The Present and Future of Online Distance Learning: Trends and Challenges of Virtual Teachers

Yongzhi Huang, University of the Cordilleras, Philippines
Maria Lenore B. Barcenas, University of the Cordilleras, Philippines

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Abstract
In response to sustain quality education during pandemic and the need to address the needs of online distance learning, this research aims to investigate what are the trends and challenges virtual teachers experience after a year since remote learning has been implemented. This quantitative research was conducted through an adapted survey questionnaire most applicable to the study. The participants were Nursery to Grade 12 teachers of Baguio Patriotic High School. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling method. The teachers were asked about their experiences with online teaching, main challenges of switching to online/distance learning, support that they need and their opinion regarding schools fully reopening after COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that flexibility, innovation and a wide range of tools are what teachers pleasantly experienced about online/distance learning. However, keeping all pupils motivated and engaged was the main challenge for virtual teachers. With this, teachers need support and easy contact with experts, professional development and more free resources and tools from education technology companies. Teachers perceived that when schools fully reopen, online teaching will become integral to school practices. For support from the school, the teachers requested continuous technical training and education provide complete and adequate facilities including internet connection and lessen recorded video lessons. Awareness on the trends and challenges of online distance learning can be an eye opener to school administrators who are on the early stage of its implementation and can give appropriate support and help.

Keywords: Distance Online Learning, Online Teaching, Remote Learning, Trends, Challenges

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Introduction

Remote learning or distant learning has been the new normal for over a year now. The education sector is taking this opportunity to reshape the way children are being taught. One of the most significant changes is the promotion of flexible learning in which there are learning programs created based on the capacity of students, and schools.

On the first week of remote learning, students may understandably miss their friends in school. After a week or two, they may start to show fatigue and lose interest in most classes. They still may make good grades but may struggle in some subjects. Some may complain about how they are finding it difficult to grasp concepts and the teacher just can't make things easier for any of them. These may not be far from the Philippine experience. While some students in other parts of the world does not have to worry about a smart phone, a laptop or internet connection, students and their teachers face the same long-term challenges that remote or distance online learning presents.

A recent survey by the RAND Corporation (a nonprofit research company in the United States) has come up with the following findings:
1.   Learning has been slower for fully remote/ hybrid classes compared to in-person. This is because students fail to show up and/or fail to complete schoolwork. When students are not learning or performing in the pace expected, lessons would tend to go slower, and teachers need to put in more effort to get the students interested.
2.   There are students that are more likely to fall behind than others. The study found that schools that have students who qualified for free, had reduced-price lunch, and schools that had more students that were of color were more likely to offer remote learning than in-person learning. In turn, these students are less likely to have access to a laptop or a computer and internet services. There are also students who may be severely disabled and may experience poverty or homelessness – and online teachers are not equipped to handle them. (Schwartz, 2020)

We have to understand that most teachers were not really trained to teach online. They need support on how to adapt curriculum, how to motivate students, how to push them to excel academically, as well as how to assess if they are indeed learning. Most of all, we have to understand that in the face of the pandemic, teachers are also worried about their own health and their loved ones.

As time goes on, and with not seeing the end of the pandemic soon, we come face to face with the challenges of distance online learning. Guisinger (2020) stated in his article "Distance learning is a challenge because teaching and learning are complex. We all sense this, but the devil is in the details."

The purpose of this study is to create awareness on the trends and challenges we are facing as virtual teachers of K-12 students. Much of what we – teachers, students, as well as parents - are going through are practically new to us. While we are learning a lot, we are also making mistakes along the way.

This study also aims to come up with solutions on how to make our new processes work for us and our students in the face of our limitations. That while it is difficult, we believe that we can make virtual learning work for our students.

Methodology

The researchers used the quantitative descriptive research design to address the purpose of the study. The study aimed to provide trends and on-going challenges teachers engaged in distance online teaching were experiencing and what can be done about it.

Convenience sampling was used in this study. Twenty-seven participants (n=27) from Baguio Patriotic High School, a Filipino-Chinese private school, were asked to participate in this study. The 27 participants consisted of 11 males (n=11) and 16 females (n=16). Their ages ranges from 20 to more than fifty years old. Their number of years in teaching ranges from less than three years to more than twenty years. All of them finished Bachelor's Degree and two are Master's Degree holder. All of the participants were teaching in different grade levels and handled different subjects, from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12. Eighteen participants spent less than 10 hours per week in actual online teaching, eight spent 11-20 hours and only one participant spent more than 40 hours.

The instrument that was used for gathering data was a printed survey questionnaire. This study adapted the Survey on online and distance learning. This instrument was developed by School Education Gateway (2020). The questionnaire used was divided into two sections: (1) Background Information and (2) Opinions and Experiences in Distant Online Learning/Teaching. The background information section asked about the participant's personal information (name, age, gender, highest educational attainment, number of years in teaching in the current school, grade level, subject taught and number of hours spent weekly in actual online teaching). The second section consisted of six questions with multiple choices (except number 6 where they provide own answer):
1. Thinking of your school, which statement best describe teacher's experience with online distance learning?
2. As a teacher, what have you pleasantly experienced about online/distance learning?
3. In your opinion, what have been the main challenges for teachers in switching to online/distance learning? Choose up to five options.
4. What would most help teachers to support online learning? Choose up to three options.
5. In your opinion, due to the current circumstances created by the COVID 19 virus, when schools fully reopen, will online/distance teaching remain part of school practice?
6. In your opinion, how can your school support further in online teaching?

Letters of permission were sent out to the school principal and participants regarding the data gathering for this research. The data gathering was conducted for two days, August 24-25, 2021. The questionnaires were retrieved August 26, 2021 by one of the researchers with the help of the school principal.

Findings and Discussion

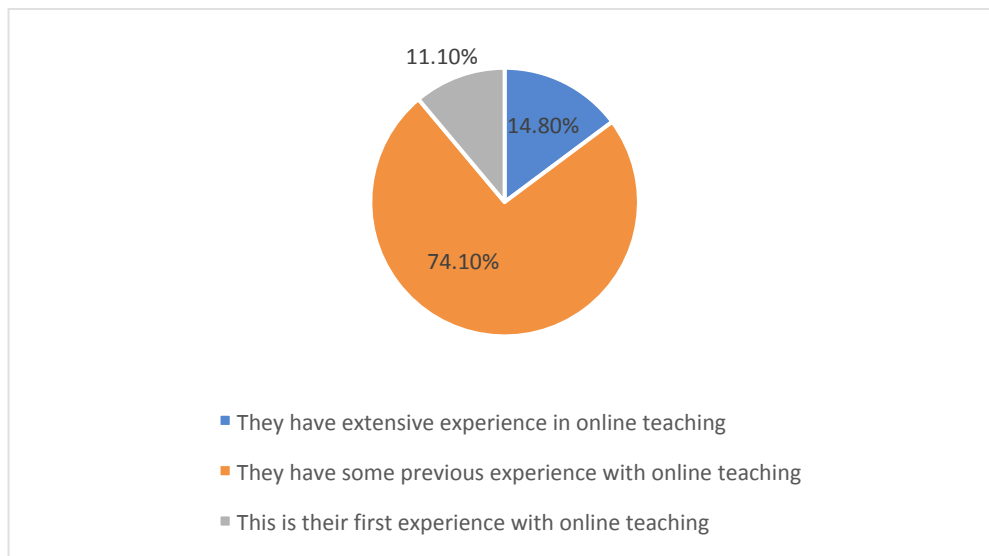These are the survey results gathered from the participants.

Figure 1: Teachers' Online Teaching Experience.

Figure 1 shows the results of which statement best describes teacher's experience with online teaching. The findings show that 74.10% or majority have some previous experience with online teaching. According to the Department of Education, private schools were allowed to start earlier than public schools provided that they are strictly using only distance learning modalities and there are no face-to-face classes. In June 2020, on the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, DepEd issued a "non-negotiable requirement" to private schools and among the "non-negotiable" requirements prescribed for private schools are setting up own email domains and educational platforms. In addition to this, both teachers and learners should have the necessary resources to access the lesson. While most public schools in the Philippines were preparing for modular distance learning, private schools started online distance learning.
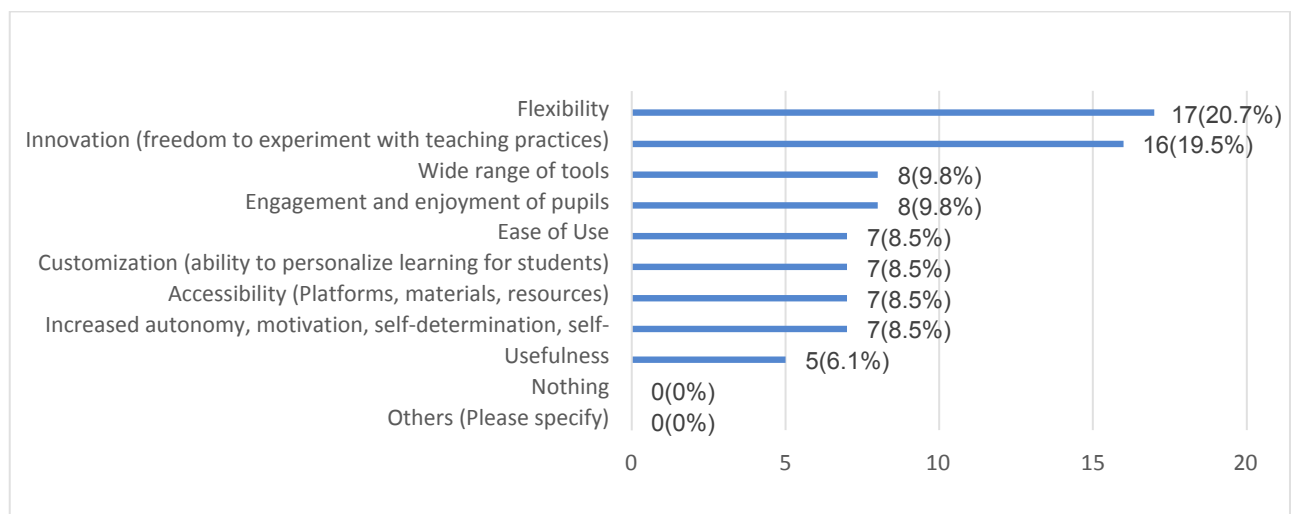

Figure 2: Pleasant Experience on Online Distance Teaching

Figure 2 demonstrates results on pleasant experience of participants with online distance teaching. Findings show that most of the participants experienced flexibility and innovation (i.e. freedom to experiment with teaching practice) with 20.7% and 19.5% respectively. The new normal in education compels educators not just to come up with new ways of doing things but also new ways of thinking. Teachers can design their own context and delivery according to the needs and context of their learners. Research has indicated that teachers are most likely to be satisfied when they are provided with flexibility in what, how, when, and where they teach (Archambault & Crippen, 2009; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Hawkins et al., 2012; Kozma et al., 1998; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2008; Smith, 2000; Velasquez, Graham, & Osguthorpe, 2013, as cited in Borup & Stevens, 2016).
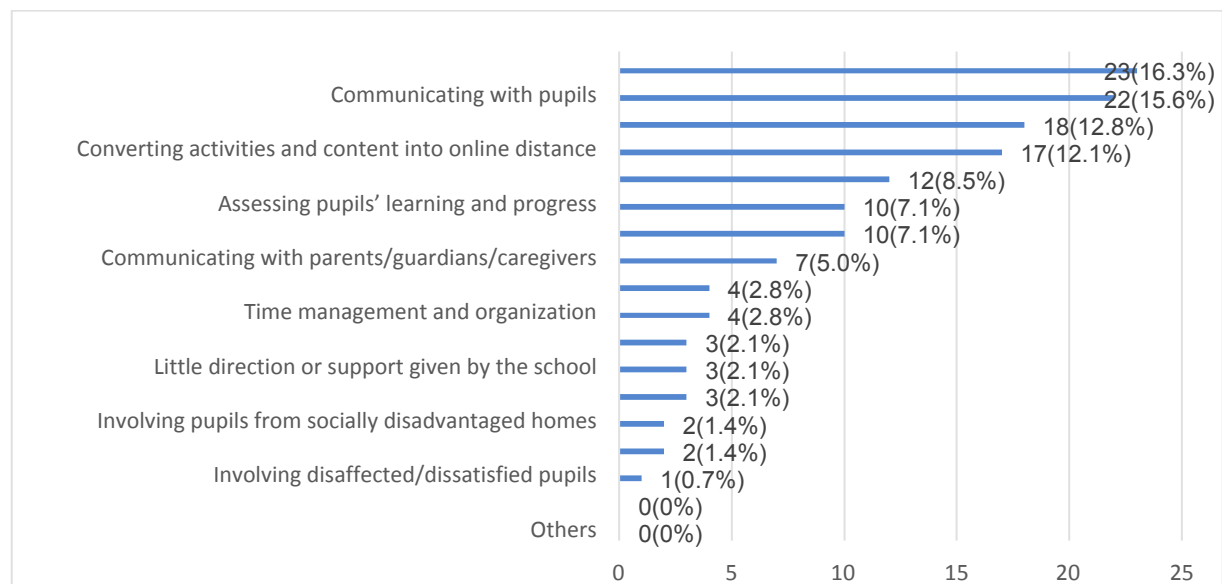

