E-Learning for Lifelong Learning in the Philippines: Challenges and Prospects

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E-Learning has not only revolutionized the delivery of traditional education but can also be used in the delivery of programs intended to improve people's quality of life. It is defined as a "generic term for all technologically supported learning using an array of teaching and learning tools that utilize electronic media."   On the other hand, "lifelong learning, is a learning progression beginning at birth and ending only with death which encompasses both the formal and alternative learning systems". (Philippine Education for All 2015 Plan).

The concept of lifelong learning is already included in the education system of the Philippines, however, it is still limited in the context of the conventional manner. On the other hand, although e-learning has already penetrated a lot of schools, it is still limited due to limitations in infrastructure and resources.

The paper aims to: a) define e-learning for lifelong learning in the context of the Philippines; b) discuss how e-learning is being utilized as a tool for lifelong learning; c) characterize the nature of e-learning courses offered by the University of the Philippines Open University; and d) identify prospects and challenges of e-learning for lifelong learning in the Philippines.

Introduction

Education is a universal and a constitutional right and is seen as a "key investment" in order for Filipinos to finally break free from its long struggle against poverty. Based on the 2008 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), about 86.4 percent of the Filipino people aged 10-64 are functionally literate. Basic literacy is estimated is 95.6 percent. Some who have little or no formal schooling must have gained functional literacy trough alternative sources such as media (National Economic and Development Authority [NEDA], 2011).

One of the recent developments in education is the use of e-learning as a tool for education. E-learning not only revolutionized the delivery of traditional education but is also used in the delivery of programs intended to improve people's quality of life. Technological advancement now made it possible to attend virtual classrooms and interact with "virtual classmates and teachers".

Lifelong learning, on the other hand, is a concept that is being embraced by a lot of nations. One of the factors behind this global phenomenon is the shift from being capital-based economies to more knowledge-based economies (Han, 2001). As a result of this transition, improvement of the skills and proficiencies of the labor force becomes a priority, and requires "developing coherent strategies for lifelong learning" (OECD, 1996 as cited in Han, 2001).

E-learning and lifelong learning are two concepts that are not really new in the Philippines. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in education has been fast increasing in recent years. On the other hand, the pursuit of lifelong learning is also evident in various policy pronouncements by the government. Several institutions have been using e-learning as a tool for lifelong learning, hence, it is important to look into the challenges and prospects of implementing e-learning for lifelong learning in the Philippines. This paper aims to:

a) define e-learning for lifelong learning in the context of the Philippines;
b) discuss how e-learning is being utilized as a tool for lifelong learning;
c) characterize the nature of e-learning courses offered by the University of the Philippines Open University; and
d) identify prospects and challenges of e-learning for lifelong learning in the Philippines.

The Concepts of eLearning and Lifelong Learning in the Philippines

E-Learning

The simplest definition of e-learning is electronic teaching and learning. Naidu (2006) refers to e-learning as the "intentional use of networked information and communications technology in teaching and learning". The letter "e" means electronic, as such e-learning refers to "all educational activities that are carried out by individuals or groups working online or offline, and synchronously or asynchronously via networked or standalone computers and other electronic devices" (Naidu, 2006).

In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) through its Technical Committee of Reviewers for the Delivery of Open Learning and Distance Education defines: "E-learning as a generic term for all technologically supported learning using an array of teaching and learning tools that utilize electronic media such as phone bridging, audio and video tape, video teleconferencing, satellite broadcast and the more commonly recognized forms of web-based training or computer aided instruction also commonly referred to as online courses." (TCROLDE, 2002 as cited in Arinto and Garcia, 2009).

According to Caccam et al (2003), the 2nd National e-Learning Conference defines the term e-Learning as "technologically-supported learning, which includes the use of electronic media such as the Internet, personal computers, phone bridging, audio and videotape, video teleconferencing, satellite broadcast, mobile phones, personal digital assistants, and other related technologies to enhance teaching and learning".

Lifelong Learning

Through the efforts of the OECD, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, the concept of lifelong learning emerged as an educational strategy in the 1970s. It was initiated because education opportunities were provided largely at the early phase of life via formal education, hence, it is important to give second chances to those who did not benefit from these opportunities earlier in their lives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004).

Lifelong learning is described as "all learning activities undertaken throughout life for the development of competencies and qualifications, where competencies cover the knowledge, skills and know-how applied and mastered in a specific context, and qualifications mean a formal expression of the vocational or professional abilities of a worker which is recognized at international/national or sectoral levels" (ILO).

In the Philippines, "Lifelong learning is a learning progression beginning at birth and ending only with death which encompasses both the formal and alternative learning systems". (Philippine Education for All 2015 Plan). This definition is consistent with Smith and Spurling (1999, as cited in Simmons), whose notion of lifelong learning is that which entails constant learning throughout one's lifetime, from the "cradle to the grave" beginning at any given age.

As early as 1991, the term 'lifelong learning" has been apparent through Republic Act 7165 which created the Literacy Coordinating Council under the Department of Education (DepEd). It was aimed to formulate policies and coordinate national efforts towards the development of literacy skills for lifelong learning in a global society/community (Soliven and Reyes, 2008).

Lifelong learning is currently being incorporated in the education system of the country, particularly in the introduction of the alternative learning system on top of the formal school system. According to Lapus (2008), the interface between these two systems allows for learning gaps to be addressed. Moreover, he refers to the lifelong learning goal of the EFA Plan that "all learning leads towards a common goal of life skills development that results in employment, social participation and integration and self-actualization".

