

Balancing the Pedagogical and Practical Concerns in Remote Higher Education: A Cyberethnography

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic brought about physical school closures and quick transitions online, with universities making decisions for this new mode of instruction. Such decisions, however, were open to discussion and debates, particularly as students and instructors held varying concerns, experiences, and expectations for remote learning. We investigate what these debates are using a cyberethnography of a Facebook group for students and faculty, and an anonymous Freedom Wall page for students in the same university. The concerns centered on workload that balanced academic rigor and practical exigencies; learning modalities that balanced accountability and flexibility; and assessments that balanced academic integrity and viable accommodations. Taken altogether, these suggest that faculty and students' concerns are not merely about discrete curricular choices but are, at their root, about balancing pedagogical excellence and practical adaptability. We thus suggest that universities couch their policies not through discrete options but through the balancing of values.

Keywords: COVID-19, pedagogy, higher education, cyberethnography, remote learning

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes in higher education systems worldwide. Physical school closure and the abrupt transition to “remote learning” have challenged universities in terms of its planning, implementation, and assessment (Toquero, 2020). As the online setup became a primary means of remote learning in higher education, it led to new modes of instruction, assessment, and communication (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Existing bodies of research suggest that this transition afforded advantages, such as positive changes in habits and mindsets regarding personal health and safety (Aristovnik et al. 2020) as well as disadvantages, such as ineffective technologies and lack of access for disadvantaged students (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Given these mixed results, researchers are studying how COVID-19 was consequential for educational institutions and student learning (Bao, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Yan, 2020). More importantly, practical recommendations are needed for higher education institutions on how to support students and instructors as the pandemic, as of writing, still continues and progresses.

Throughout the course of the pandemic, several studies have investigated this drastic change in education delivery and reception (Ali, 2020; Barbour et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020). Researchers highlighted the promise of online learning and the importance of its contextualization (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Karalis and Raikou, 2020; Mouchantaf, 2020). Although online learning has been present for some time before the pandemic, it was often seen as supplementary to onsite learning or a secondary source of knowledge and skills through online courses. With physical restrictions, however, online learning has become the primary mode of delivery in many higher education institutions, and many organizations and researchers have studied the transition through surveys and interviews (Agormedah et al., 2020; Devkota, 2021; Didenko et al., 2021; Mukhtar et al., 2020). To supplement these studies, we explore how students and instructors talk about their transition to online learning through a cyberethnography using social media posts and interactions. While studies have looked into social media as a site of learning (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Deng & Tavares, 2013; Phirangee & Malec, 2017;

Whittaker et al., 2014), less is known about how social media becomes a site for debates and discussions regarding learning.

In this research, we looked at the experiences of a private university in the Philippines, and the emerging discussions and debates on implementing online learning. Through a cyberethnography of two sites frequented by university students and faculty, we found that they were concerned about (1) workload that balanced academic rigor and practical exigencies, (2) learning modalities that balanced accountability and flexibility, and (3) assessments that balanced value-adding characteristics and viable accommodations. In a way, we argue that these debates are not so much about whether to use this or that option, but about how the institution balances competing values of pedagogical excellence and practical adaptability. Thus, university decisions should not only rely on what is most efficient or what the majority prefer, but should be attentive to the balancing of the pedagogical and practical concerns of both students and faculty.

2. Literature Review

2.1 COVID-19 and Higher Education's Transition

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted various sectors of societies across the globe with education being no exception. In the beginning of the pandemic, many educational institutions struggled to adapt to this disruption of face-to-face learning. However, universities quickly transitioned to remote and online learning with the goal of continuing students' education during the pandemic.

This transition, as explained by Barbour et al. (2020), can be conceptualized in four stages. Phase 1 represented the rapid transition to remote teaching where educators employed an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to recreating educational presence in online classes. This came in the form of utilizing synchronous videos or holding lectures through videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom. The second phase involved universities addressing issues of equitable access, academic integrity, and course design, while the third phase included schools' preparation to initiate a full term of online delivery and student support. Finally, Phase 4 is the present stage where schools need to further fine-tune technology, support, and other resources available to students as they continue on with their education. Such investments made during the transition can potentially be utilized after the pandemic as students and instructors become increasingly comfortable using these resources.

The four phases of educational response to COVID-19 highlight the movement from remote learning to a more integrated online learning. Emergency remote learning served to fulfill the goal of education continuity during the pandemic as an attempt by universities not "to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis" (Barbour et al., 2020, p. 6). Meanwhile, online learning has since become the primary form of remote learning employed by higher education institutions for experiences rooted "in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices (e.g., mobile phones, laptops, etc.) with internet access" (Dhawan, 2020, p. 7). In contrast to remote learning, online learning is recognized to be more structured because it is characterized by its careful design, planning, and application of organized models for the intention of designing and developing instruction (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). In this present study, our emphasis will be on this transition from emergency remote learning to a more integrated and pedagogically responsive online learning.

2.2 Opportunities and Challenges

The abrupt transition of higher education from face-to-face classes to remote learning has introduced various opportunities, challenges, and limitations for both instructors and students.

On the one hand, new opportunities included socio-economic interventions towards accessible online learning platforms, research innovations that helped fast-track advancements in the digitization of educational systems, and technological developments that focused academic attention towards the fight against COVID-19 (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Karalis and Raikou (2020) found that during the beginning of online classes, students felt positive emotions for the promises of a new learning experience. These positive findings included increases in online education participation, development

of new skills through online teaching, and greater collaboration between students. Zembylas et al. (2008) have substantiated this finding by suggesting the students' eagerness for the flexibility of a distance learning setup and the satisfaction that comes with the fulfillment of course requirements improving students' morale. Designing for students with disabilities have also prospered and have led to the development of inclusive models for courseware design as well as evaluations that feature changes that accommodate different learners (Pearson & Koppi, 2016). The transition has also opened discussions exploring distance and online learning methods in general, which has helped government and academic institutions strategize their transition to online learning. A study by Ferri et al. (2020) explored the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic through discussion forums and case studies, and were able to identify proposals responding to the open challenges posed by online learning.

On the other hand, significant challenges were also documented such as greater technological inequities and difficulties. A study investigating distance learning in higher education institutions discovered factors that affected its effectiveness: technical complications, concerns about academic transparency and integrity, and the lack of instructor training and/or institutional support (Mouchantaf, 2020). Meanwhile, another study found that students faced limitations such as lack of access to internet facilities, lack of proper interaction or contact with students and instructors, and ineffective technologies (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Such challenges can be summarized and are related to communication, cooperation, and restriction of social contact in the academic context as significant challenges experienced by higher education students (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). While remote learning has introduced several novel educational experiences, barriers continue to affect students' learning experience that prevent their optimal participation, instruction, and engagement.

To address these, universities instituted different policies and made various decisions that were supposed to address the continuity of education and flexibility to individuals' contexts. Specific solutions, such as providing affordable devices; maximizing alternative modalities such as television, radio, and online courses; creating systematic training initiatives for teachers and learners in adjusting to new learning management systems (LMS); and using a blended or hybrid approach to reinforce a sense of community have been suggested (Ferri et al, 2020) and implemented in different institutions as a response to the pandemic (Telles-Langdon, 2020; Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020).

2.3 Social Media Groups

Alongside migrating to online learning means, various members of the education sector have also utilized social media in simulating and continuing common social interactions beyond the classroom. This coming together in online platforms led to the creation of online learning communities. Such communities have been found to not only enable students and educators to fulfill learning goals online (Yang et al., 2007, as cited in Chen et al., 2009), but also foster peer support virtually by providing practical and emotional help (Bruckman, 2006, as cited in Deng & Tavares, 2013). Although LMS's provide spaces for discussion online, both students and educators have preferred social media platforms, particularly Facebook, in interacting with each other and sharing knowledge. Facebook as a dominant social media platform for learning communities can be tied to its prevalence worldwide.

The same phenomenon has also been observed in learning communities from other parts of the globe. In the case of students' usage of Moodle versus Facebook for school-related interactions, Deng and Tavares (2013) observed that students were more motivated to convene in Facebook groups due to the wider array of discussions it enables, from casual chatter to serious academic concerns. Students perceived Moodle as a more formal academic platform, whereas they believed Facebook's interface gives way to more organic and spontaneous engagement. Meanwhile, teachers of English as Foreign Language (EFL) in Vietnam saw Facebook groups as a platform for extending their professional development beyond the (virtual) confines of their institution (Mai et al., 2020). In private Facebook groups for EFL teachers, they did not only acquire references for research and opportunities to join seminars, but they were also able to build community with other members by sharing experiences and advice (Mai et al., 2020). The perceived collaborative and semi-formal approach for imparting knowledge and support is also shown in Muls et al.'s (2019) study on a Facebook group used by Flemish secondary school teachers.

Beyond its stark difference from the common interface and communication approach of LMS's, Facebook motivates both students and educators to engage in these learning communities by enabling social network ties and social presence (Chen et al., 2009). Seeking and providing social support are

connected with users' existing habits of using Facebook and their perceived social presence in the platform (Deng & Tavares, 2013). Social presence of members in an online group encourages a stronger sense of community, which then fosters shared meaning and understanding amidst a distant and isolating online learning environment (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). For these reasons, researchers can view the social interactions in this cyberspace as "more natural" than those in LMS's or those obtained through surveys or interviews.

Apart from these online learning communities interacting through Facebook groups, which usually take up a "formal" approach in communication, another affordance of Facebook is the emergence of spaces for anonymous posting. Often created and moderated by students themselves, these Facebook pages allow students to air out grievances and opinions (Buenaseda et al., 2021), which often include their learning experiences. In the Philippines, the rise of similar platforms, more commonly known as "freedom walls," has been observed in recent years (Buenaseda et al., 2021; Pantaleon, 2019). In general, several studies have investigated student interactions and engagement when they were anonymous to each other (Freeman & Bamford, 2004; Roberts & Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013); however, these were often limited in the formal academic setting online. Thus, in addition to studying online Facebook groups, online spaces that grant anonymity may also be a potent place for social understanding.

3. Methods

The transition to a remote style of learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has opened online spaces for debates and discussions among individuals from a private university in the Philippines, herein called Marian University. Two such online spaces have been identified by the researchers: Marian University Online Learning Community (MUOLC) Facebook group and Marian University Freedom Wall (MUFW) Facebook page. The MUOLC group had more than 6,000 members, including students, faculty, administrators, professionals, and other personnel of Marian University who shared feedback and ideas to further improve each other's online learning experience. Meanwhile, the unsanctioned MUFW Facebook page has over 3,000 followers where people, presumably from the said university, can post anonymously about anything: from experiences and inquiries, to rants and complaints. To better understand the online community and analyze the debates and interactions that took place in such online spaces, we argued that a cyberethnography was the most appropriate research method.

Cyberethnography, also known as online or virtual ethnography, involves immersing in virtual cultures and observing interactions on websites and virtual communities. It enables researchers to explore how digital technologies support the needs, abilities, aspirations, and circumstances of learners and learning communities (Keeley-Browne, 2011). In this study, the researchers observed the interactions of both MUOLC and MUFW to gain insights from people of different sectors and backgrounds regarding the different topics discussed. The researchers took on the role of observers detached from the participants, allowing for an unbiased snapshot of typical discussions and practices (Jenkins et al., 2021).

3.1 Data Representation and Post Selection Criteria

The researchers decided to analyze first the MUOLC Facebook group since it was the site for various formal discussions between faculty and students. Posts, alongside their comments and number of reactions, from July 2020 to June 2021 were analyzed to determine what debates were prevalent and persistent. The identified MUOLC debates were then compared to their counterparts found in MUFW, which we searched using related keywords. Juxtaposing similar MUFW and MUOLC debates enabled comparisons in terms of the nature and content of these arguments.

3.2 Limitations

Given the nature of an online space, limitations were also considered by the researchers. First is the ethical issue of using participants' posts and comments in both online spaces. Since the MUOLC is a closed Facebook group, its posts and comments were not intended for research, which raises the issue of individual privacy and consent. This may also apply to MUFW despite being a public Facebook

group page, given that members might regard the page as a private space. In order to resolve the ethical issues, the present research does not name the Facebook group and the Freedom Wall nor are people's names or verbatim quotes used. Changing the names demonstrates respect of privacy given "the social reality of cyberspace" (Rutter and Smith, 2008; Paccagnella, 1997). Efforts have also been made to completely deidentify the data through paraphrasing and only providing an analysis of these online interactions (Dey, 2019). In addition, none of the information negatively implicated any individual or organization since the focus was on pedagogical and practical debates.

A second limitation is the methodological issue of biased answers with participants who are actually involved in such online spaces and with posts that gain greater traction (Mathy et al., 2003). It is important to clarify that the current study takes an exploratory approach, with the objective of understanding the online community and its members from different sectors and backgrounds, and analyzing the events and the interaction that took place within the online community. The study does not intend to conclude generalizations and representation of the opinions of the university.

The third limitation is that most of the analysis was dependent on interpretation of the textual or visual data rather than the physical behavior of people. According to Dey (2019), the researcher's analysis and understanding of the data may differ from the audience's perception of it and more importantly the producer's intent. However, by placing the data within the sociocultural context and using critical theoretical lenses (Dey, 2019), we provide reasonable grounds for our arguments' salience and rationality.

4. Findings

To understand what concerns faculty and students have during the transition to remote learning, we looked into posts and replies regarding decisions made for this new modality of learning. From the university's informal Facebook group and its anonymous Freedom Wall page, we found that three key topics were heavily discussed. First was about the workload and time allocation for the courses, in particular the school's decision to move from a semestral to a quarterly system. Second was regarding the most effective ways of delivering content through synchronous or asynchronous activities. Third was about how assessments have to be set up during this transition to online learning in order to ensure both flexibility and academic honesty.

4.1 Workload and Term Length: Semestral vs. quarterly

During the COVID-19 outbreak in the Philippines mid-semester in March 2020, Marian University transitioned to remote learning, moving classes online through the platforms teachers preferred and ending the semester in late May. The university announced the move to a quarterly system for most courses during the summer of 2020 just before the 2020-2021 academic year. Some courses like science laboratory and thesis-writing courses followed the semestral system. With this transition to remote learning and to a quarterly calendar of around nine weeks, both students and instructors had to prepare for changes. During this transition as well, different offices were evaluating how their constituents responded to the new quarterly set up: The student government created a survey; the university administration sent out its own survey; deans created town hall meetings with faculty; and different people discussed their sentiments on social media.

In this section, we document what was happening in the social media space as students and faculty discussed their reasons for choosing one over the other. On the one hand, the preference for the quarterly system stemmed from students' focus on the subjects and their concerns about the unwieldy course load. On the other hand, the preference for the semestral system stemmed from students wanting flexibility in terms of time, and instructors wanting more time to grade coursework and create a sense of community in their classes.

In the Marian University Online Learning Community (MUOLC), students who preferred the quarterly setup primarily viewed the reduction of subjects as an advantage. They found that managing fewer subjects in a shorter amount of time allowed them to focus on their workload, which in turn lessened their anxiety in juggling different courses and commitments. However, these students preferred this relative to the semestral setup, which most assumed would have a higher amount of workload.

Additional arguments were made where students felt that a shorter academic period made rigorous efforts in doing academic requirements paid off faster.

Similar adjustments were also made and documented by faculty members who talked about how they reduced the workload, given the differences in students' ability to work on the online materials, and the many other issues of internet connectivity, health concerns, and natural calamities. Many of the faculty, however, feared that such a shortened term coupled with reduced workload could lead to a decline in academic rigor and the inability of students to gain the necessary skills for their professional careers and licensure exams. Thus, not a few students and instructors also advocated a shift to the semestral system.

The main argument for the shift to the semestral system is in terms of the flexibility it affords for time management and pacing. In the back-and-forth discussions on posts and threads in the MUOLC, faculty and students emphasized how the semestral system will provide them more time to give (or be given) feedback and catch up on classes after a sickness or typhoon. They argue that the semestral setup is also better suited for courses in which students will need to avail of certain services such a borrowing of books from the library and availing of a portable learning packet for those with internet connectivity issues. Students also stated that certain assessments like essays and class projects were more time consuming than others. Additionally, students found that course content adapted to the semestral set up have a fuller impact in comparison to summarized course content adapted to the quarterly set up, allowing students to feel academically challenged. Finally, the discussions mentioned that this semestral setup was more inclusive to those who did not follow the regular program of study since conflicts may arise when enlisting for different courses and programs.

Many of these reasons discussed in the MUOLC were also present in the discussions on the Freedom Wall. Given that the MUFW was more frequently used for anonymous posts and complaints, the debates looked into the disadvantages of both sides. One original post was about a "conversation" between the quarterly and semestral systems, and how quarterly term advocates shared that they had so little time to study their subjects while semestral term advocates shared that they had too many subjects to study at the same time. With regards to the semestral setup, concerns about instructors assigning more workload due to a longer academic period were raised, inciting feelings of stress and anxiety among students regarding workload management.

While there was no clear "right" decision, Marian University opted to shift to the semestral system for the 2021-2022 academic year, which as of writing, will still happen online. Taking a step back, we found that advocates and critics of the quarterly setup were using the language of practicality. Ultimately, what they wanted was a setup that addressed their concerns about time constraints and curricular stresses. On the one hand, students and faculty wanted to have flexibility in terms of time as many unforeseen calamities and diseases may arise in a shortened quarterly setup. Yet they also hoped to have a setup that did not overwhelm them or lead to more stress. Thus, we argue that we should couch this debate not as between quarterly and semestral setups but between balancing academic rigor and practical flexibility.

4.2 Modality: Synchronous and asynchronous

In MUOLC, students and faculty spoke about their reasons for preferring a certain instructional modality, and more critically, when synchronous or asynchronous instruction is more effective. In this discussion, synchronous is defined as students attending class with the instructor lecturing or facilitating discussion over a video conferencing platform. Asynchronous is defined as students watching recorded lectures or going through course materials independently at their own time. Rather than a dichotomy, discussions in the Facebook group were more of a spectrum regarding which mode of delivery would be more appropriate. On the one hand, some students preferred synchronous modules since it fostered a sense of community, provided a chance for quick feedback, and created a sense of accountability. On the other hand, some students preferred the asynchronous setup because of the increased flexibility and efficiency it provided.

Discussions regarding synchronous learning emphasized how being in the same Zoom room as their classmates lets students ask questions when they arise. The usual format has often been one where the teacher lectures while sharing the computer screen, and students watch and take notes. Some students, however, just wait for the recorded lecture, but those who are in the synchronous session have the opportunity to ask questions. Students said this was helpful for them to check in and consult with

their teachers while class is going on. Students also said that particular subjects lent themselves more readily to this synchronous format, such as those that are highly technical where one needs to clarify things in class (e.g., math, physics, chemistry), those that need a lot of engagement and discussion (e.g., philosophy, theology, history), and those that require oral understanding and practice (e.g., foreign language courses).

While some students prefer to attend these online sessions because they feel that they are held more accountable to their learning, a number of professors lamented the fact that very few--if any--students had their cameras turned on. This made communication difficult since there were no visual cues to see if students were understanding the content being taught. Thus, the idea of building a community depends on whether the class is engaged enough to build that community.

Given this inability to fulfill this community-building goal, many students opt to simply watch recorded lectures--whether those the instructors record on their own or the recording of Zoom sessions made available online. In a poll in MUOLC, students cited that asynchronous modality was their most preferred method of learning, with it garnering more than 600 votes. Many highlighted how it provided them with flexibility on when to "attend class" and provided them with materials they needed to know.

In the Freedom Wall, posts related to learning modality highlighted how personal concerns like dealing with vaccination side effects and natural calamities prevented students from participating in synchronous classes. For those who went to synchronous classes, they explain not wanting to turn on their cameras because of the feeling of discomfort or because of poor internet connection. Many thought that synchronous sessions should be optional since they could easily access course content.

Taking another step back, we found that students valued flexibility and efficiency on the one hand, and accountability and community on the other. Many thought that synchronous classes should be recorded for those unable or unwilling to attend them, providing a sense of flexibility for those who needed it. At the same time, this did not disprivilege those who wanted to attend the synchronous to build a sense of routine. The challenge then is for instructors to provide and show the added value of students being in the synchronous class. If students can efficiently access recorded classes anyway, what would motivate them to attend synchronously?

4.3 Assessments: Synchronous tests, discussion boards, group work

The shift to online modes of delivery also calls for rethinking the assessment of student learning. As observed from both MUOLC and MUFW, the recurring concerns for assessments centered on academic integrity, organic discussion, and efficient collaboration. In general, there were differences in how instructors and students view the purpose and practicality of some assessment procedures.

While instructors think of synchronous tests as a way of preventing cheating, students said that these tests should only be used when it is the only appropriate option for a subject. They reasoned that instructors had to make structural adjustments to provide just enough time for tests given the unforeseen delays but not so much time for students to cheat on a test. Some mentioned that synchronous tests are a poor measure of preparation, diligence, and mastery of a subject, but are rather an assessment of an individual's speed. Yet instructors' fears of cheating are not unfounded since the MUFW also documented stories of individuals being invited by others to cheat with them.

Another aspect that gained considerable debate is the use of asynchronous discussion boards, which many students thought as unsuccessful in generating the organic discourse it had originally hoped to foster. Moreover, instructors assigning grades on the discussion posts have led students to write mini-essays and forced them to reply to others with bland agreements which fail to add any value to the online discussion. Although some said that they gained insights from their classmates' replies, many more would rather have it ungraded; otherwise, if they were graded, it had to be designed purposefully to generate dynamic learning and questions. Such discussion boards, however, have to be juxtaposed with the original intent of instructors who said that these were supposedly for greater engagement with the material and with each other.

Another common form of assessment that the students were generally against was group work that tended to be inefficient and inequitable. It was found that this form of assessment was used by instructors in the hopes of alleviating the weight of their students' workload. However, students reported otherwise: they expressed that collaborating with people they are unfamiliar with can lead to inconveniences in reaching other students, and the quality of work suffering because of it. They

explained that this experience was exacerbated in an online setting because of the uncertainty in contact. MUFW was also filled with rants about how unnecessary group works were.

Altogether, these sentiments claim that apart from making familiar assessments flexible in the online setup, looking into what students regard as value-adding to their learning should also be considered. The disadvantages observed from the three different forms of assessment raise the question on how students can be discouraged from cheating in tests, blandly agreeing in discussion boards, and finding collaborative work burdensome. This concern highlights how students need to perceive relevance and practicality from their coursework, as this can generate motivation for involving themselves in the exchange of ideas and questions. Hence, beyond upholding academic integrity, instructors must also note how students can be motivated to engage in class and apply their learning in a relevant and practical manner, even in an online setup. Although traditional assessments should not be completely discarded, the types of discussions in both MUOLC and MUFW give way to the need for remodelling online assessments. Given these points, it is not enough to couch the debate as to whether this or that type of assessment is better, but as to what values are in conversation or in conflict with each other.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The question on what universities should do is not so much a question of which among the options is the best one, but a question on what specific values need to be balanced. While most research looks into the discrete advantages and disadvantages of educational policies in the transition to remote learning (Korolkov et al., 2020; Kotrikadze & Zharkova, 2021), our present research furthers this conceptualization by suggesting the need to look into the deeper values coming to play. Using a cyberethnography of a Philippine university, we found that students and faculty were concerned about balancing the academic rigors of higher education with the flexibility and adaptability necessary during these difficult circumstances.

Such balancing of the pedagogical and practical happens in at least three domains. First, it happens in the domain of workload and time allocated. Given how the pandemic has exacted physical and emotional demands on students and instructors, higher education institutions are conscious about inducing additional stresses (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Göksu et al., 2021; Hoyt et al., 2021, Oducado et al., 2020). Thus, universities have looked for ways of reducing these demands. For Marian University, it was about transitioning to the quarterly system. However, as with any policies, these have had unintended consequences for students and instructors feeling greater stress from the shortened time to work on courses. Thus, an organizational intervention must attend to the balance between time flexibility and the stress in these activities.

Second, higher education actors are concerned about the mode of delivery. Synchronous sessions provide a sense of normalcy and accountability, but given the many unforeseen events and stressors with this new normal (Fawaz et al., 2021; Tümen Akyildiz, 2020), asynchronous sessions provide much needed flexibility and lenience. Many universities have adapted to this by suggesting bichronous modalities such as the flipped classroom approach, which was found to be empowering to the student's engagement and interactive learning (Rehman & Fatima, 2021). This model is an active learning pedagogical method that integrates a mixture of asynchronous and interactive synchronous learning strategies, where the former includes pre-recorded lectures on learning content, videos, quizzes, and uploaded module assignments, while the latter includes interactive discussions and higher-order learning activities like problem-solving in class. This approach was similar to Lin and Gao's (2020) study of students in a Chinese university that focused on creating a community with distance learning formats. Heilporn et al. (2021) also proposed similar strategies to enhance student engagement of such blended learning (BL). These strategies were classified in three meta-categories concerning (i) the course structure and pace; (ii) the selection of teaching and learning activities; and (iii) the teacher's role and course relationships to guide practitioners and researchers toward enhanced student engagement in BL environments, whether asynchronously or synchronously.

Third, a growing concern during the pandemic is how to make online assessments valuable to students yet also attentive to issues of academic dishonesty, unengaging discussions, inefficient collaborative work, and others. Aside from the feedback gathered from MUOLC and MUFW, existing studies have also raised similar concerns. Some have focused on the rise of academic misconduct in the

online setup (Amzalag et al., 2021; Elsalem et al., 2021), which led universities to implement strict policies such as academic integrity codes, monitoring softwares, and timed exams (Paredes et al., 2021; Holton, 2020; Kharbat & Abu Daabes, 2021). As for discussion boards, Ringler et al. (2015) suggested how improving them entails encouraging student motivation, demonstrating instructors' social presence, and eliciting high-level critical thinking skills. Lastly, group works have been seen as beneficial and efficient to students, particularly both before the pandemic, and at the onset of emergency remote learning (Hazari & Thompson, 2015; Nickerson & Shea, 2020). Hence, our study counters this by suggesting how students are burdened by this mode of assessment. Taken together, these measures, suggestions, and observations can come in conflict with adaptations to students' unique circumstances. Thus, instead of suggesting whether one option is better than another, our research highlights the need to couch the debates in terms of the values considered important. Interventions then should be set up so that the different values are in conversation with each other rather than simply rely on the observable policies. For example, in balancing the accountability and flexibility of synchronous or asynchronous delivery, instructors may provide recorded lectures for the discussion of content, offering students flexibility on when to view them, but then holding them accountable by having synchronous classes that deepen this discussion. In addressing time constraints and curricular stress, instructors can introduce curriculum schedules and project plans to allow students to pace themselves accordingly and manage requirements incrementally. Meanwhile, in assessing student learning in the online setup, strategies such as crafting authentic assessments can be considered, as these can connect classroom learning to the practicality needed in professional fields. It has also been found that some forms of such assessment can prevent students from engaging in academic misconduct (Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Furthermore, instructors must also consider how forms of assessment can strike the balance between being engaging and effective for students (Trinidad et al., 2020), while practicing utmost empathy to their varying contexts for online learning.

While the pandemic has made the work of higher education more challenging and has shown fissures and inequalities in society, it has also brought about much needed reflection and reassessment of how universities and colleges instruct. Because of the massive shift and change, we argue that universities should not only look into the most efficient or equitable option, but look deeper into the values that are at play in these options. Only when we clarify these values can universities come up with creative solutions that do not choose "either-or" but the best of "both-and." Here, we suggest that such values ultimately boil down to the balancing of academic excellence, rigor, and integrity on the one hand, and practical flexibility, adaptability, and accommodations on the other.

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