# A TWO-YEAR LOOK INTO THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

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## Abstract

Viewing "A Two-year Look into the Highs and Lows of Distance Learning" the author determined to investigate pros and cons of distance learning and recommend the updated approach to cope its future challenges. The author found that the pandemic continuously hybridized beyond normal. Monkayo College of Arts, Sciences and Technology would survive this challenge and grow under the supports of its own-self and LGU with resilience. The author recommended that it needed national and private collective efforts to conquer current situations; Monkayo College of Arts, Sciences and Technology needed to improve its efficient distance learning and deliberate adaptation what means in distance learning for its collegians beyond successful in their future careers after graduation.

## Introduction

Almost two years later after the first COVID lockdown in the Philippines, both students and teachers alike continued to face challenges in the implementation and adaptation of its 'distance-learning' programs. Let us look into the experiences of students and teachers in the Philippines, specifically in a municipal college under the new normal. What was initially thought to be a

short-term suspension of classes turned out to be a two-year experience of distance learning? With lockdowns having been strictly placed during the onset of COVID-19 response in the Philippines, it followed that education in the country and in the world, in general, was among the most affected sectors that had to adapt to drastic changes because of the pandemic. (Nymia P. Simbulan, 2020).

In its attempt for learning continuity, the governing bodies in the education sectors in the Philippines pushed to adopt distance learning. Merriam Webster (n.d.) has defined distance learning as, "a method of study where teachers and students do not meet in a classroom but use the Internet, e-mail, mail, etc., to have classes." This meant that under the distance learning modality, teachers and students were separated geographically and therefore do not meet face-to-face.  However, it was important to note that technology and the Internet played a crucial role in the implementation of this learning modality. This posed a major concern as Philippines hasn't been able to build a great reputation on its digital well-being for the past years. A global study on the digital wellbeing of countries called Digital Quality of Life Index 2020 was conducted by VPN provider, Surfshark; and it reported that the Philippines ranked 66th out of 85. The following year, however, the Philippines climbed up to 48th out of 110 participating countries in the same study. Albeit this significant progress, it would be evident that many parts of the country continue to experience difficulty in terms of digital connectivity. Consequently, this affected the targeted smooth transition from traditional to a hybrid form of learning. (Simon Kemp, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted digital divide. Less privileged students experience bigger problems in coping with the demands of distance learning.  The lack of equipment needed to continue schooling under the new normal setting is one of the greatest hurdles students coming from disadvantaged sectors needed to solve.  In a 2021 survey by Social Weather Stations (SWS), it was revealed that 4 percent of school-age Filipino students lack distance learning tech. "The national Social Weather Survey of November 21-25, 2020, found 58% of enrolled school-age (5-20 years old) Filipinos using devices for distance learning.  These devices were either already owned (27%), bought (12%), borrowed (10%), given (9%), or rented (0.3%)," SWS explained.

The survey further showed that only 41 percent of students in Mindanao have the tools to be able to take part in a blended learning modality. Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippines located in the southernmost part of the country.

Internet connectivity along with the need to have access to vital technological tools were, indeed, two of the serious issues that students and even teachers continue to experience to this day.

**MONCAST and Its Progress in the Delivery of Instruction**

Monkayo College of Arts, Sciences and Technology is a local college located in the municipality of Monkayo, Davao De Oro. It is one of the five provinces of Davao Region in Mindanao. Despite being a first-class municipality, a number of students don't necessarily have the means to easily provide themselves essential support for blended learning. Further, the municipality does not have equal access to internet in all its areas.

Going back to 2020, the school had closed down in the middle of the second semester; and accordingly, lessons needed to be disseminated. But needless to say, the school wasn't able to prepare for such a huge shift to learning. Like everyone else around the world, the institution was met with an unprecedented time. In order to keep up with the demands of the new normal, one of the very first responses of the institution to address continuity of learning is the use of course packs. A 'course pack' is a document which contains the lessons as well as its complementary assessments. As there was no prior preparation to completely move to distance learning, teachers were given time to prepare all necessary documents before the distribution of these materials online. Faculty members were also given short courses on the making of the document. Course packs are similar to modular learning which employs the use of self-learning materials. Moreover, as an innovative approach to learning, MONCAST adhered to the suggestion of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to strengthen online platforms and blended learning. As a result, the school administration has proposed the use of Facebook and Messenger as its major online learning platforms for the remaining months of the semester from April to May. These platforms served as lines of communication between students and teachers for any clarifications and questions regarding the course packs. (Chad de Guzman, 2021)

The following academic year, the school has adopted flexible learning- a learning modality which is a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction. This time, faculty members needed to step up their game as the use of video-communication services such as Google Meet and Zoom was required. In addition, they needed to set up their own virtual classrooms either via Facebook or Google Classroom, or any other learning management system a teacher prefers given that he or she provides an orientation to students. This learning modality would continue up to this day.

