

Education in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond: Lessons from Six ASEAN Teacher Education Institutions

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As of February 17, 2021, a total of 1,284,622 confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported in the ASEAN region. This placed the entire region in a very precarious situation. It changed a plethora of things regarding how we conduct ourselves and how we interact and engage with others. It forced countries to temporarily close their borders and caused governments to impose quarantine-lockdown measures in order to mitigate the spread of the virus. The adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt by all aspects of society, particularly the domain of education.

We are living in what could be considered as one of the most threatening events to both local and global education. It is a crisis that no one anticipated. We find ourselves in the middle of a learning crisis. While some students continue their education, many were deprived and left behind. Many students have not been able to actively and fully participate in classroom discussions due to the absence of appropriate tools and resources for online learning as well as the inability to utilize the different digital platforms as a replacement for traditional learning materials.

In this special issue of the AsTEN Journal of Teacher Education, we reflect on the lessons we have learned during the pandemic and how our experience with the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped our lives. This issue tells of the struggle, resilience and adaptability of several ASEAN teacher education institutes of higher learning in dealing with the crisis. It documents how each has adjusted, adapted, and innovated amidst the pandemic. The objective of this special issue is to draw lessons and inspiration from the practices and strategies of fellow ASEAN teacher education institutes of higher learning to adjust to the new normal.

This collection of institutional reflections has been contributed by Kasetsart University of Thailand, the Philippine Normal University, the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, Kolej Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan (Seri Begawan Religious Teachers University College) of Brunei Darussalam, University of Social Sciences and Humanities/ Vietnam National University, and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (Indonesia University of Education).

The authors discuss the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning in their respective universities, challenges faced by students and faculty, and the strategies employed to overcome and manage these effects. They also reflect on how they can harness the lessons learnt during these extraordinary times to plan for the future of their institutions in providing teacher education. Each article contains some background description of teacher education in the country and in the specific institution, and discussions of response strategies and issues of the impact of the pandemic. The authors reflect on the impact of the lessons learned and offer insights for moving forward.

Adjusting to the New Normal

The Covid-19 pandemic completely upended work and study routines as well as familiar ways of life in every society caught up in it. For universities, there were no comprehensive operational guidelines and contingency plans concerning the methods and procedures of conducting classes during a pandemic. This necessitated education stakeholders to respond quickly and formulate plans and procedures in order to maintain the continuity of education and learning. One of the first considerations was how to deliver instruction to millions of students during school / college closures and national lockdowns. Many universities which

relied predominantly on physical classrooms promptly acquired licenses for video conferencing software and applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Google Classrooms, as the temporary replacement for the physical environments

A familiar experience in many institutions was how anxiety and uncertainty about lesson delivery and student learning eventually gave way to growing confidence in innovative ways of engagement. Universities gradually adjusted to online learning enabled by ICT tools and platforms. Training and workshops were provided to educators not familiar with digital tools. Lessons and discussions were transferred to new platforms while materials were uploaded as podcasts, in the form of video vlogs, and live videos on different social media applications. These changes helped to transmit learning materials to students and enabled lecturers to communicate with them on matters such as evaluation and feedback.

Besides providing content and opportunities for engagement and dialogues, universities also offered their duty of care by attending to emotional and mental well-being of their students and faculty. Various efforts such as guidance counselling, mental health helplines and regular keep-in-touch messages were implemented to ensure that students and teachers could positively transition to online learning as well as adjusting to the socio-emotional repercussions of the pandemic.

Impact on Education and Learning

As this editorial is being written, the numbers of infections in some ASEAN countries have remained high and various restrictions are still in effect. By now, everyone will be all too familiar with the disruptions brought about by the abrupt closure of schools and universities, work from home schemes and remote learning. Governments in various ASEAN countries had put these Covid-19 safety management measures in place to curtail the spread of the virus among students, faculty and non-teaching staff. Such drastic changes, through necessary, have had severe impact on everyone from school children, college students to teachers at every level.

The prolonged closure of schools and the adjustment to online learning has not always been easy for both teachers and students. Many faced

constraints as a result of inadequate technological enablers, such as laptops and computers with good processing speed, availability of internet connectivity and bandwidth, and accessible online education tools. At the same time, online learning also changed the relationship between students and teachers, and their interaction with learning contents. The traditional classroom provided a familiar and conducive learning environment for students. Teachers in this environment were able to communicate ideas, demonstrate skills, and impart knowledge to the students. Importantly, they could lead students into dialogues to co-construct their learning and understanding with one another. The familiar classroom without the presence of physical boundaries directly bridged teachers, learning processes and students, as it offered a space for physical interactions and dialogues. In the atypical online classroom because of the pandemic, however, many teachers and students experienced a huge gap and this took time to bridge.

