- Distance learning / Education

# OF CANVAS AND MOODLE: EDUCATORS WEIGH IN ON NEW LEARNING PLATFORMS

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Lockdown measures against the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) has demolished the four corners of the classroom. It wasn't easy; and still is, as educators put efforts to rebuild those corners that are now situated in learners' domicile.

Educators from the Department of Education (Deped), the Commission on Higher Education (Ched), De La Salle University, Ateneo de Manila University ( Admu), and STI Education Services Group Inc. (STI) have different tags for this new platform for learning. Some call it electronic learning or e- learning, distance education, alternative learning, online schooling, etc.

The commonality of these labels, however, is the use of technology, especially the Internet, in molding a generation of students prohibited from physically interacting with each other and their teachers. They also only have a screen as their physical connection with what is called "school."



**Booting up**

WITH the recent restrictions brought about by government's response to a deadly and infectious disease, the Deped issued an Aide- mémoire, which is defined as "a memorandum setting forth the major points of a proposed discussion or agreement." Signed by Undersecretary Alain Del B. Pascua in July, the Aide-memoire called for the creation and launch of the Learning Management System ( LMS) and Electronic Self-Learning Modules (e- SLMS).

According to the Deped, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for a plat form where teachers can conduct online classes for learners who have access to Internet when -ever face- to- face classes are not allowed. The LMS, according to the Deped, "can be used by teachers and learners who would like to adopt on line classes as the modality by which learning would be delivered." An LMS is a computer software application that will allow teachers to create virtual classes where they can as sign activities that learners need to go through. It is also used to monitor if the activities have been completed, to submit grades and conduct online quizzes to assess learners' comprehension in conditions where face- to- face classes are not allowed. The LMS will work hand- in- hand with the Deped "Commons."

**E-learning**

ACCORDING to the government agency, the Deped Commons "is a platform built on the concept of our Grado Network where resources and learning materials are being shared, discovered, reviewed and made alive."

Developed by Intellemina Systems Inc., a homegrown software company, the Grado Net-work is an online school registration, enrollment and grading system. Intellemina Systems was one of the bidders for the "Supply, Delivery, Installation and One-year Subscription for Unlimited Users to Learning Tools and Education Continu ity Programs Monitoring Ap-plication System" project of the Deped worth P25 million. (Source: https:// www. deped. gov. ph/ wp- content/uploads/ 2020/ 10/ MPB_ 2020c- CB- 010.pdf) The Deped Commons will contain open educational resources (OERS), e- SLMS, video and audio lecture episodes and other digital content that will be used by teachers to assign and schedule the activities that learners will go through in the LMS.

The e- SLMS that will be preloaded in the Deped Commons are in epub3 format. The format, according to the Deped, allows the production team to embed videos, educational games, interactive features and feedback mechanisms that learners can access connection to the Internet.

"The ability to embed external media into the e- SLMS is extremely powerful and will even allow Deped to in corporate sign language, subtitles and audibles that can be used by deaf and blind learners," documents from the agency said. "These e- SLMS can be viewed using a mobile phone or a computer as long as the appropriate reader is installed." The Deped chose Moodle for its LMS requirements.

**Instructure, Moodle**

MOODLE is an open- source computer software application that was released in August 20, 2002. It is among the top 3 most- popular LMS platforms in the world with a market share of 18 percent in the United States and 50 percent in Europe, Latin America and Oceanea. There are currently 157,775 active Moodle sites world wide that are registered across 242 countries.

According to the Deped, there is a total of 1,859 Moodle sites in the Philippines. These sites include the Ched, Admu, the Asia Pacific College, Miriam College, Mindanao State University, the Technical Education Skills and Development Authority, University of the Philippines, Xavier University, among others. Jesuit priest Johnny C. Go told the Business mirror that the Admu has been using Moodle for a decade now, but mainly by the Computer Science faculty and students.