## Difficulties of Distance Learning

Robin Sharma (2022) says "Change is hard at first, messy in the middle, and gorgeous at the end". And MonCAST is not an exemption to this. An internal study in 2020 by faculty members of the school was conducted to look into the struggles of teachers under the new learning modality. The study, "Unanticipated Journey: The Predicaments of Teachers During the New Learning Modality", revealed that among these struggles include 1) the hows of applications, 2) online learning materials preparation, 3) poor internet connection, and 4) online tools used in assessing students' performance (Angoy, Caiña, & Doydoy, 2020).

The study found out that because of the shift to flexible learning, many teachers had experienced to be under a new learning phase. Teachers used to textbook teaching had to overcome a technological learning curve. Although the integration of technology is not new to the field of education, it was definitely the first time to conduct classes with such a high dependency on technology. On top of that, teachers had to learn to manage classes in a virtual classroom- something that needed a lot of adjustments and practice. Teachers have also been inclined to reevaluate their teaching skills in the midst of all of this.

Poor internet connection is felt not only by teachers but also students. In a 2022 study, "Lagging: Students' Predicaments in Learning English Language under the New Normal Modality: A Phenomenological Study", one of the biggest difficulties of students in learning and acquiring knowledge is the intermittent connection in the municipality. As mentioned previously, there is a lack of equal access to stable internet connection in the area. Some students will

have to travel to areas with better internet stability. Consequently, this affects the quality of education that students receive. Based on the findings, "most of the students really have a hard time in learning not just because of the poor internet connection itself but their minds are divided to their duties as sons/daughters and their responsibilities at school" (Arsenio, Gonzaga & Pacatang, 2022).

Lastly, verifying the authenticity of the students' responses and assessments seem to be a daunting task for teachers. Cheating is hardly detected because of the lack of proper tools that prestigious universities have the luxury to incorporate in their system. Additionally, the risk of students losing accountability in their learning is present.

## Coping Mechanisms

In order to address teachers' challenges in the mixture of education and technology, the school regularly gives in-house seminars and trainings for platforms and ICT-related tools. The teachers are also encouraged to echo learning tools they use in their respective classes to accelerate the value of virtual learning. To help with connection problems, teachers are asked to provide pre-recorded video discussion of lessons. This way, students are given more flexibility to take their learning at their own pace.  In times of synchronous sessions, on the other hand, where students and teachers meet real time using any preferred video conferencing platform, teachers are encouraged not to take more than 40 minutes of class time. This is an attempt to help students save their bandwidth which hopefully will eventually lessen their economic burden in having to subscribe for additional promos. Furthermore, the school has allowed limited face-to-face classes especially to performance-based courses such as Physical Education given that students are either fully vaccinated or has gone through their first dose of vaccination. (Megan Kuhfeld, et.al. 2022)

The Local Government Unit (LGU) of Monkayo has also been very supportive in the efforts of the institution in providing equal access to education. The LGU, through its local radio station, has given MonCAST its very own airtime to use for any necessary institutional programs including but not limited to delivery instruction. This initiative makes for a better and wider reach and

supports the most vulnerable students without or limited electronic devices and internet access at home.

## Conclusions

**A brighter future:** The pandemic may be far from over, but with vaccination rates continually growing higher every day, it is hopeful that schools may be going back to normal sooner than later.

Monkayo College of Arts, Sciences and Technology still has a lot to learn. Clearly, its attempts at responding to risks are far from perfect but definitely not lacking. The teachers, students, administration, and staff have proven to be bigger than any circumstance thrown to them brought by the pandemic; and everyone was able to grow through these years both personally and professionally.

As the LGU is starting to loosen its restrictions, the administration is optimistic that it can operate most of its classes and courses via the limited face-to-face sessions.

Everyone has been greatly affected by the pandemic, but at the same time, it has made people even more resilient in facing these obstacles. The education sector all around the globe has managed to gradually live through the pandemic and continue to strive to provide quality education that its constituents deserve.

## Recommendations

Alleviating issues surrounding the COVID – 19 pandemic requires government and citizen participation; hence it is a collective effort for the nation. But the government making a feasible concrete plan regarding both containing the virus and aiding the educational sector is vital.

Safe re-opening of schools as soon as possible is a must but still taking an eye in controlling the virus is generally important for public health too. Embracing the new normal and firmly implementing some policies for public health safety such as wearing of face masks and physical distancing to avoid

spreading of the virus while also assisting a safe and strategic operation of learning activities within school premises. This effort of balancing public safety and secure school operations might aid the stability of education during the pandemic. (Inero Ancho, 2021).

If re-opening of the school is not possible reviewing and improving the distance learning method is also necessary. If possible, fund research for the development and optimization of distance learning in chances that a quality online education may cater to all Filipino students as it is part of their rights. Reinforcing the online resources by consulting a digital literate professional in an attempt to create more suitable and accessible content that is effective in an online environment to help build a valued education for all Filipino students despite the physical barriers with the school. This deliberate adaptation might be of help for the distance learning means. (Ivan Rei V. Castro, 2022).

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