
Transforming Learning Activities at the Faculty of Education during the COVID-19 Situation

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Background

The pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread with alarming speed and has gone beyond expectation despite the forecast for the pandemic (Office of the National Economic and Social Development, 2020). There is no specific antiviral treatment for COVID-19 and there are no vaccines proven to protect the body against it. For these reasons, anxiety became society's prevailing condition and people are susceptible to panic attacks. The traditional face-to-face learning activities could not be carried out anymore, and teachers and lecturers have started to adapt the use of technologies to their teaching activities through online platforms. The teacher education sector in most countries is facing a multitude of barriers. The shift from a face to face environment to completely online environment has not been easy. Scull, Phillips, Sharma and Garnier (2020) stated that universities in Australia were in the same situation. They proposed the innovations included the conversion of all face-to-face course work units into online units, including synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities.

According to Mishraa, Gupta and Shreeb (2020), the whole educational system from elementary to tertiary level has collapsed during the lockdown period of COVID-19 and online teaching-learning modes must be adopted. However, the main difficulty is that a large number of lecturers in the Faculty of Education may belong to the older generations – baby-boomers generation and Generation X, who have just begun to adopt more technology in order to stay in touch with family members and reconnect with old friends, while their learners are from Generation Z, who were born in a world surrounded with technology, and need technology in their education (Combi, 2015). Despite the fact that the lecturers have to suddenly adjust their teaching and learning

activities, they can embrace technology at a faster rate than before due to the urgent need of the global crisis. COVID-19 has abruptly forced them to redesign their learning activities to be as meaningful as possible for the learners amid the chaos and confusion in the society. In the early stages of problem solving, apart from EduFarm which is Kasetsart University's main Learning Management System, the Faculty of Education also provided its own learning platform called CPED which was developed by one of the faculty members. It may be stated that the COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of higher education in this faculty.

Therefore, the goal of this article is to demonstrate the important impact of COVID-19 on the Faculty of Education in Kasetsart University, and the approaches of how our faculty members and administration team used to handle the impact. A study was conducted to find out: 1) What were the impacts of COVID -19 on faculty members and students in the Faculty of Education? and 2) What were the attitudes of faculty members and students regarding future solutions for this crisis? Short interviews were conducted with 58 participants: 10 instructors from all departments of Faculty of Education and 48 undergraduate and graduate students who were impacted by COVID-19. All of the data were analyzed by using a coding technique and it was kept in the safe place in which only researchers could access it. It is hoped that the findings of this study would serve as guidelines for other educational institutions to apply to prepare themselves as they face unexpected impact and situations in the future.

The Impacts of COVID- 19 on the Faculty of Education

Qualitative data from 10 instructors and 48 students of Faculty of Education at Kasetsart University showed

that COVID-19 has impacted instructors and students in the following aspects:

- 1. Student Financial Issue.** COVID-19 noticeably caused financial burden to students. The Faculty of Education at Kasetsart University has hundreds of students who mostly come from low income families and also live in other provinces, far away from Bangkok. COVID-19 has affected their parents' incomes which directly impacted students' living. According to the data, most of our students could not go back to their hometowns and also had limited financial budget to live and study in their dormitories during COVID-19 period. Unexpected expenses such as Internet monthly fees, online learning tools, and electricity monthly fees caused them to face with financial crisis.

The Faculty of Education recognized the problems and collaborated with the University in a project entitled "Student Food Coupon", with the aim to help students to have better quality of living through this difficult period, especially those who were faced with financial crisis because of COVID-19. In this project, staff and faculty members were asked to purchase food coupons from local restaurants around the university and donate them to the students. Students who participated in this project could use those coupons to buy meals from those restaurants. The project was successful not only in helping our students to pass and overcome their financial crisis, but also in helping local restaurants to earn more income during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 2. Online Learning and Teaching.** COVID-19 obviously impacted and changed ways of content delivery from offline to online. The Faculty of Education became a leader faculty of the University in developing full-academic online instruction. The Faculty released "E-Learning Research Funding" in order

to provide funding in supporting faculty members to conduct research projects that aimed to explore innovative ways and strategies for creating efficient online courses in various content areas. The project was successful in not only helping faculty members to have greater understanding about online course, but it also provided opportunities for instructors in all departments in the Faculty of Education to study, share, and collaborate ideas and techniques for delivering successful online content.

The Faculty of Education then used data from the E-Learning Research Funding project to design supportive seminars and trainings to provide helpful information to instructors and students in preparing them to understand and have skills in teaching and learning through online learning environment. In addition, the department of Educational Technology at the Faculty of Education collaborated with the Office of Computer Service of Kasetsart University to be the major team to share and promote knowledge and skills in online learning and teaching to instructors and students of Kasetsart University in all the four campuses around the country. The four campuses are in Bangkok, Kamphaeng Saen, Si Racha and Chalemphrakiat Sakon Nakhon Province.

- 3. The Accidental Education Benefits of COVID-19.** The global COVID-19 pandemic has triggered new ways of conducting the teaching-learning process online. For some, this has been a small move but for others, this is a completely new way of education. Most universities have already initiated online learning in their universities before the pandemic. Many lecturers have adapted to the new normal of online learning with varying degrees of success. With the advent of COVID-19, online learning seems to be one of the safest and easiest ways to impart education for acquiring new skills. Online learning is now applicable not

only to teach academic subjects but also to conduct extra-curricular activities for students, informative online sessions, online conferences, and webinars.

The demand for online learning has risen significantly and will continue doing so as society starts adapting to ‘social distancing’ post this pandemic. It can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption in education systems in history (United Nations, 2020). The advantages of online learning mentioned by lecturers and students are 1) Online learning offers a very efficient way to deliver lessons. The use of videos, sharing of resource links and conducting of tests can all be done at the click of a button. Additionally, the lectures can be recorded and shared for reference with a wide range of audiences. It also allows for a much larger set of children to be taught. 2) Online learning primarily eliminates transportation costs. The course or study materials are all available online and one can access it as many times as one wants. Moreover, students spend less time on the road, especially during rush hour in Bangkok, Thailand. 3) Students can easily access the study materials anywhere and anytime as long as there are a device and connectivity. 4) Many shy students open up in the online classes. They are far more forthcoming with their questions and participation. This could be because of a comfortable home environment. These findings are in accordance with Eschenbrenner and Nah (2007) who studied the use of mobile technology and found that it made teaching and learning activities more effective than in the traditional classroom. After the current crisis, it is clear that some form of blended learning will evolve with online learning forming a crucial part of the overall teaching-learning process.

- 4. The Big Challenge for Lecturers and Students.** At the beginning, there were lecturers who were confused about the varieties of online learning

platform and this led to an agreement of selected platforms for lecturers and students of the Faculty of Education at Kasetsart University. Afterwards, there were trainings on CPED (an innovative learning platform of the Faculty of Education at Kasetsart University), Google Classroom, EduFarm (Kasetsart University main LMS) and Microsoft Teams. Due to the different preferences of the lecturers, even millennial learners had to adjust their learning to a number of learning platforms used by each lecturer. A number of lecturers reported that they preferred giving lessons through video conferences on Zoom because they were familiar with it and its Breakout Rooms function allowed them to split their Zoom meetings into separate sessions. The lecturers could choose to split the students into these separate sessions automatically or manually, and it allowed students to experience virtual discussions which were close to the ones which happened in a classroom.

However, the findings showed that many lecturers found their online learning activities not as effective as they should be. Not all students had computers, laptops or Internet at home. Some students had to use cellular phones without cameras so they could not see their lecturers’ and classmates’ faces while they studied. Many lecturers found that online learning was suitable for mature, self-disciplined students but it was an inappropriate learning environment for more dependent learners.

Moving Forward

According to the data, there were two aspects that the Faculty of Education had to prepare to support the disruptive changes. They are as follows:

- 1. Online Training.** Basically, Kasetsart University has already set up a technology system and facilities for lecturers and staff. Nevertheless, the results showed that

participants agreed that online training on the use of online learning platforms and information about tips or techniques for organizing a virtual learning environment must be provided continually in order to make the lecturers and staff familiar with technology and use it as part of their routine. In addition, online learning demands the teachers to be technology-savvy, which, unfortunately, is not the case always. Teachers need to invest more time in aligning themselves with the latest technology updates to ensure that they can conduct their online classes seamlessly.

- 2. Technology Access.** Social distancing measures to stop the spread of the virus leads to online teaching so that students can study even at home. However, transitioning to online classes is extremely difficult for a large number of students from low-income families. Therefore, participants agreed that the university should consider providing assistance to those students who do not have access to computers, tablets, and the Internet in order to ensure that all students are able to participate in online learning at home.

In conclusion, the important lessons from COVID-19 are to 1) remind us, as educators and instructors, that learners are different in terms of readiness and 2) remind us that all individuals should deserve the same opportunity in accessing education. Therefore, the main task for administration, instructors, including educators is not to focus on delivering content, but rather to focus on finding efficient ways for creating successful learning in all situations and also for all learners.

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