data analysis was never aimed at being too deep into inferential analysis rather just presenting the frequency analysis of each item in the questionnaire to determine the degree of the seriousness of each item.

4. Result

From the demographic, 376 respondents who responded to the online Google form, there are 92 male and 279 female. This made up 24.9% male and 75.4% female.

The respondents come from various area of studies ranging from humanities, business management to computer science and professional studies. They come from different semesters ranging from semester 1 to semester 8.

Students' Online Perception
There are three (3) items for this section. They aimed to direct the respondents' perception of online learning. Respondents were given the choice to select the appropriate respond from the list provided from the three (3) items. Item 1 asked the respondents' view or opinion on the greatest benefits of online learning.

From a list of four (4) possible benefits listed most respondents stated that "no travelling" required as the greatest benefit. A total of 219 respondents ticked this as the greatest benefit. This is actually the main philosophy of online learning. Teaching and learning is assessable anytime, anywhere. Once there is no travelling required, the respondents stated that they managed to save their time in learning process. This is followed by convenience and lastly, the respondents stated as the time has come for the teaching and learning to go online due to the pandemic where minimizing ones' movement by staying home is the best solution to break the virus chain.

On the drawback point of view, the respondents stated that it was difficult to understand what is being taught as the main drawback. This could be an indicator that the respondents still prefer face-to-face delivery if given a choice. This is supported by the connectivity issue as being the second biggest drawbacks of the online learning process. This could be due to the location of the respondents as some of them are at home located in the rural areas where internet accessibility is still an infrastructure which has not been fully developed.

Being at home due to MCO with connectivity problems stem the third biggest drawback that was the difficulty to work in a group to complete the group assignment. Since all of them are at home at a different location, that justifies the choice of the third biggest drawback.

Other drawbacks expressed by the respondents among others; are self-discipline, where they have to discipline themselves to follow the online lecture, followed by more additional work needs to be done on their own as they can never get together with their group-mate.

As the next drawback is the speed of the connection. The first drawback was on the connectivity, where some respondents find it difficult to get connected to the internet, but this is more on the speed of the connection. If the speed is slow, the learning pace tends to be distracted and thus, will definitely affect the overall learning.

The learning materials uploaded for the online learning seems to be a drawback to the respondents. As some of the files are too big and cannot be uploaded and downloaded. They need to be simplified, hence, the general idea of the lecture could be distorted leading to difficulty to understand them.

Those are the major drawbacks chosen by the respondents from 11 items. Items which are not mentioned here did not get too many responses from the respondents and are therefore, regarded as not too major.

The last item for this section was the experience the respondents have while involving in an online lecture/class. Most of the respondents stated that it was very complicated and difficult

followed by it is troublesome. These seem to correspond to the major drawback stressed by the respondents as stated earlier. Even though most respondents felt that it was complicated, difficult and troublesome, some of them stated that the whole online learning experience has been interesting to them despite all the challenges they faced.

Students' Opinion
Section C of the questionnaire illicit the respondents' opinion on the online learning concept. There are nine (9) items under this section.

For this section, most of the respondents felt that online learning was not more effective compared to the conventional approach. From the total respondents, 185 (49%) fall under the category of disagree (13.9%) while 140 (37%) were indecisive whether online teaching is better or otherwise compared to conventional teaching. While the rest think it is more effective than conventional approach. Therefore, most of the respondents felt that online learning is not effective compared to conventional approach. This is supported by other items under this construct where out of 371 respondents, 186 disagreed that online learning is somewhat more effective than conventional approach followed by 211 responded disagreed that online learning is equally effective to conventional approach.

The statement of online approach does not applied to the students is further strengthen by the items where 219 respondents stated that online learning was less effective compared to conventional approach. On the whole, the respondents do not think that online learning is better or more effective than conventional approach in helping them to learn.

One possible reasons for this may probably be the respondents felt that online learning is not convenient for them to learn with 136 respondents stated that to them, online learning fails to meet the individual learning needs and does not offer better classroom communication. This is evident from 376 respondents, 168 stated that it does not meet the individual learning needs and 260 stated that it does not offer better classroom communication.

On top of that 199 respondents stated that online learning does not foster good communication between students and lectures. This statement is further supported by the following item, where 210 respondents stressed that online learning does not promote greater student participation and interaction.

Based on this construct, it could be concluded that the majority of the respondents do not favor online learning as an alternative to conventional approach.

Type of Learning Preferred by Students
Section D is focused on the type of classroom format that respondents preferred. From a total of 376 respondents, 261 stated that they still prefer the regular classroom setting (conventional setting). On top of that if it were to be an online class, 185 preferred delay or pre-recorded or asynchronous lecture. From the two statements, respondents actually preferred a combination of both method for more effective learning experience to them. 214 respondents agreed with this statement.

171 respondents stated that they prefer online class just for discussion and tutorial only yet about half (50%) of the respondent prefer to complete their coursework online. Hence, respondents were indecisive on the completing of the coursework point of view, as some tasks are best suited for online while some still require conventional approach. Even though most of

the respondents (217) tend to have a negative perception on the online learning, yet they praised their lecturers as the lecturers are very helpful in making the online experience beneficial.

As far as the access to learning materials is concerned, the normal curve shows a normal distribution on both ends with most respondents stated not sure. The same respond was recorded for the instruction provided where they disagree and the agree are distributed normally on the curve with the "uncertain/not sure" recorded the highest.

The same pattern is witness for the mixture of the online platform used. Respondents recorded another similar normal curve for this. Even though the respondents (191) find it confusing in assessing the content and the platform, yet again, they overwhelmingly agreed that their lecturers are able to handle the online lectures effectively.

On the whole, what can be summarized for the preferred learning format is that the respondent would still prefer the conventional approach, and if, it needs to be online, it cannot be a totally online lecture as they preferred face-to-face more and asynchronous activities more.

On a more general opinion, the respondents stated that they are satisfied with the online learning even though there are cons to the practice and they do agree that online classes do require a strong sense of discipline in them to keep learning and they prefer online examination compared to the conventional examination.

5. Conclusion

Based on the data analysed, it could be concluded that on the whole, the respondents do not favor the online learning approach as most of them recorded "unfavorable" responses in their feedback. Even though such attitude is being observed, yet, this does not mean they rejected the idea of online learning totally. So the good points of such practice are also recorded.

The study was carried out at the beginning of the pandemic and people are still getting used to the new normal practice including the teaching and learning process. Even though before the pandemic online classes are being conducted, they are not conducted at a full swing where everything is done online.

This tends to create a little discomfort among the respondents where they are still at a cooling off period at adapting to the new normal. As time goes by, with the MCO has been exercised for almost a year now, less complaint or dissatisfaction from the students being recorded on social media.

Online learning is here to stay because it is what technologies do. Its future lies among the students and lecturers in due time. Students and lecturers have to learn to be more efficient and effective in its usage, and the government has to provide better infrastructure, connectivity, access and usability for the public to use not only in banking transaction, e-government, but it has also change the way our children learn. Change is dynamic, technology opens the window to a better future for the young generations.

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