

ZOOM IN ON LIS EDUCATION: TRANSCENDING OBSTACLES AND MOVING FORWARD POST-PANDEMIC

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Dr. Kasdi Subagyono, General Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Indonesia, Dr. Abdul Basit, Head of Indonesian Center for Agricultural Library and Technology Dissemination, my fellow keynote speaker Ms. Catherin Lavelle—Welch also the President-Elect of Special Libraires Association, dear organizers and reviewers, participants, good morning. Special greetings to some participants coming from the Philippines, Magandang umaga! Which in Bahasa means Selamat pagi! I would like to thank Dr. Bambang Winarko for this opportunity to be one of your keynote speakers in this International Conference on Library and Information Science and I would also like to congratulate the Agricultural Library and Technology Dissemination for organizing and making this conference happen despite the challenges we are facing now. I would also like to thank Google Maps for making it possible to visit Bogor. (It would have been better if I were there with you and experience your warm hospitality and partake in your sumptuous banquet.)

More than a year ago, community quarantines were enforced in many parts of the world to mitigate the spread of the virus. Schools and higher education institutions have been greatly impacted with the situation as most have had no experience with online or distance education let alone how to survive a pandemic. Library and information science schools were not spared of such predicament despite the fact that we deal with information technology. While some LIS schools have had experience with online or distance education, some were just starting, others have not considered this at all.

We were not prepared. We were fighting to survive. It was not easy to just shift gears from face to face learning to online learning. We were caring for family members who got sick and we could hardly manage our time to include teaching and/or addressing school requirements on top of household, logistical, financial, as well as our mental and physical health concerns. Since the quarantine restrictions were enforced mid-March of last year, most LIS schools operating on a July were toward the end of their semesters. For some, they were just in the middle of their semester, like in our case at the UP School of Library and Information Studies. As such, we had to make the decision whether to proceed with the semester or otherwise considering that faculty and students alike were not properly geared toward remote learning. Our syllabi was planned on a face to face modality and shifting to online learning does not mean merely holding classes and transferring it to an online video conferencing application. We had many factors to consider, and these included technological capabilities of both teachers

and students, learning outcomes to be fulfilled, and health and safety of the faculty, staff, and students. You see, the Internet connectivity in the Philippines is one of the slowest. Not all of our students and faculty members have excellent internet connections in their homes, dorms, and/or boarding houses. Our homes were not prepared for remote learning. How do you expect a typical middle-class family of 5 or six, all at home, working or schooling all at the same time, from 8am to 5pm? My laptop then was running on Intel Celeron, while it was working for my word processing, email, Netflix, Facebook, but it wasn't prepared for MS Teams, Zoom, and presenting slides over zoom or MS Teams. My case wasn't as dire because there were those who don't have any device to connect to the internet as was the case for some students who only had internet access in campus and use computers in the library or in our laboratories. And we couldn't bear to live with the thought of proceeding with the semester without everyone on board. We had an academic freeze for about two months.

The academic freeze in the university gave us some time to re-think about the whole scenario of remote learning. We had so many questions from pedagogical, to technical, and even financial concerns. How can we teach indexing, abstracting, as well as cataloging and classification online? How can we measure the learning of our students in the programming, database management, and other ICT courses? How can students engage in practicum or internship in a remote learning set-up? How can we conduct research and data gathering for our research as faculty members and the research of our students? How can we proceed with our classes knowing that we have poor internet connection? How can we enable all our students to proceed with the semester knowing full well their varying capabilities and capacities? How can we help students who do not have devices and internet connectivity? These were mind boggling questions on top of the health and safety concerns: Do we have mass testing? Where can we avail of health services? What should I do when I get symptoms? How can we get food or go to where we need to go? But that wasn't enough, our government leaders don't seem to care! And that's where I have to stop before I say something else outside the parameters of my speech.

We took a step back and dealt with what we could deal with at that time. We started learning the ropes we determined what video conferencing applications we can use and how we use these in class. As many of our fellow teachers out there, we tried almost everything and anything that was free (most definitely), was hassle free meaning easy to use, and those with free extra minutes. We used what was available – Facebook messenger, Facebook groups, Facebook video calls, Viber, Skype, and then we learned how to zoom, google meet, MS Teams, etc. We didn't have time for baby steps as we trying to cram what was left of the semester and for all we know it, we were already conducting webinars. It wasn't easy, but we were fortunate to have with us fellow faculty members who were adept with the use of technology.

Our university organized webinars and other learning fora to equip the faculty members on how to proceed with remote learning. While we had a virtual learning environment, most of us used this as depository of our class readings, and submission bin for requirements. We had to rethink of how we used the virtual learning environment and relearn the modules available to us. We also had to go back to our syllabi and restructure them, guided by the questions – what are the items here that the students need to know? How much time do we need to spend for each topic in a remote setting? How can we teach these items in an online environment? How can we teach these items to those who do not have any computer or internet connectivity? We had to prioritize the items in our syllabi and we had to think of at least three scenarios for our classes – for those who have computers and good internet connectivity; for those who have devices whether computer or mobile devices but may be shared with others in their household and have intermittent internet connectivity; and those who do not have any computer or mobile phone and internet connection.

We thought of ways of delivering our lessons and conducting evaluation and assessment considering these scenarios. We prepared course packs to include the course outline, lessons, resources, assessment activities and other requirements and prepared these for both online and printed modes. These course packs are mainly self-instructional modules and teachers are there to facilitate learning whether in the online or offline environments. As they are self-instructional, these should also be self-sufficient, and should have all the necessary reading materials, books chapters, articles, that the students need to fulfill the learning objectives of the course. We had to coordinate with our librarians on how to access the resources we needed and they gladly obliged. They sourced out open access sources that can be alternatives to copyrighted materials and sought ways of providing library service for all our students and faculty members in need.

We did this at the UP SLIS and we had another session of redesigning LIS syllabi with our fellow LIS faculty members across LIS schools in the Philippines, who had similar predicaments as we had. This was mandated by the Commission and Higher Education so that we can proceed with the incoming academic year in a Flexible Learning mode. In its memorandum, CHED defines Flexible learning as: *a pedagogical approach allowing flexibility of time, place, and audience, including but not solely focused on the use of technology. Although it commonly uses the delivery methods of distance education and facilities of education technology, this may vary depending on the level of digital literacy, and approaches.* Flexible learning has its learners as the center of this approach, so we determined the needs and sentiments of our students and used these as one of the parameters in our re-design of the LIS syllabi.

Sharing our stories with each other somehow made the tasks ahead little less daunting. We all had to shift to remote learning as there was no way we could proceed with an in-

classroom set-up. Some of the LIS schools had virtual learning environments but some didn't. While waiting for their school administration to set up the VLEs, they resorted to what was readily available and free of course. We also determined which areas we need to strengthen ourselves with and we conducted webinars for our fellow LIS teachers to prepare for the coming academic year.

The academic year 2020-2021 did not go without a hitch even if we had just enough time to prepare our course packs. Internet connection was still a problem, along with home set-up. When everyone at home goes to work or school online, the house either gets too silent or too noisy. Devices were also an issue, that even when we were able to source out benefactors, we could not acquire laptops because of the high demand for these. Everyone needed one smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer and we couldn't find a store that has the right device at the right price. As for online learning environments and video conferencing software, it was a steep learning curve for everyone. Think about your first online meeting as an attendee, or your first online meeting as the host and presenter, was it successful or was it a cringe moment? A year after and I still forget to mute my microphone and I am still discovering so many things in relation to online presentation. I learned a new trick just now actually.

The problems we faced in the Philippines were not far from other Southeast Asian country. We shared the same issues of not having the proper digital infrastructure to enable fast internet connectivity. In the article of Balakrishnan that looked into the attempts of four Southeast Asian countries to mitigate learning loss due to COVID 19 found that "the challenges faced by the countries, [specifically Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand] are not unique. The communities on the fringes of societies are the ones greatly affected by the pandemic in terms of education." While the city centers are connected to the internet, the rural areas are barely connected. The pandemic not only exposed the issues in our health care systems but also exposed the digital divide. Jalli wrote an article in March of 2020, when schools were starting to move to online platforms, and she said that while Kuala Lumpur has high internet speed, this could not be said for those in East Malaysia. While our response in the Philippines was to implement a flexible learning modality instead of the fully online arrangement, its implementation was easier said than done. The quarantine restricted much of the movement from procuring the materials needed for printing to collating and delivering these to recipients.

