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THE NEW NORMAL : Creating a Pleasant Virtual Communication

Learning in the New Normal: Positive convergence of technology, quality, and sustainability

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All of us are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic that caused disruptions in education, healthcare, economy, and travels. Likewise, it is impacting the way we live, study, work, think, and interact. During this global crisis, we consider the health and well-being of people as most important. In fact, the medical doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals and clinicians who are front liners in the fight against the corona virus are now lauded as the new heroes in the coronial era. Health education and mental health issues are crucial and relevant today as we navigate adverse situations, manage stress, cope with loss of jobs and loved ones, and deal with the quarantine fatigue.

In the education sector, online learning has catapulted into the forefront due to the restriction of face-to-face classes. Learning modalities have changed and education is transforming into the new normal. The quality and sustainability of technology-enabled learning is a major point of discussion. School leaders, policy makers, teachers, students, and parents, are all trying to make sense out of this unprecedented situation that needs unconventional wisdom. Education in this new normal is challenging. Hopefully, we can move forward with open minds, positive perspectives, and steadfast faith that we can make it.

Communication is very important and vital during this pandemic. We need to communicate clearly, positively, and effectively. In the digital platform of teaching and learning, the teacher needs to be creative and innovative in communicating, to get the interest and attention of the students, thus, make the learning process more engaging and interactive.

Learning in the new normal is full of challenges, particularly in terms of: a) quality of content, delivery and assessment of online learning; b) cost of investment in technology and digital infrastructure; c) lack of internet connectivity and electronic gadgets, and the digital divide issue; d) data privacy concerns and cybersecurity; e) training and up-skilling of the digital skills of teachers, staff and students, and teaching strategies in the new normal; f) financial constraints for salaries and school operations especially with decrease in enrolment; g) safety and mental health issues of students and employees; h) physical and geographical restrictions and health protocols; i) internship, on-the-job training, clinical immersion and laboratory classes; and j) industry linkages and employability of graduates.

Educators in the new normal need to communicate and exemplify the following:

- a. Positive disposition and mindset that will help us to adjust to the disruptions, manage stress, and take care of our physical and mental health and well-being
- b. Resilient attitude and skills to easily adapt to changes, cope with difficult situations, and bounce back amid setbacks
- c. Agile approach in tasks and responsibilities that deliver efficient, effective, prompt, value-added and high impact results and services
- d. Integral framework of transformative education anchored on quality teaching and learning, technological solutions, and sustainable development for a better future
- e. Strategic management and leadership founded on connectivity to the institutional vision-mission, promote students' and employees' welfare, responsive to societal needs, and supportive of national and global peace and unity
- f. Empathy and compassion towards the teachers, students, parents, healthcare front liners, law enforcers, workers, and all those who are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

The education sector is tremendously affected and disrupted by the pandemic and so we need to re-think, re-imagine, and re-design our learning model, to come up with something that would be more adaptive to the transforming world today and tomorrow. The educational landscape is changing and re-shaping, and so we need to be creative, resilient, smart and innovative. Remote teaching and online learning in the new normal can communicate a holistic and integral learning model that is effective and doable. Learning in the new normal calls for a new way of teaching and communicating using digital platforms of the Learning Management System (LMS), videoconferencing, teleconferencing, and any other modalities of technology-enabled learning. We need to communicate what is essential and positive, and stimulate the thinking process of the students, to come up with an interactive, engaging, and effective virtual learning

In the new normal, the teaching and learning process revolves around three vital elements: Technology, Quality, and Sustainability.

Technology has truly revolutionized the delivery of education, especially when internet was introduced. The cutting-edge educational technologies in the 4IR can facilitate the effective delivery of the lesson through interactive, adaptive, independent, and immersive learning, and virtual simulations. During this pandemic, classes continue through online learning, the flexible modality of both synchronous and asynchronous learning, the blended and hybrid delivery to suit the context of the learners and reach out to those with limited or no internet connectivity.

With respect to teaching courses in Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Medical Technology, Midwifery, and other health-related programs, the laboratory courses and clinical immersion in the hospitals are discouraged due to the risk of the corona virus. It is difficult to communicate and explain to the students online without the specimen that they can see and touch. At St. Paul University Philippines (SPUP), for example, we use 3D simulations and virtual reality. We have subscribed to the Lecturio LMS for the students taking up Medicine, Nursing, and allied health sciences courses. Through the said learning platform, teachers and students may access an array of learning resources (video lectures), simulations (3D models), interactive assessments (quizzes), testing assets or test banks, and clinical/medical case scenarios for their academic engagement activities. For the laboratory experiments, SPUP subscribed to Labster with its virtual laboratories in the different science courses.