Figure 3: The Main Challenge for Teachers to Switch to Online/Distance Learning

With years of experience in traditional instruction and face-to-face classroom setting, changes at this rapid pace can be confusing even to the most experienced teacher. On Figure 3, participants were given to choose their top 5 main challenges for switching to online or distance learning. The most popular response or 16.3% of the participants have had difficulties in keeping all the pupils motivated, followed by 15.5% who also experience difficulties communicating with pupils. In a research conducted by Abramenka (2015), student motivations towards online learning are enhanced with clear organization, communication, interaction and presence of the instructor. Students should be able to contribute various perspectives and thoughts in an online setting, and in turn receive critique (Abramenka, 2015). The 21st century world is becoming increasingly digitized which is another reason why it is important for academics to be more aware of the specifics of their cohorts and learners and find ways to engage with and support isolated learners (Gillet-Swan, 2017). The third on the list is teacher's access to technology with 12.8% of the participants and 12.1% find it challenging to convert activities and content in to online distance learning.

In an article by Beltran (2021) a teacher told Nikkei Asia "I start and end my day staring at a laptop". EDUCAUSE notes that teachers use digital technologies in their personal lives, but that, when applied in classrooms, they encounter serious technical, logistical, and pedagogical problems (Johnson et al, 2016 cited by Mercader & Gairin, 2020). While most teachers are still learning how to use different online learning platforms, there are also those struggling with poor internet connection and lack of gadgets/computers. The fifth main

challenge for teachers is their student's access to technology. Most students do not have the appropriate connectivity, device and digital skills required to find and use educational content dependent on technology. According to UN, nearly 500 million students from pre-primary to upper secondary school did not have any access to any remote learning—three quarters of those lived in the poorest household or rural areas. This enormous digital divide shows how connectivity has become a key factor to guarantee the right to education (UNESCO, 2021).
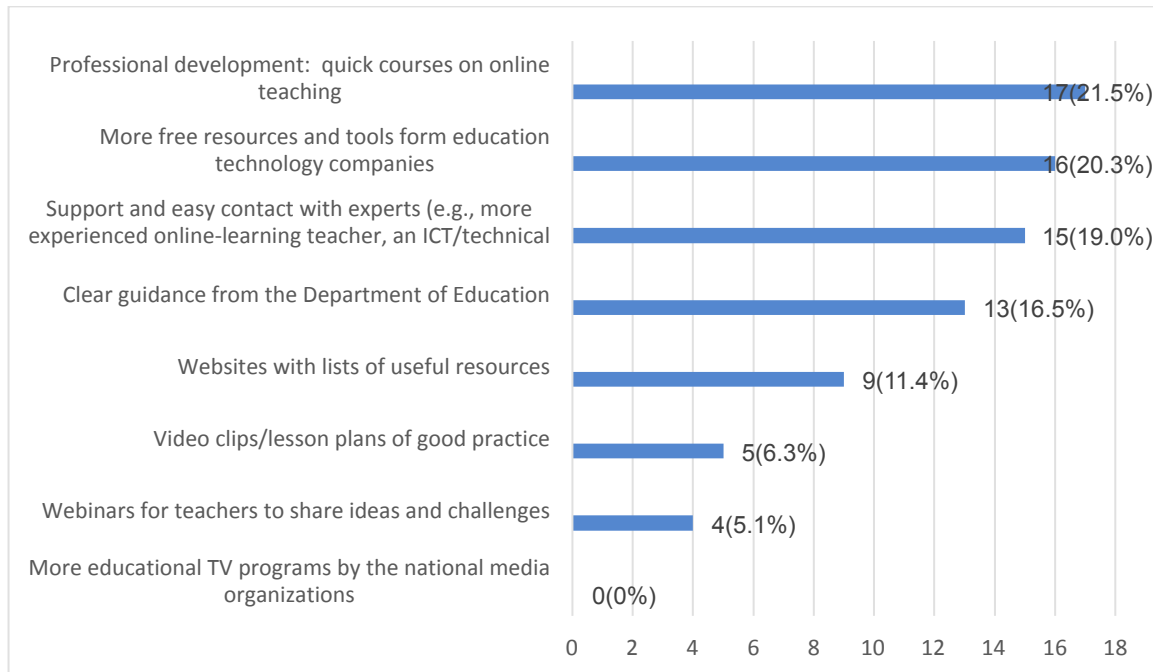