Go, who is also the director of the Ateneo Institute for the Science and Art of Learning and Teaching, added that they introduced the Canvas LMS (developed by Salt Lake City, Utah-based Instructure Inc.) for the university's large- scale migration to online learning. He said the Grade School, Junior High and Senior High students are using Google Class room.

**New philosophy**

HOWEVER, Go said that before they selected a platform, they first had to define their own philosophy of online learning. "We didn't want the Ateneo brand of online learning to be teachers simply going online to do what they do face- to- face," Go told the Business mir ror. "We wanted our students' online learning experience to be more learner-centered, more engaging and, of course, more effective."

Accord ing to Go, they "embedded this philosophy into our unique professional training pro gram." They call this pro gram "Adaptive Design for Learning," or ADL. "And the university's over 1,000 faculty underwent the training; equipping themselves not only with digital skills but, even more importantly, with designing learning in an online environment," Go added.

"It was only after we've envisioned online learning ' the Ateneo Way' did we pick the appropriate platform that is, one that would enable teachers not just to post assignments and files for students to access, but to design learning tasks and activities that students can undergo," the Jesuit priest said.

He cited as an example the “discussion forum,” one of the most commonly- used features this semester in the Canvas LMS. “This is where teachers can ask questions and encourage discussions among students,” Go said. “So learning isn’t just an exercise of consumption but one of collaborative learning not just between teacher and students, but among the students themselves as well.”

**Quizzical ATENEO’S**

Go said one of the key principles of its ADL is its predilection for “asynchronous learning over our default of simply going synchronous, or delivering our lectures online through a video conferencing tool like Zoom.”

In general, this means self paced online modules are available for students to undergo and learn from, but supported by strategically scheduled synchronous sessions, he explained. Go added there are two main reasons for this preference. "First, asynchronous design offers many advantages.”

Aside from flexibility in schedule and pace, Go said the learner has more time and opportunity to mull over the matter and prepare before participating in the discussions. “The second reason, of course, is inclusivity.”

Go added this is due to the unstable Internet connection in the country. He noted the Admu it self cannot assume 100- percent Internet reliability for all its students. The priest further explained that the preference for asynchronous learning is a general principle offered to Ateneo’s faculty.

“But the teachers are expected to exercise their judgment regard ing the balance be tween asynchronous and synchronous sessions since they would be the better judge in terms of what would be best for their students and their disciplines.”Both Canvas and Moodle are used everyday and quite heavily by both teacher and student, according to Go.

**User experience**

ACCORD ING to Robert C. Roleda, DLSU Vice Chancellor for Academics, the university uses the Canvas LMS. “Can vas has the functionalities that fits our needs such as files, pages and modules to organize resources; and online activities such as discussions, collaborations, assignments and quizzes,” Roleda told the Business mirror. He noted that the LMS also has learning tools interoperability ( LTI), “which allows us to integrate third- party tools and applications [e.g Turnitin for academic integrity]. Studio offers user friendly video creation and/or editing, as well as video- quizzing and discussions capabil ity.” Roleda noted that Zoom uses less, manageable bandwidth. “Canvas is practically used both in the under graduate and graduate classes,” he said. For this trimester, Roleda said 4,018 courses are on Canvas.

“The choice and adoption of Canvas LMS was based on the various dimensions, one of which is scalability and cost,” he added. To get feedback on the use the learning tools, Roleda said a bi-weekly survey is given to students and teachers to monitor their experience of the Canvas LMS. The DLSU observed there is an increase in the students’ and teachers’ overall experience with Canvas. “Both groups expressed perfor mance of the Canvas LMS, familiarity with the platform and availability of support as minor challenges,” Roleda noted. “On the other hand, they expressed Internet connectivity and performance of their device as continuing challenges.”

