THE ACADEMIC NEW NORMAL: FLATTENING THE PANDEMIC CURVE
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The year 2020 and 2021 have been challenging so far for the Philippines; and for the rest of the world as well. Amongst the global disasters facing today by mankind, as we know it, is the COVID-19 pandemic crisis which is by far the deadliest in recent years; battering not only human life but other sectors of the modern world like the socioeconomic sphere. According to Wikipedia, the new corona virus outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on the 30th of January this year by the World Health Organization. Within two months, it was officially labelled as a “pandemic.”

A novel pandemic with no known specific antiviral treatment, nor vaccine, will obviously bring the world into a standstill, particularly when positive cases and death tolls begin to rise. In fact, the world has only so much as far as COVID-19 studies and research materials are concerned. Somehow, we are caught off-guard. The science and medical field communities began the frantic search of yet another holy grail quest of possible cure. The high and mighty leading countries began to fall on their knees as, once again, they are reminded that death does not discriminate. So is the case now when mankind began to realize that no one is safe against the relatively new corona virus disease.

This is not the first time, in the billion years story of life on Earth, that a dominant living race is on a decimating predicament to stay alive and survive a generational threatening onslaught. Whenever such events occur, it is a natural response for life to fight or flee. Unfortunately, the nemesis at the moment is too small to be seen by the naked eyes of our globalized porous societies. Several opted to flee, only to become the carriers of the viral adversary. So, fleeing is not advisable; you only delay the pandemic since the virus is also likely to stay out there. And, with the limited information on COVID-19, waiting for the virus to die out is not a popular proven directive and thereby such decision will be rendered unwise; not to mention it is very passive. Therefore, we are left to face this ongoing pandemic crisis head on. And once again, the world is rallying itself armed with science and figures - mankind needs to flatten the curve.
Whilst watching the web and television on how several countries are dealing with the pandemic crisis, the popular management approach prevailing is the lockdown and quarantine impositions. The method varies from one country to another, but the containment and mitigation of the disease is the common denominator. And, it is easier managed if the populace limit their movement and avoid the usual herding that the society have grown accustomed with. In business lingo, higher foot traffic is a good sign; but, it is the other way around during this pandemic crisis. In short, a “new normal” is inevitable.

Yes, the world resulted into an unlikely halt. Many events were cancelled, rescheduled and had to wait indefinitely, or pushed to be held on virtual web monitors. Flight cancellations and stricter travel bans struck down the tourism and transportation market. In some local communities, no quarantine pass means no passage. Local and global economies slowed down like it is “The Great Depression” once again. And, of course, the academe institutions were nonetheless part of the unprecedented casualties. Almost everywhere, classes were cancelled… school gates were closed. At first the learning community thought that this crisis will soon be controlled in no time, and that the suspension will be lifted within the timeline of the current semester. The quarantine weeks, however, turned into months now. Possible extension talks and debates are becoming a norm everytime the end of a lockdown period nears. Community Quarantine was rebranded as Enhanced Community Quarantine. Then came other variations or modifications of community quarantining like GCQ, MGCQ, and MECQ. At least those are the only terms and acronyms I worry about now; along with IATF EID. Anyways, however you brand the emerged situation, they are still quarantining in their purest sense. Conjointly, new rules and laws are to be observed as we move forward. And sure enough, changes and challenges will reshape our learning institutions- thus “the new normal.”

Countless norms will be affected as learning institutions opted to continue the academic calendar as planned and projected. Grading systems, instruction styles and delivery, and modes of evaluation will have adjustments to keep up with the new norm. Left alone enrollment processes and ceremonial rites, the foundations of professional education like (to mention a few) teaching strategies, teaching-learning environment facilities, and appropriate learning or visual aids will ideally acclimate to the recourse of direction. This has been the system that learning institutions have been perfecting for the longest time. Suddenly, albeit the quest for academic excellence is still in play, the learning administrators and authorities took a necessary
step back and pause to reflect on what the next best move is. Obviously, this is going to be a massive challenge to every member of the learning communities. Consequently, it will greatly affect the nearby spheres of communities like the homes of learners and the waiting business sectors for their next fresh professionals.