Figure 4: Ways to Help Teacher's Support Online Learning

Figure 4 demonstrates the results of the most helpful support to teachers on online learning. The top 3 support that teachers need in online learning are professional development with 21.5%, more free resources and tools from education technology companies with 20.3% and support and easy contact with experts with 19%. In a study by Simon (2015), many participants reported having given thoughts to ways in which they could improve their online courses. However, many of these ideas were tied to technology, and were systematically rejected due to time constrains, lack of technological knowledge, lack of available and usable technologies, perceived lack of support, and doubts 123 about resulting educational benefits. In the absence of incentive to experiment with new technologies, exemplary practices and active support, teachers are not likely to take the risk to incorporate new technologies or pedagogies in their online courses. They are more likely to stick to familiar practices, even when these practices are not fully satisfactory (Simon, 2015). While the problem of teachers' indifference and resistance to technology is common, providing support through all of these can hopefully change their mindset. Acquiring the necessary skill is equally important as having the technology to provide online learning.
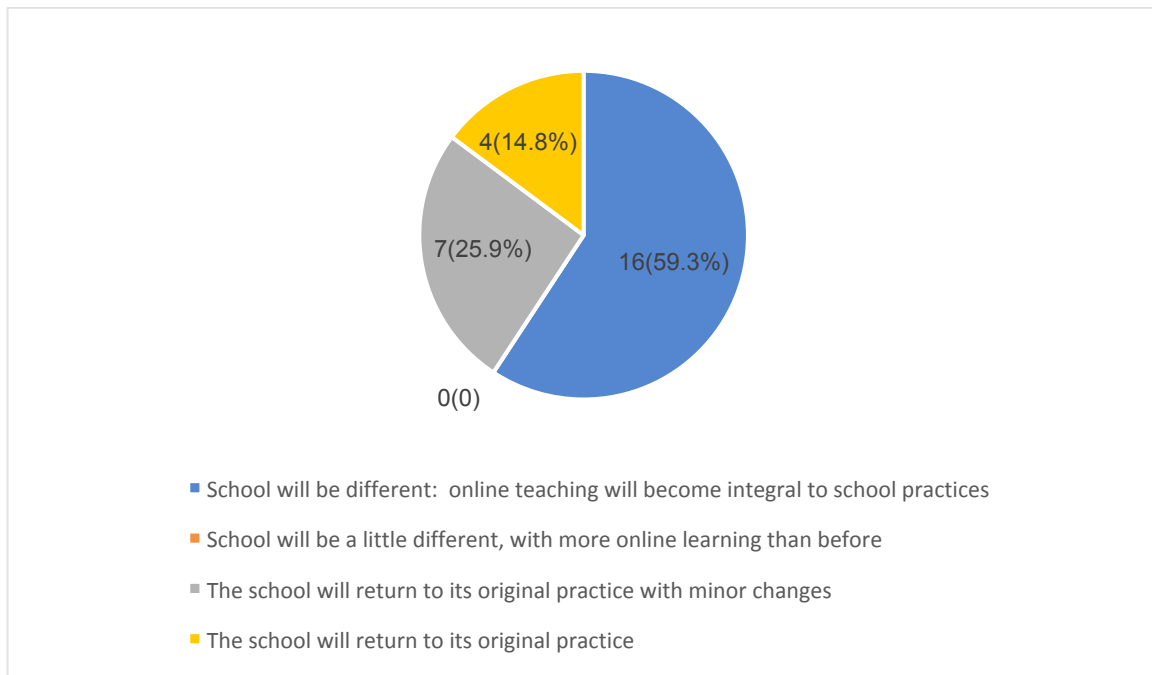
Figure 5: Trends in Online/Distance Teaching When Schools Are Completely Reopened