The Philippine Government Policy on e-Learning for Lifelong Learning

The Philippine government has no specific policy on eLearning for Lifelong Learning. However, the country has made efforts to introduce the use of ICT in the education system. The government has shown its commitment to ICT in education through the MTPDP (2004-2010), The Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA), The Basic Education Curriculum (BEC), Schools First Initiative (SFI) and the National Action Plan to Achieve Education for All (EFA) (DepEd, 2009).

The DepED, together with various stakeholders, have developed the ICT4E Strategic Plan which believes that through ICT, more stimulating opportunities for both learning and collaboration are presented to schools and students. It is anchored on the vision, "21st Education for All Filipinos, Anytime, Anywhere" and thus aims for an "ICT-enabled education system that transforms students into dynamic lifelong learning learners and values-centered, productive and responsible citizens". (DepEd, 2009).

In the pursuit of quality technical vocational education and training, the TESDA has formulated the National TESD Research Agenda 2005-2009 to identify research priorities to support the attainment of the goals and objectives of the agency as stated in the National Technical Education and Skills Development Plan 2005-2009.

One of the strategic directions to be pursued by this research agenda pertains to lifelong learning. It calls for a "lifelong learning mechanism/ladderization and articulation". This implies the implementation of Executive Order (EO) 358, To Institutionalize A Ladderized Interface Between Technical-Vocational Education And Training (TVET) And Higher Education (HE), in order for more opportunities to become available to learners as it will facilitate a smooth transition and progression between TVET and HE or the other way around (http://www.tesda.gov.ph/program.aspx?page_id=51).

For higher education and institutions, the Commission on Higher Education issued Memorandum No. 96, series of 2003 which is on the Policies and Guidelines on Transnational Education. This policy recognizes borderless teaching and learning as well as expanded the opportunities for transnational education. It also recognizes the rapid developments in information and communications technology and also encourages universities, colleges and training institutions to offer credits and degrees in a borderless environment.

E-learning for Lifelong Learning: The University of the Philippines Open University Experience

Among the HEIs that offer e-learning, it is the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) which was recognized by the Commission on Higher Education as the Center of Excellence in Open and Distance Education. Established on February 23, 1995, The UPOU's vision is to be at the "forefront of the knowledge society as a leading institution of open learning and distance education". The UPOU embarks on a mission to provide education opportunities to individuals who aspire for higher education and improved qualifications but are unable to take advantage of traditional modes of education. It aims to provide quality higher and continuing education through distance education and has always

pursued its commitment of providing: "Lifelong learning for every Filipino, Lifelong Learning for all" (http://www2.upou.edu.ph/about-us/upou-vision-and-mission).

UPOU offers a wide array of academic programs, undergraduate and post-baccalaureate, spread through its three faculties. Moreover, it also offers non-formal courses such as online teaching and learning, new enterprise planning, and professional teaching certification program, among others (http://www2.upou.edu.ph/academic-programs).

To illustrate further how e-learning courses are offered and conducted at UPOU, the paper will use some of the criteria of the Open ECB Check Quality Assurance Framework for courses/programs.

a) *Information and organization of program.* The UPOU provides information regarding the course or program including its objectives and requirements. These are all available from the website. The information also includes the methodology, the number of hours/units, and even the contact addresses of the person in charge of the specific program or course. In some instances, these are also available through printed materials and in social networking sites. The learners are also given an orientation on the workload and schedule.

b) *Program/Course Design.* Each course is handled by a Faculty-in-Charge (FIC) and/or a tutor. They provide motivation, tutorial and learning materials to the learners. There are assignments and exams that are given to the students in order to assess the extent of their knowledge on the courses. In some instances, collaborative learning is also encouraged. The materials are reusable. The links are also tested to ensure that the online resources are available.

c) *Technology.* The UPOU's learning management system is called as "MyPortal". It provides the learners a stable virtual environment where discussion forum, chat, wiki, blogs and other tools can be utilized.

d) *Evaluation & Review.* At the end of the course, all the learners are provided an opportunity to give their feedback in order to improve the course through an online evaluation form.

Figure 1 shows the screen of a typical formal course at the UPOU Myportal.

Figure 1. Course site for a Master of Public Management Course, UPOU

Challenges and Prospects

There is still much to be done in terms of implementing and integrating e-learning for lifelong learning in the Philippines.   The following are some of the challenges and prospects for the Philippines.

1) There is a need to integrate e-learning and highlight its relevance in lifelong in the Philippines.   Although there have been some policy pronouncements regarding regarding the use of ICT in education, it should further be explored and instituted.

2) The CHED, DepED and TESDA should be able to come up with regulatory mechanism on the use of ICT for lifelong learning.   These three agencies should be able to maintain a record of information on existing institutions and courses offering e-learning courses including the nature of these courses.   Moreover, they should also disseminate information, set standards and provide policy directions to all programs related to e-learning.   A framework for capacity building on e-learning for lifelong learning should also be developed.

3) One of the major tasks of the regulatory agencies is to ensure quality in the e-learning courses being developed and implemented. Hence, it is important that a framework for quality assurance should be developed and implemented by the different regulatory agencies.

4) One of the prospects for e-learning for lifelong learning is the development and utilization of open educational resources.   Again, the government should create a facility for the review and creation of open educational resources that can be used and shared by the learning community.

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