There are several issues and scenarios that need the attention of authorities and professionals with expertise; one example is the reduced face-to-face interaction, if not entirely removed. Personally, it will be very tricky to remove the face-to-face interactions entirely. Maybe, a careful reduction of physical learning interaction will come handy in the new normal-like personal progress assessments or consultations. But, the physical class interactions will definitely be diminished as the crisis continues its pestilence.

Basically, the personal touch of style will be compromised. Strategies and how instructions are going to be delivered will spell the difference. Less face-to-face interactions will mean difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of the style, specially in the affective domain. It will be inconclusive to tell though what good remedy is out there. I guess, it is safe to say that variations of ingenuity and creativity may be able to solve the problem from one student to another, from one class to another. I bet there are already a lot of research papers and dissertations regarding remote teaching scenarios. Now is the best time to actually put them in use.

The learning or visual aids, amongst the many problems, may have less of a complication as compared to other factors when delivering efficient and effective education. Many modern classroom set-ups now are already leaning towards the modernity of time. Even without the ongoing pandemic crisis, technological learning or visual aids which have remote capabilities are already in use. This could be an opportunity to be harnessed for technology usage exposures and explorations. This would turn out to be beneficial of teaching the digital generation.

The only glaring problem now is the inclusivity element. Each individual is different, which is being addressed by the diversity of learning styles and strategies, multiple intelligences and all that. It was an almost everyday challenge for instructors before the pandemic crisis; all the more now where physical distancing is in place. Moreover, the
determinant of digital divide seems to steer away the inclusion principle of education. I do not know why most think that everyone has the same access to updated technology or has privileges with the modern digital-domestic homes. Online learning gave uproars to majority of students during this pandemic crisis. Surely, it is not the problem of every learner; but, having only a few who cannot access the same digital edge (which others can) removes inclusivity as one of education’s known pillars. Left alone those who chose to be under the grid, the digital social divide widens during this pandemic crisis. Perhaps, the government and computer communities should step in to remedy this problem. How about we start to address the issues on the monopoly of our long time telco suppliers? Well, it cannot be helped to leave them out of this technological suppression since they have been our telco providers for the longest time. Another solution that could be worth giving a try is providing multiple alternatives that instructors and students can freely choose from- this one is by far the most practical and relatively the cheapest. It only needs understanding and, as the learning community put it, humane consideration.

History and life taught us that civilizations come and go; that adversaries test the endurance of mankind, every now and then; and, that from time to time, problems arise to question our mere existence. This pandemic crisis is just one of those defining moments of mankind’s glorified story of survival. When the dust settles, this ongoing crisis might be remembered as the event that pushed this contemporary world to its new normal. With this in mind, it is advisable for the learning institution to take this as another challenge in the pursuit of academic excellence, and as an opportunity to be more innovative than ever in providing quality education to the Filipino citizens, to every citizen here and offshore. We should embrace this new normal as a tool to step up our game of finding and experiencing education as a science based on varying cultural make up and stories. Obstacles and hiccups are always to be expected when navigating through difficulties, hence understanding and utmost consideration should be practiced amongst every members of the learning communities. I say, we should have more patience, add more ears who listen, and extend more hands that would help. For some in the educational field, this is a rare chance to help discover new innovations and provide plausible solutions to the new normal setbacks that has been laid on the table.

I cannot remember who the scientist or person is, and I can hardly tell if someone actually said it or not, but I may have remembered it correctly that once this phrase was
quipped: "Everything is algorithm." COVID-19 may have been a step ahead of science, be it medicine or education; but mathematics and science will show us how to flatten this pandemic curve, both literally and figuratively. So far, the community quarantines have been effective as expected. Eventually, the resolve and resilience of the bodies in authority have introduced us to "the new normal" as everyone is taking their part in flattening this pandemic curve. And, it is also expected to last longer than we, in the academic institutions, have anticipated. Oh, aren’t we, the learning institution, suppose to be part of making the world a better place to live in? Therefore, we should take our time, make more calculated steps, and be more thankful that we are still alive despite the viral threat. Let us then put more importance to living; and give more value to the sanctity of life in general, as we try to keep the torch of education burning in the time of “the new normal.”

Whilst we wait for the dust to finally settle, for the man’s algorithm to catch up, and for the COVID-19 curve to flatten – may God help us all!

References: