PUBLIC ODEL: PERPECTIVES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AMONG GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES AT THE ROXAS CITY LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Track: Problems, Barriers, Reforms and Solutions

Sub Theme: Overcoming problems, barriers and challenges in ODeL or Nurturing the culture of lifelong learning

Key Words: Public service, government, distance education, Roxas City Hall

Abstract:

Distance education while currently being exploited by professionals should also be viewed as a means of self-enrichment for government employees who are frequently forced to dismiss the possibility of continuing education because of the demands of public service or others. The Civil Service Commission of the Philippines Qualification Standard lists as qualifications among the many government positions higher attainments in education as a preference. Surprisingly, not many government employees and officials take or are currently enrolled in distance education courses or regular non-online courses for that matter. This study qualitatively explores, via interviews, the perceptions of distance education of the government employees of the Roxas City Local Government. The study uses narratives to make sense of the observed distance education phenomenon among government employees. Data is analyzed in the context of the reality that was described by the respondents and contextual assumptions are derived from these realities. Quite simply, the analytic frame of this study is founded on realities that reside in the researched community and in knowledge that is co-constructed by the researcher and the researched community. Among others, it seeks to determine how government employees view distance education and what it represents to them as public servants, it identifies the reasons why government employees in the said local government unit barely attempt to enroll themselves in distance education courses despite the opportunities that this can offer and it attempts to make recommendations as to how distance education can be improved to accommodate the needs and be more responsive to the demands of government employees.

Introduction:

Working for the local government of Roxas City for the past eleven years has made me realize two things – that intellectual development in government is static and that government employees have no reason at all to stay away from educational or academic opportunities. However, in the Roxas City local government, barely any employees have pursued or are currently enrolled in post-graduate courses. In fact, some employees are undergraduates who decided to just work and not pursue their education. The implications of this are great. Apart from stunted intellectual development for these employees, public service could suffer considering the intellectual capacity of the public servants performing vital operations necessary for public service efficiency especially employees who are merely college under graduates.

About six years ago, I graduated from my Masters in the Professional Studies of Development Communication from the UP-Open University. I was working full time while studying but graduated dean's list despite the time and resource constraints that, from my perspective, did not actually exist to begin with. Government work is as lax as any kind of work can be notwithstanding the regular eight-to-five time clock, which gives employees enough time in the evening to take care of other things or perhaps, study, or do course work. As a fringe benefit, I was able to use my workplace as the subject of many of the papers and research tasks that were required of my course. Of course, distance learning is expected to encourage its learners to draw from their own backgrounds for applications of theories learned in class. What needs to be extrapolated here is the reality that government employees are, in their capacity as individuals, fully capable of continuing education and are in need of it. In addition, distance education or e-learning, while already available, is not as inaccessible or expensive as some believe it to be.

The true wealth in continuing education, however, is not just its accessibility or its low cost but the benefits one reaps after having completed advanced degrees. Upon my graduation from the UPOU I immediately received a promotion from my office and since then my professional growth in government has been upward. I have gone from being a researcher, to a manager, to a department head, and of course, the financial benefits follow suit. Modesty aside, I am living proof of what an advanced degree can do to one's professional growth, hence, while government employees are not as privileged when it comes to other things, this is the privileged voice that is highlighted in this study. The reason for this is, apparently, a selfless act on my part to try to encourage my fellow government employees to consider advanced educational opportunities for their own personal growth by first exploring their perceptions of the singular educational delivery system that seems to be tailor-fitted or customized to the needs of government employees. Hence, this study is a stepping-stone towards a better ODEL for government employees and a more comprehensive and accurate ODEL understanding among public servants.

Perception Of The Central Phenomenon:

Why is perception so important? What role does it play in the decision-making process of individuals? These are but a few of the questions one would ask in relation to the matter of whether certain decisions are made or are passed up on account of individual perception. The connection between perception and action can be found in an early Nietzsche metaphor that posits that things can be perceived differently when viewed under diverse conditions (such as

colors which shift and change depending on the amount of white light these are exposed to), in effect, perspectives can be distorted on account of certain other conditions (Conant, 2008:8). Hence, in the context of this position there is a necessity to correct these distortions in the interest of a more accurate or better judgment (Conant, 2008:8). Nietzsche termed this position as naïve perspectivism (Conant, 2008:8). Despite some scholars considering naïve perspectivism to be merely a "reminder about some of the potentially deceptive circumstances under which objects can be perceptually encountered" (Conant, 2008:8) the concept itself illustrates how a judgment can result from a perspective of something, regardless of the accuracy of the perception. In such philosophical terms, one can see the importance of perception to the decision-making process. The importance of perception to action is further reiterated in an extensive scientific psychological study conducted by Anthony Marcel in 1983 titled, "Conscious and Unconscious Perception: An Approach to the Relations between Phenomenal Experience and Perceptual Processes" where a series of experiments were conducted to ascertain the role of conscious and unconscious perception in phenomenal experience. Said study concluded that perception does play an important role in phenomenal experience albeit this being just an aspect to include cultural beliefs and preconceived notions (Marcel, 1983:290). Nonetheless, perception matters in the kind of experiences that individuals choose to go through with; what all these amounts to is the significance of perception in a person's actions corollary to said perception. In essence, it is possible that the way people perceive a central phenomenon influences actions in relation to that central phenomenon. In which case, recommendations can then be made to make the perception of a central phenomenon more accurate to allow better-informed decision-making.

Odel-The Perceived Central Phenomenon:

In this study in particular, the central phenomenon is open and distance e-learning (ODEL). While ODEL is a worldwide phenomenon with the University of the Philippines System through the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) as one of the pioneers in the field (UPOU, 2011), it is ironic that many Filipinos have varied perceptions of it. Universities and people all over the world have a concept of what ODEL is. In terms of costs, "distance education can be more cost-effective than face-to-face education and that costs are predominantly dependent upon student enrollment and the fixed costs of course development and delivery" (Cukier, 1997, p. 138 as quoted by Jung, 2003:717); cost-effectiveness here can be construed as having the most benefits with the least financial output. Hence, this statement alone establishes two things; that distance education is cheaper on the part of the individual and the part of the institution and its quality is comparable to conventional education. Putting this concept in the context of Philippine setting, it becomes particularly clear that ODEL is in fact described to be education that is easily accessible by modern information technology and education that does not fall short when it comes to standards of educational quality. In a broader sense, distance education has been described to be totally reliant on and responding to the demands of the modern industrial era (Evans and Nation, 2003:784). As such, distance education may be delivered without the aid of modern information technology as was the case in correspondence schools, but with technological tools becoming more accessible in the 20th century distance education has expanded its reach because of how it is easily accessible via technologies easily available to audiences and consumers of such kind of education. On the outset, "Distance education emerged as a descriptor for those forms of institutional education

occurring outside the classroom and beyond the campus in the 1960s" (Evans and Nation, 2003:777). It was during this period that distance education was referred to as correspondence schools or correspondence education. Later, the trend moved more pronouncedly towards correspondence schools becoming distance education institutions with the "International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) becoming the the International Council of Distance Education (ICDE)" (Evans and Nation, 2003:777) in 1982.

In the Philippines, the distribution of education via information and communication technology (ICT) channels has spurred the contagion of distance education. Said distribution methodology is also being the primary goal of the National Information Technology Council (NITC) of 1997 as it sought to deliver vital agricultural, health, and economic information and education to far flung areas in Maguindanao via the establishment of community telecenters (Ramos, Nangit, Ranga, and Triñona, 2007:214). To this day, this type of educational delivery is what pervades distance education perceptions in the country so most Filipinos feel that such kind of education is informal and free. As for formal and paid distance education, with only a few institutions offering such kind of education to include the University of the Philippines, the Asian Institute for Distance Education, CAP College Foundation, CE Learning, Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Manila, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, and the South East Asia Interdisciplinary Development Institute, the perception of distance education has been varied, and often inaccurate. There are, however, two main lenses in this study through which distance education is perceived and these are accessibility (to include price) and quality.

Odel In The Context Of The Roxas City Local Government Unit:

For purposes of this study, the employees of the Roxas City Hall, a local government unit in the Philippines, have been subjected to interviews regarding their perceptions of distance education. Said LGU is composed of 698 employees all occupying plantilla/permanent positions (Roxas City Government, 2011). Of the 698 employees, twenty-nine, or approximately 4% are in top-level management (Roxas City Government, 2011) and the rest are rank and file. Of the 669 who belong to the rank and file, 338 or 48% are either high school graduates only or college undergraduates (Roxas City Government, 2011). Of the 360 employees who are all college graduates only two are currently pursuing or had attempted to pursue continuing education, one had already dropped out five years ago leaving only one who is currently pursuing a post-graduate course (yours truly) (Roxas City Government, 2011). The staggering figures in the Roxas City Local Government unit would seem disconcerting if not for the Civil Service Qualification Standards (CSQS) that allows employment of undergraduates and high school graduates specifically in first level positions, requiring only sub-professional CSC eligibility (CSC, 2011). Here, then, is the primary reason why many have sought to work instead of pursue their studies. Nevertheless, of the almost half of employees choosing not to complete their academics, the option of distance education is now available which would allow said employees to work and at the same time pursue their degrees or seek higher academic attainments. If not for politics and the recent reorganization of qualification standards in 2003, the CSQS would definitely not allow mere college graduates to occupy managerial positions. In essence, higher educational attainment would allow rank and file employees to ascend to higher (more high-paying) positions. In retrospect, even those who are currently occupying managerial positions who were not able to pursue continuing education also have the option of distance education to themselves, if not to enrich or empower them, at least to quell talk that they are in their positions

because of politics. On hindsight, there does not seem to be any reason at all why employees at the Roxas City Government did not or will not pursue academic degrees because doing so would only bring them and the public that they serve, good. The question, however, still remains, why don't these employees pursue further academic degrees?

Going back to earlier discussions on perception, this researcher would like to recall the role that perception has in decision-making and the philosophical assumption that perception can be distorted hence, resulting to a mis-informed decision. Taking this into consideration, this researcher posits that aside from obvious reasons as stated in the preceding paragraph, the perceptions of the Roxas City Government employees of ODEL may have something to do with the reality that only a few of said government employees enroll themselves in distance education courses. The perceptions of the Roxas City Government employees of ODEL may or may not be distorted but either way, it is possible that within these perceptions are reasons for their attitude towards ODEL, or more specifically, their phenomenal experience of the central phenomenon. In addition, and for obvious reasons, education in the Philippines is most often passed off because of two primary reasons, poverty and the shortage of educational resources thus affecting quality (Meinardus, 2011). These two reasons can be simplified merely as accessibility and quality. These are the two lenses unto which the interviews conducted in the study area were be framed. Nonetheless, attitude change or a shift in perception is not the kind of knowledge or result that is sought in this study.

Odel Perceptions:

In conducting the interviews, this researcher singled out five interviewees, two are department heads, and two are rank and file. In addition, one other employee, the employee who began taking up courses in law and stopped mid-program, was also interviewed. Both the department heads are college graduates who did not pursue continuing education. One rank and file employee is a college undergraduate and another is a college graduate with no further education.

After transcribing the interviews and reducing the raw data it immediately became apparent that all those interviewed had a pretty accurate idea of what ODEL is from a general perspective. All five interviewees looked at ODEL as education that does not require physical presence and education that is delivered via computers, the internet, or the web. Garrison (1993), in his concept of interactivity, explains that such a concept does require interaction through the web (in Karatas, 2008:1), which, currently, is the most prominent feature of ODEL. The perceptions of distance education begin to skew a little bit when the interviewees were asked how they perceived ODEL in terms of accessibility, which included their take on ODEL, price-wise. All except one interviewee perceived distance education as being very accessible for two basic reasons, because it did not require physical presence and because it is based on information technology. Two interviewees claim that it is (sometimes) not accessible for government employees because said employees are not well trained in using computers. One employee mentioned that ODEL is not accessible because he/she did not have time to do the work required in such an educational program. The perceived road block, in this respect, is therefore the lack of information technology skills required to successfully hurdle an academic program offered via the web well as an admitted lack of resources (time).   Accessibility in terms of price also had mixed responses with only two mentioning anything that has to do with expense. One interviewee mentions that ODEL is cheaper and another says that it is expensive because of the

equipment that needs to be purchased to be able to succeed in ODEL programs. The three other interviewees did not mention anything about the price.

The final lens through which ODEL was viewed was quality, considering that even at this point in time, there are just a few institutions offering ODEL and majority of educational institutions still offer their programs the traditional way. Three of the interviewees viewed ODEL educational quality to be better than traditional education saying that such kind of education is only for 'above-average students', such education is offered by good institutions known for their high standard of education and that ODEL is offered in an innovative manner. One interviewee viewed traditional education and ODEL to be of the same quality and another interviewee said that ODEL is substandard because of the absence of constant monitoring of the students by professors. The raw data acquired from the interviews is summarized in the matrix below:

	Odel Viewed		
	From a General Perspective	**In terms of Accessibility**	**In terms of Quality**
Interviewee 1	Education that is computer based	More accessible because it does not need physically going to the school; can be accessed at the click of a button; cheaper because students do not have to worry about transportation.	More sophisticated; better quality, only for above average students (learners).
Interviewee 2	Education delivered through the internet	You can study anywhere there are computers; more expensive because you need to buy a computer to be successful in it.	Maybe substandard because there is no one to constantly monitor your education.
Interviewee 3	Education without real classrooms; classrooms are online	You can complete a course without going to an actual school so it is more accessible, physically, but is also inaccessible in a way, because most government employees are not adept at computers and need further training.	The institutions offering it are very good, so maybe the quality of education is the same as regular education offered in these institutions.
Interviewee 4	Education that does not require physical presence; only presence in the web/internet	I find it difficult and inaccessible because I am not good at handling computers and I have no time.	Same quality as ordinary or regular education.
Interviewee 5	Education that uses information technology	Very accessible, just like Facebook that you can access anywhere.	Better quality because of innovative approach to learning.

Table 1 Tabulated responses to interviews.

The collected data shows that despite earlier assumptions, government employees do understand what ODEL is all about in general. However, when it comes to accessibility, the more notable comments have to do with the price or expense required in ODEL. Two employees commented on this aspect of ODEL, the first saying that ODEL is cheap. Experience tells me

that in fact, ODEL is cheap because I graduated from UPOU and I spent a mere three thousand pesos per semester in matriculation, which included my instructional materials. I did not have a computer then, and I went to internet cafés to log into the IVLE and it cost me ten pesos for a productive hour online. Below approximates what was spent during my years as an open distance-learning student:

> *Matriculation:*
> > *Php 3,000.00/semester X 6 Semesters*   *18,000.00*
> *Internet time:*
> > *Php 10.00/hour X 365 days X 3 years*
> > *(If I were to log in an hour a day)*   *10,950.00*
> *Research and Course Work:*
> > *Php 5,000.00/semester X 6 Semesters*
> > *(Inclusive of paper, printing, mailing, etc.)*   *30,000.00*
> ***TOTAL***   ***58,000.00***

The total amount spent in my three years as an open university student shows that I spent approximately Php 19,000.00/year which is considerably cheaper than any conventional post-graduate course. However, it has to be considered that UPOU is funded partly by the state which accounts for the reasonable price. If private institutions are to be considered, then the price would probably be double, but still cheaper than studying in a conventional institution if accommodations, board, lodging and transportation costs were to be factored in. In the long run, ODEL can be really cheap.

The other interviewee who claims that ODEL is expensive because he/she would require computers views ODEL from a short term perspective. This is so because an entire desktop unit can in fact, cost from 40-50 thousand nowadays, depending on specifications, but when this amount is spread across the entire three-year period of a masters course in an open university, the cost is still considerably low.

In terms of physical accessibility, all interviewees but one subscribe to the pervading idea that ODEL is in fact more accessible because of information technology. This perspective is consistent with the promise of information technology. Such promise states that info-tech makes "a huge amount of information available to anyone at the touch of a button, everything from airline schedules to esoteric scientific journals to video versions of off-off-off Broadway…Consumers will send as well as receive all kinds of data…Viewers could select whatever they wanted just by pushing a button" (Newsweek, 1993:38 as quoted by Jensen, 2011:185). In this perspective of web technology, all information is made easily available, and hence, accessible to the user. Unless of course, there are limitations such as in other countries where certain websites are not accessible (a current classmate in China has problems with accessing Moodle from their university computer) or when offices prohibit unofficial websites from being accessed, the mode of delivery of ODEL is actually generally accessible to its students.

ODEL as perceived by the subject government employees is generally of top-quality as seen in the responses. This perspective of ODEL is a manifestation of the confidence of the respondents in the ability of ODEL to deliver quality and useful educational information.

It would seem from the data presented that government employees have absolutely no reason not to pursue a course via ODEL, but the reality bites. Despite perspectives of ODEL by

government employees, only few seem to opt to enroll in institutions that offer such kind of information. Where does the problem lie? If the negative perspectives of the Roxas City Government employees are to be taken into account, I could say that there are still existing inaccurate perspectives of ODEL. Perhaps, the problem with the Roxas City Government employees does not lie in the way they perceive ODEL but in the indolence that is encouraged by the Philippine system of government or possibly in the belief that said employees do not need further education to earn in government. If this is the case, then further study is required to fully ascertain what causes government employees from staying away from continuing education via e-learning platforms and systems.

Future Directions:

Mere perceptions of the Roxas City Government employees of ODEL in terms of accessibility and quality will set future research directions in terms of ODEL IEC aimed at encouraging positive responses from more government employees who will, as earlier discussed, benefit the most from ODEL programs. In addition, as was discussed earlier, a more accurate perspective of the central phenomenon will allow more informed decision-making, in the case of employees who view ODEL negatively and perhaps, allow these employees to see ODEL for what it truly is. Again, this researcher would like to reiterate that this study did not, in any way, attempt to affect perception at the moment, specifically that of employees who perceived ODEL negatively. What was sought to be achieved at this point was a body of knowledge emanating from the researched community that shows how said researched community perceives distance education or ODEL. In reference to the earlier reviews, where the reasons for not pursuing continuing education or educational courses in particular was identified to be accessibility, said position did emerge from the data acquired from the interviewees but said perception can contextually be construed as representing the perception of those who are not fully aware of what ODEL is. Based on the data acquired, specifically on the negative and inaccurate perceptions of ODEL, there is a need to mount information, education, or marketing efforts to definitively orient government employees of what ODEL is, what it can offer, and the impacts that it could have on the professional lives of government employees. In addition to this, further research needs to be conducted to determine the true reasons for the tendency of government employees to stay away from distance continuing education albeit general positive perspectives of it. It is my hope that after conducting this study, the need to conduct further studies as to how the perceptions of the Roxas City Government employees affect their decision to grab academic opportunities becomes particularly clear and imperative.

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