Resilience

A year after and we look back at what we have conquered. Somehow we have managed to transcend our difficulties despite obstacles. For universities in the Philippines, they have provided the necessary administrative, technical, financial, and logistical support for faculty members and students. In our case, we received some allowance for internet subscription, financial assistance and loans were available for faculty members, and

webinars for navigating the various online resource that we had were also available. We also communicated regularly with our colleagues and staff and made it a point to be updated with each other, check up on one another just to make sure that they are ok.

As teachers, we made sure that we were available for our students, for our case, we conducted at least one online meeting with our students per semester like a general assembly of students. We normally have one at the beginning of each semester when we had our face to face classes and this was dubbed Kapihan with the Dean or Coffee with the dean where we serve coffee and cookies for those attending. We were available in formal channels such as our official email but we are also available on facebook messenger or viber. Some of us have Slack channels or the more adventurous ones have Discord, Twitch, and others.

At the UPSLIS, the most important decision we made was to accept the fact that given the limitations at the time, we couldn't make remote learning at par with what we had during face to face sessions. Our ICT courses were the hardest hit because most of these needed lecture and hands on sessions in the computer laboratory setting. But adjustments had to be made and expectations managed. Our ICT faculty members sought out free and open access software, learning materials, and learning opportunities. Our mantra of course was "Do not re-invent the wheel. If it is there and available, use it." And acknowledge those who have made it available.

Teaching cataloging and classification is also daunting. In the face to face setting, we have the manuals with us and we still teach our students to leaf through these and select the best subject heading and classification. While we have access to the Library of Congress Classification online, we do not have access on a per student basis which made it a bit difficult. Also, our LC online access was within the network of the university only. So the only way was to get excerpts from DDC, Sears List, LCC, and LCSH to correspond to the exercises for our students.

Our internship courses which required students to be on a library or information center setting to learn hands on also suffered some setbacks. Students were not allowed to go out and libraries were also closed so we thought of ways on how to enable them to pursue internship. Our college library accommodated some students to work online. They were tasked to create infographics, source out open access materials for specific LIS courses, compiled and re-packaged these as well. They were also tasked to create orientation materials on how to use or access our online resources. Some were given research assistant work and some were given database management work all in an online or remote setting. While limited, these were still learning opportunities for our students.

The other concern we had was with respect to our research classes. Our students are required to complete a research study as a requirement for graduation and most researches necessitates going to sectors of communities to gather data which of course

was not allowed. Some were able to complete their data gathering using online surveys and online interviews, but some had to revise their methods entirely. During the iFederation meeting sometime in March 2021, reports from the iSchools sector indicated that iSchool members also made revisions in their research requirements because of the quarantine restrictions. Even our North American and European counterparts have made adjustments in their research requirements because going to the field for data gathering is definitely a health protocol violation. The iFederation is an informal collaboration of information related organizations and for now it is composed of iSchools, Association of Library and Information Science Education or ALISE, and Association for Information Science and Technology or ASIS&T.

We sourced out learning opportunities for ourselves, for our students, and our fellow LIS teachers. I couldn't count the many webinars and online conferences that I have attended. IFLA has hosted several webinars aside from the World Library Information Congress that was online. Many library organizations, associations, and societies brought their meetings, events, workshops, and webinars online. Some were for a fee but mostly these were free. We just had to deal with the time difference.

The UP SLIS also came out with several online learning events and hosted monthly webinars which we dubbed WebinarWednesdays and made these available for free. We have our own YouTube Channel and you can watch there episodes from our shows For the Record, Faculty Room, Digital Scholarship, and our other events. We have definitely made a strong online presence. We received a grant from the National Committee on LIS of the National Commission on Culture and the Arts and this grant enabled us to conduct online training for those handling school libraries in the public sector, and public libraries especially the ones in the provinces. We also conducted training for our fellow LIS teachers to train them for teaching in the flexible learning set-up.

Our students had difficulties adjusting to the new set-up. It was difficult to elicit responses from them during online classes via zoom or google meet. While these are not the same as face to face interaction, online games can light up the mood. Some students however found the arrangement better and were faring much better in terms of participation and output. There is no one size fits all model for learning and a key point that educators must not forget is that the learners are the center of this process. So we need to get to know our students and know what is best for them.

Moving Forward

We have learned from the past year of conducting remote learning and we have noted some concerns that we needed to address and improve. We also noted some methods or techniques

that worked and resolved to put them to good use. The flexible learning modality is here to stay, as our Chair for the Commission on Higher Education said. This is met with mixed reactions from the education sector but I would second him. The flexible learning, when implemented properly, is helpful for students and faculty members alike. It addresses inequalities and believe it or not, traffic and transportation. We are in a time of paradigm shift. We can't go back to how we were exactly like before and the only way to move forward is to accept that this is so.

How can we move forward? As situations and circumstances differ from one country or one institution to another I have no definite guide or list of things to do that I myself have constructed. However, let me direct you to UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education in their Nine ideas for public action. These were formulated because COVID 19 has brought to light weaknesses and vulnerabilities in education such as digital divide, inequalities, and teacher capabilities. *But while these difficulties were realized, there were also positive outcomes that were realized such as solidarity, resilience, resourcefulness, dedication, and creativity.*

First is a call for a strengthened public commitment to education as a common good. Like public health, education is for all. Our remote learning arrangements should include those without devices and internet connections. We should device learning materials and learning plans for them as well. Our stance should be “No man left behind.”

Second is a call for an expanded understanding of the right to education and this right extends to learners of all ages. Given the learning modalities we have now, it should not be difficult to welcome all those who are able and willing to learn or go back to school despite their circumstances. Age should not be a hindrance.

Third is a call to value the professional expertise of teachers and create conditions that give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively. The teachers have made plenty of sacrifices in this shift to remote learning. We have all been into a crash course mode – learning the intricacies of video conferencing software, enabling student learning and participation in online mode, using learning management systems, and teaching others how to use these as well. These were not easy times for teachers and this is not the time to blame them for when we feel that we are not learning enough. Instead, we cooperate or collaborate with them.

The fourth is a call to prioritize the participation of students and young people to co-construct with them the change they wish to see. As the main stakeholder of the education sector, their voices should be heard as they have experienced the travails of remote learning first hand. While we, as educators, may think we know what is best for them, we should talk to them and listen to what they have to say that may validate what we know or change this for the better.

The fifth is a call to protect and transform the school as a separate space-time, specific and different from home and other spaces of learning, where there is as much growth

and expansion of social understanding as there is acquisition of skills competencies and knowledge. With the shift to remote learning, some have realized that they can “learn” outside the school setting and that they may not need to go to school at all. However, even when we are facing a paradigm shift from traditional classroom setting to hybrid forms of teaching, we should realize that what we learn from “school” is different from what we learn “outside school” that these two settings are different, and both are equally important areas of learning. We should not undermine the efforts that our school teachers put in the development of remote learning modules for the best interests of the learners were considered when these were made.

The sixth is a call for the development and distribution of open educational resources and open platforms. The use of open educational resources addresses the inequalities that have surfaced. Also, teachers should not be dependent on the materials created by public companies which are very costly. The move to remote learning should not be dominated by technology companies and their products.

The seventh is a call to prioritize scientific literacy to ensure a curriculum with strong humanistic objectives that explores the relationship between fact and knowledge and is capable of leading students to understand and situate themselves in a complex world. We have seen a spread of misinformation in so many aspects – from entertainment, to health, to politics, etc. and being caught in the crossfire of misinformation is detrimental to us all. The call to prioritize scientific literacy along with developing and enhancing information and digital literacies can mitigate the spread of misinformation. As information professionals this is our contribution to the future of education.

The eight is a call to mobilize around the protection of public education and its financing. Privatizing education institutions and budget cuts to the education sector will increase the inequalities in learning, and we can’t let this happen.

The ninth is a call to commit to a global solidarity that does not accept current levels of inequality. We need to revitalize international cooperation and global solidarity with empathy and an appreciation of our common humanity at the core. Regardless of race, education, gender, or age, the pandemic has affected us and instead of building walls of segregation, we must break them down, and recognize that we are all in this together.

With this, I end my speech, and I hope you were able to learn from this as

I have. Terima kasih!

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