Quality is a vital component of technology-enabled learning, particularly the content and delivery, authentic assessment of learning outcomes, process management of operations, and quality assurance. The transition from the in-face to online learning revolves around the quality of teaching and learning process and outcomes. The students and teachers are adjusting to the virtual learning environment. Teachers have to establish good rapport with the students and empathize with the latter's state of mental and psychological

well-being. The quality of relationship between teachers and students can boost learning engagement. This global pandemic is causing a lot of stress to students and their parents. Likewise, the teachers and school administrators are pressured to ensure the quality of education in the online and flexible learning modalities. So, the quality of communication is important. The school leaders can inspire the teachers and students with caring words that communicate compassion, understanding, and willingness to help in these difficult times.

A prevailing concern today is sustainability. The schools are confronted with problems like low enrollment, losses and financial constraints, complaints of students about internet connectivity, teachers' lack of digital skills, expensive investment on technology, etc. School administrators and teachers are like walking on a tightrope during this pandemic, confronted with the uncertainty of the school re-opening, the availability of the vaccine for COVID-19, adjusting and adapting to the changing technological frontiers that require new skills, and observing health and safety protocols.

School leadership in a COVID VUCA world entails strategic resiliency, innovation, and sustainable development. To move forward, now more than ever, we need resiliency, strategy, courage, competence, openness and flexibility to adapt and adjust to the changes and disruptions going on, and learn to cope with inconvenience and difficulty. School leaders who display strategic resiliency would have the conviction and character to engage in reforms, paradigm shift, transition, transformation, and recovery effort. It is imperative to focus on sustainable development and innovation in order to survive and thrive in the present, and thus ensure that we would have a bright future. Education and training systems need to keep pace with the new demands of labor markets that are continually challenged by technological disruption, demographic change, shifting business models, and the evolving nature of work.

Let me share a Sustainable Quality-based, Technology-driven, Education (SQTE) framework which can be a useful guide for educators in the new normal and beyond. The SQTE is a positive convergence and integration of Quality pedagogy, Technology as a learning modality, and Sustainability through innovations and networking with stakeholders.

A holistic education must be anchored on the basic tenet of lifelong education which is seamless, borderless, and a continuing development of the full potentials of the human person in both formal and informal setting.

Sustainability is a primary consideration especially when we deal with enrollment, salaries of teachers & personnel, employability of graduates, administrative concerns, and the survival and sustainable development of the school during this pandemic and beyond. To be sustainable, the school must network with the stakeholders and be responsive to their needs in context, particularly with the students, teachers, parents, alumni, and the community where they belong. Also, we have to monitor the government policies and subsidies. We need to collaborate with partners in the academe and industry and match the skills of graduates with the demands of the labor market. School programs and endeavors must be aligned with the sustainable development goals (SDG) 2030 and the principles of education for sustainable development (ESD).

Sustainability would entail continuing innovations, specialization and niche programs, strong connectivity and interface with the industry and civil society, research collaboration with local and international partners in the academe and industry, care for people and environmental environment, and global citizenship education.

The Quality of education is most important. A learner-centered interdisciplinary approach tends to evoke more interest and engagement. The quality of teaching and learning in whatever modality is influenced by the mindset of the teacher and students. That's why, it is fundamental for the school to uphold its vision, mission, institutional goals and core values as embedded in the curriculum and instruction. This defines the unique quality and relevance of the school's educational value proposition which can be its differentiation factor as well. Intrinsic to quality would be training, research, the development of 21st century learning competencies, transformation and real-life application of knowledge and skills. Our contemporary education

is highly globalized, borderless and seamless, and we are moving fast into transnational education (TNE) and internationalization, therefore, the universal application of knowledge and skills is the way to go, transcending geographical locations and cultural differences. The universal design for learning (UDL) caters to all types of learners.

In the context of the primacy now of machine learning and the increasing automation of jobs in the industry and changing working models, then we need to future-proof the quality of education not only to focus on 21st century professional competencies and adeptness of 4IR technologies but also to enrich the quality of education with values, ethics and spirituality, soft skills, research, resiliency and creativity, problem-solving and solution fluency, and other qualities of the human person that would make us superior from the humanoid robots and smart machines which is the trend in the future. Technology is a tool that we can use in school to improve the quality of being human with the responsibility to uplift the quality of life and make the world better.

The digital platform of learning is dominant during this pandemic. With millennial learners, technology-enabled learning is the way to go. Since the labor market is fast changing due to new technologies, and the automation of jobs is displacing the traditional workforce, then we need to strengthen the soft skills as well as the hard skills of our graduates. Amid the hype on technology and machine learning, we need to enrich our curriculum and instruction with values, spirituality and work ethics, so that our students and graduates become more responsible, well-adjusted, productive, and caring towards people and the environment.

The impact of technology on learning is anchored on people engagement and mission-driven goals, quality and values embedded in the curriculum and instruction, and a sustainable roadmap of continuing innovations and lifelong learning towards better quality of life and work, today and tomorrow.

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