**Interactive features**

THE Tanco family-controlled STI, on the other hand, uses the NEO, an LMS developed by San Francisco, US-headquartered Cypher Learning Inc. The NEO LMS is a cloud-based e-learning tool that STI uses "to provide students and teachers a 2-way platform where they can discuss, collaborate, assign and submit home-work, take assessments and track learning progress, among others," STI Vice President for Academics Aisa Q. Hipolito told the Business mirror. Hipolito speaks highly of the technology which features gamified elements and real-time collaboration, among others.She added that students "are enjoying the setup as its interactive features such as threaded discussions, video- conferencing and discussion forums make each session more fun and meaningful." Hipolito said the LMS also benefits the faculty "as it enables them to develop, deliver lessons and monitor students' progress by providing them with clear insights on where students fall behind or who could take up extra activities." "It offers them a central repository where they can easily organize and upload learning modules for their students," she said. "All of these are conducted behind a virtual wall that provides a measure of authentication, security and privacy." Hipolito students are using the LMS with their synchronous and asynchronous classes. Right now, there are more than 1,700 STI teachers who are using the platform, according to her. She added that almost 19,000 courses cater to over 62,490 students on the NEO LMS.

**Some issues**

THESE educators, to note, agree that cost is one of the issues in acquiring these LMS products.

"Cost is of course an issue but by no means the most important one," Go said. "The more important criterion for the selection of our learning platform is the learning experience that we can provide our students."

When evaluating platforms to be used, Go said that Ateneo's guiding principle "has always been its capacity to address the needs of the kind of online learning it wants to happen, and the ease of use for both students and teachers." Moreover, he said Ateneo had to strike a balance between these factors. "There are platforms that are much simpler and cheaper, but lacking in particular features that we consider essential," Go said.

"Others boast of a dizzying array of features, but the feedback on the user experience has not been great." STI'S Hipolito, meanwhile, said that cost is a factor in choosing the platform. "Nevertheless, STI made sure that the features, accessibility, security and privacy and the over all user experience are not compromised in achieving its goal to leverage on technology for better learning," she added. She said STI, like the Admu, also conducts regular surveys to identify the challenges being encountered by their students. Moreover, there is an immediate feedback mechanism system in place where students can use to send concerns or problems to their teachers through the LMS, according to Hipolito.

**Internet connection**

THESE educators also noted the advantages and disadvantages of the current set-up in teaching and learning. According to Hipolito, since learning is done via online, the health and safety of their students are ensured.

"Since some lessons are asynchronous, students are taught how to manage their time and deadlines," she said adding that student-teacher interaction is more accessible.

"Teachers are also encouraged to be more creative with their methodologies to make their lessons interactive and engaging." Hipolito said the "study- from-home" set up is also convenient for students. The down side for them, however, is they don't receive anymore any allowance for transportation and food. That's a benefit for the parents, she noted. On the downside, Internet connectivity issues remain.

While some have no appropriate gadget, those who do are easily distracted. Some lose their focus while at home due to certain conditions like noise, absence of a private space to study, the need to do household chores, among others, Hipolito said. She noted there's also limited hands- on training since laboratory lessons are taught via instructor's online demonstration. "Teachers are also challenged to fully supervise students during on line classes," Hipolito said. Go said they also remind their faculty not to get carried away with these "bells and whistles," "because when you think about it, they are not at all necessary: a well-designed course can be no less engaging even without them."

**Teachers, parents**

WHILE Go said the Admu has yet to undertake a systematic survey among the parents, anecdotes show the status of distance learning. The priest said parents are also still adjusting to the online mode of education as much as their children. "They have very definite ideas about how on line learning should look like [ how much of it should be synchronous and asynchronous, etc.], which we don't always agree with." Meanwhile, Roleda said many parents of DLSU stu dents say that they and their chil dren have al ready ad justed come the present term. "There were, of course, struggles in the first few months as parents and students adjust to the new routine," he noted.

Roleda said parents acquired a new role as they have suddenly become the extension of the teacher at home. Through constant communication between the administration and the parents, Roleda said DLSU has been able to refine the program that suits the students' situation at home while still keeping a standard for education despite the mode of learning. "The challenge is still to master the best ' formula' for amount of workload, synchronous session and asynchronous activities," Roleda told the Business mirror. "We are still adding and lessening here and there, and we hope to finally find the most optimal combination of tasks considering the many factors that relate to the success of online distance learning."

**Initial feedback**

WHILE the Deped be lieves these new learn ing plat forms are effective, they are not for every one. For one, the Deped emphasized that its LMS is applicable only to learners who have access to internet, which currently number to more than 8 million registered users in the Deped Commons.

"It is not recommended, at this point, to require all public schools to adopt only the Deped LMS for their requirements in conducting online classes as schools may already be using other LMS platforms or there may be features in other LMS platforms that are not available in Moodle," Pascua said. "All other LMS already being used and made avail able to schools may continue doing so until such time that their integration with Moodle and the enhancement of the Deped LMS will be undertaken."None the less, Go said the university acquired a lot of knowledge about online learning not just through its university-wide professional development programs, but also and especially from one another.

"Some thing happened when we were busy learning how to go online: We suddenly found our selves with a dynamic and vigorous professional learning community that allowed virtually any educator to consult any colleague or to share tips and strategies with others," Go told the Business mirror. He added that a number of their faculty have enjoyed using the platform for teaching. "Being a new tool, there is a learning curve, and a lot of teachers took hours of training to get themselves familiar and comfortable with using it. Nevertheless, based on initial feedback, many have found the LMS effective," Go said.

**Valuable lessons**

ADAPTING to a new form of teaching and learning is expected to continue with government eyeing a return to school in the near future. However, according to Jesus Lorenzo R. Mateo, Education Undersecretary for Planning, Human Resource and Organizational Development and Field Operations, this won't happen overnight. "Our transition from distance learning to face- to- face setup will be done gradually," Mateo told the Businessmirror. "This is to manifest that we consider the health safety of our learners as a top priority."

The Deped official added that public officials "are striving to ensure that quality education is given to our Filipino learners and will continue to do so, with or with out pandemic." "In addition, the Philippines has already adopted other learning modal i ties even be fore through the Al ter na tive Learn ing Sys tem [ALS]."

Mateo's view is echoed by Atty. Lily Freida M. Milla, CHED Deputy Executive Director IV (officer- in charge). "What matters now is that all learning…what happens in the transition will matter in the transformation," Milla told the Business mirror. "And for us, we do not want, as Winston Churchill said, ' We do not want a good crisis or serious crisis go to waste.'" According to Milla, she be lieves "flexible learning is here to stay." "There are so many learning that we have during this pandemic and, therefore, flexible learning is here to stay," she told the Business mirror. "It is not just about whether it's face-to-face or online learning but more of flexible learning."

**Eyeing return**

MILLA noted that for flexible learning, the CHED is "putting in place many of the policies that will truly transform higher education where you're not limited to just learn in the classroom but in many other areas and by gaining experiences also in other fora."

She also noted that the pandemic reall brought partnerships, both local and international partnerships, coming together and hopeful to learn from each other. "That's why the Asean community is very important because readily we get to share our experience, what we've done in the pandemic and how the universities are coping and transitioning to the new and better normal," Milla said. "And we can only learn from each other and build from the strength of this partnership, together." For Ateneo, Go said the current scenario is not just gaining a lot of knowledge on online learning, but about more effective teaching as well.

"Online learning makes teaching more visible. Effective teachers continue to do what effective teachers do or even better, but in effective and yes, mediocre teaching also be comes more evident. This is not something to complain about; it's something to celebrate because again, it's an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice and learn how to become better teachers," he explained. As Admu keeps on learning the intricacies on how to handle the new normal, Go pointed out there are both limitations and advantages to teaching online. "Our teachers are becoming better teachers because of all this, so we imagine that we will continue to utilize online learning or atleast, its principles when we're finally able to return to the campus."