The shift to online classrooms proved to be a challenge for students and their teachers, and few were spared. The students were the ones most affected by these changes. One of the realities that emerged during this time was the silent and hidden inequalities experienced by students in their education systems. Within countries, many students did not have access to ICT enablers which prevented them from participating in online learning. Some of those who were able to participate online also did not have adequate self-management skills and lose attention. As a result of the impact of the lockdowns on the economy, many families were also hit hard financially. This has had a direct impact on many students' well-being.

Faculty members within each institution also had their unique challenges due to the unevenness in their abilities to use technology for teaching. Those who were less adept at using digital tools experienced delays in a smooth and seamless transition to online learning. Many online lessons were also ineffective, as some teachers needed time to develop skills for engaging students online. Nevertheless, universities allotted time for training their faculty to adopt these tools and develop new skills. With greater adoption of digital platforms and tools, faculty were able to choose those that best suited their needs and familiarity with the user interface. Some students found it inconvenient to have to deal with multiple platforms for their classes, while teachers had to learn to assess learners'

participation and learning, both synchronously and asynchronously, using different features of these systems. In addition, they had to monitor their student's progress and check the validity and quality of their submitted works. Learning to teach and learn in the new modalities that began abruptly for students and teachers remain an ongoing process.

Moving Forward

As the COVID-19 global health crisis continues to rework the design of our daily lives, particularly in the domain of education, education experts continue to persevere with devising strategies that can enhance the future of education in an increasingly unpredictable future. Our responses to the pandemic showed us that we can no longer approach education and learning by reverting to the practices and processes of the past. We have seen how COVID-19 changed the landscape of education through an acceleration in the use of technology in ASEAN countries as the articles in this issue show. Universities are integrating the utilization of different digital and virtual tools and developing online repositories of learning materials, guides, and reference materials to help students cope with the transition to a fuller digital education landscape. Expectations from students have also changed. Where teaching used to be in a fixed time and physical location in the pre-Covid 19 days, it will need to continue to be flexible and responsive to learner needs in ways that technology has provided for. Teachers who have learned new ways of delivering their lessons will want to continue to experiment with the new tools to further sharpen their abilities to deliver online lessons through blended as well as hybrid learning.

No one will dispute the importance of digital technology and tools, which were indispensable for coping with the disruptions we had all experienced. Teachers and students also discovered the usefulness of technology-enabled learning. While technology is reshaping pedagogy, there are several considerations for educators to bear in mind. First, educators resisted technology driving pedagogy in the past and we should remain steadfast in this. Technology must be seen as an enabler. Teachers must continue to approach teaching, learning and assessment by using sound education and pedagogical principles. Nevertheless, having experienced the various technological affordances, we are in a stronger position to harness the features of digital tools and platforms to strengthen pedagogy.

Technology can make teaching impersonal if it is not properly managed. We must find ways to bridge students, teachers and the subject matters, so that students can approach learning holistically with the help of their teachers' scaffolding and guidance.

Secondly, the focus of teacher education institutions must continue to be on developing teachers who are knowledgeable, skillful and cognitively agile, as well as people of good moral character. We must also continue to develop in them capabilities such as adaptability and resilience so that they can manage the future where more changes are expected in schools and classrooms. At the same time, we must review the pedagogical skills that are in our current pre-service curricula and teacher professional development courses. Our experience in the pandemic has shown us where we will need to strengthen. One of these is the skill sets for teaching with technology and the ability to handle online, face-to-face classroom and hybrid teaching. Teachers should also have a wider pedagogical repertoire to include strategies for developing learners' thinking and learning through dialogue and interaction on and offline.

In closing, as this special issue focuses on the experience found in South-East Asian countries, it is important to return to the significance of this focus. In our region we have very large populations of children and young people and they are from diverse backgrounds, not least the rural-urban divide. The future of these children and young people rests in the hands of teachers who will open their hearts and minds, as well as opening doors to the next stage of their growth and development. Teacher education institutions must be the voice and the hands that support students of all ages to have access to all opportunities for learning and not lose out on these opportunities because of social and economic inequalities, as the pandemic has revealed. The collection of articles has shown us that despite differences in culture and size, we share many similarities in our experiences and aspirations during this Covid-19 pandemic. It is our hope that these articles will engender further conversations among teacher educators in ASEAN, as we continue to explore how we can work together to strengthen teacher education for the region.

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