Figure 5 shows the results on trends in online/distance teaching when schools are completely reopened. Results show that most of the participants or 59.3% have selected "School will be different: online teaching will become integral to school practices". Those who are in the education sector know that online learning is here to stay and thus the school has a very big responsibility to shape its teachers and learners into that direction. Thus in the last part of the survey the participants wrote the following on how the school can support them further in online teaching: (1) Education with incentives/trainings and seminars; (2) technical software support; (3) lessen video lesson recordings/digitized video recordings; and (4) provide digitized learning material, equipment/facilities including fast internet connection.

Conclusion

More than a year later since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic, Philippine schools continue to tackle challenges in ensuring that quality instruction be delivered safely to students at home. However, quality instruction has already been out of reach for many students long before the pandemic. While many Filipinos see education as a way out of poverty, the national government since the 1990s has given dwindling allocation to it, compared to budgets for Public Works and Highways or Transportation or National Defense. The pandemic has not only disrupted the delivery of quality education, but it has also magnified the issues that have been plaguing it for a long time.

When teachers and students struggled with the lack of books, classrooms and other learning tools, the onset of the pandemic has forced the Philippine educational system to go online at a purely untested and unprecedented scale. Of course, online distance learning is the safest possible solution to continue learning. On an economic level, it could be a godsend as it would reduce spending on daily commutes, packed snacks and lunches, and test papers. Students and teachers do not have to get up early to catch jeepneys or buses to go to school. You can actually "go to school" without taking a bath or getting into a uniform. This takes into aside, of course, the main purpose of reducing contact to save the lives of teachers and students. From an administrative point of view, this could also be a good opportunity to

implement innovative technology solutions such as ***High Touch, High Tech*** or the use of artificial intelligence to improve leaning.

However, the implementation of the online distance learning solution has raised a lot of issues with regards to access to technology, reliability of internet access, consistent computer access, and ensuring regular online participation of students, on one hand. And on the other hand, we have teachers who are also struggling with the transition to remote learning with inadequate technological training and preparedness to handle teaching online. Because standing in front of the phone or laptop camera and broadcasting is not teaching. As our teachers "painfully" find out, we have to do things differently.

So, should we go back to traditional face-to-face education once the pandemic is over?
Not so fast.

Even before the pandemic, there have already been plans to prioritize spending of the education budget largely on technology-based solutions – to make our students globally competitive. The onset of the pandemic only accelerated our need to transition to a model of education that brings together the best of both traditional offline learning and e-learning – not only here in the Philippines but in the entire world. This global pandemic is far from over, so it is incumbent upon us to continue learning and innovating to minimize the despair and disruption it has caused on our children's education. The government should continue to support and fund technology-based learning solutions like online distance learning. Teachers should be given continuous training on online engagement and troubleshooting. Access to the internet should be made as universal as access to water and electricity. Education has never been more important as these times when knowledge of facts and science can save your life and your loved ones. Focusing on improving the access and methods for online distance learning could be the key to increased global competitiveness of our children.

Shakespeare once said, "There is no darkness, only ignorance", online distance learning may just be our light out of this long tunnel.

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