GOING THE DISTANCE: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Background and Objective: The enactment of the Republic Act 10912 or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Act of 2016 requires Filipino professionals to engage in lifelong learning practices by earning the required or minimum number of CPD units. However, issues such as affordability and accessibility to CPD seminar-workshops impede professionals to enroll and actively engage in professional development. As such, this paper aims to investigate the perceptions of secondary school professional teachers in a particular school in Manila, Philippines about the use of online and distance learning approaches in continuing professional development.

Methods and Findings: Using a qualitative case study research design, the data were collected through employing semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected professional teachers. Four themes emerged in this study: efficiency, accessibility, contextualization, and social network. Interestingly, the findings outline that the online and distance learning approach catalyzes in providing an avenue for lifelong learning engagement. This reflects the notion of opening a new learning pathway for professionals to continue engaging in improving their field of practice by utilizing open and distance learning programs.

Conclusion: Nonetheless, the results of this study can contribute to policymakers to rethink the way they plan, develop, and deliver CPD programs which will also address the existing and emergent issues, for instance, in complying CPD units in the Philippine context.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning, Continuing Professional Development, Lifelong Learning.

Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century marks a tremendous call for a paradigm shift towards integration of online and distance education in the four walls of the classroom [17, 24, 26]. However, with the introduction of the internet and technology, the concept of learning at a distance has evolved which changes the way we approach teaching and learning. These changes in education delivery models have been rapid and transformational and can be observed globally [32, 34].

More importantly, it is noteworthy to emphasize that the uniqueness of learners plays an important element [3] for the establishment of online and distance learning. For instance, individuals who for various reasons are unable to go for traditional face-to-face classroom learning have the option to shift to learning at a distance.

Generally, the Filipino professionals are mandated by law to engage in lifelong learning through continuing education prior to professional license renewal. The enactment of the Republic Act 10912 or the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Act of 2016 states that all professionals should meet the required or minimum number of CPD units in order to renew their license identification card and continue practicing their field of profession in the country. This supports the call for lifelong learning and ensures that the competencies of Filipino professionals are still up to date [2].

Truly, the CPD law serves as an evaluative parameter to ensure that Filipino professionals are nationally and globally aligned to the standards of practice. This also allows to widen their learning competencies and performances to adapt to the changing demands of learning society [2]. However, issues of affordability and accessibility are some impending factors that require to be addressed through listening to their stories [4, 6].

To illustrate, since the approval of the CPD Act of 2016, the teachers who viewed it as burdensome had been clamoring for its immediate abolition [28].

This became an issue especially to public school...
teachers since seminars and trainings provided by private sectors charges excessive fees while others like those in remote areas had difficulty in traveling far. One factor that is worth investigating is the use of open and distance learning. Specifically, our study highlights the case of ten in-service teachers in a particular secondary school in Manila, Philippines about how they perceive in engaging continuing professional development through utilizing open and distance approach.

Considering that majority of teachers encountered different personal and work-life circumstances which in return hinders their capability to engage in continuing professional learning, it is significant to investigate their perceptions in engaging on the use of the open and distance education approach for continuing professional development. Additionally, the gaps that exist, such as accessibility, cultural acceptance, and instructional practices to online and distance world [19], remain to be contextualized in nature. Thus, we cannot also simply underestimate the idea that open and distance education approach plays an integral role in reaching out learners beyond time and space.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study talks about the perceptions of teachers in relation to engaging in the CPD program through open and distance education. The use of the inductive qualitative process provided us to further examine the meanings shared by the participants. Using a case study research design, it served to have an in-depth understanding of a particular locale in terms of their insights on the use of open and distance learning as their way for professional growth and lifelong learning development [29, 41, 42].

**Participants and Locale**

The area of focus is a secondary school located in the district of Sta. Cruz, Manila, Philippines. We had selected the said institution because the school administration is looking for an alternative way of encouraging its teachers to engage in lifelong learning. Ten secondary school teachers participated in this study. Interestingly, there are also move from the management to introduce online continuing education, however, there is a lack of studies on teachers' perspectives in their context.

**Data Collection and Ethical Considerations**

A semi-structured questionnaire [30] was used to elicit qualitative insights of the participants focusing on their perceptions about the use of online and distance education approach of engaging in lifelong learning. Through this data collection procedure, we intended to ensure an open-ended conversation to deepen our investigation which led to open responses with the participants [8, 18, 27]. Further, we stopped asking conversational questions when data saturation was already evident from their responses [12]. Follow-up questions were done through text messaging, phone calls, and social media chat. This approach was used to gather clarification and elaboration of some of their responses [15]. After the entire interview process, the anonymity of the participants was tagged as “P1” which means participant 1 to secure personal privacy. Also, the gathered data were transcribed and stored in data protected system to ensure that all information of the participants were treated with confidentiality.

**Data Analysis**

We utilized six steps of analyzing our data which involves an open coding approach [11]. We reviewed the audio recorded interviews and transcribed the data using word document spreadsheet to ensure organization and preparation for data analysis. From there, we read again the transcribed interviews from each participant to deepen our thoughts and to make sense out of the information provided. To ensure the credibility of the data transcripts [33, 37], we sent a copy of the participant’s transcript for them to check and to validate [30]. This also supports the idea about researchers’ way of reflecting from the collected data [18]. From the segmented text data categories, we chunked it to generalize a small number of themes through analyzing its general descriptions confined to this case study. Lastly, the findings were interpreted and discussed by employing relevant and different points of scholarly literature [42].

**Findings**

The first theme that emerged about the perception of teachers in online and distance CPD programs is *efficiency*. This notion has been identified by the majority of participants as efficiency both in the context of time and cost.

“Although for us professional teachers the law mandates us to have certain number of CPD units to renew our licenses, on a personal perspective, I think in this modern time, it is wise to maximize our time and utilize available resources such as technology for continuing professional development” (P1)

Moreover, some of them emphasized that instead of enrolling in face-to-face CPD seminars, which almost runs for two-three days, the use of online
and distance learning can provide the opportunity to maximize their time, such doing house chores, prepare lessons, and other personal matters during their off-days, and yet, they are still learning at the comforts of their home.

"The usual CPD seminars [take] a lot of time to consume. You have to wake up early to avoid Manila traffic, especially in EDSA, and be on the venue on time. To be honest, during weekends, I also have other personal tasks to be done, most especially that I am a single mother of my two lovely children. I think it is wise to engage in online and distance learning for my personal growth as a teacher, which I also don't need to sacrifice my time going physically in the venue" (P7)

Interestingly, they also agreed that aside from the fact that online and distance learning can bring beneficial effects for time-efficiency learning, there is also no doubt that it is cheaper compared to traditional CPD program offerings which cost thousands of registration fee, excluding other expenses like transportation, accommodation, meals, etc.

"I also want to share that online CPD programs, I believe, is much cost-efficient or cost-effective since we are in the comforts of our home. We don’t need to wake up so early and travel as far as in other cities here in Manila to attend physically. To be honest, a lot of money is being expended to transportation. The trains are incapable to carry a lot of passengers, jeepneys consume a lot of time waiting for passengers, hence, sometimes, the only option is to take chance for taxi or Grab just to attend on time in CPD seminars, which in return is additional money burden" (P5)

The participants also perceived accessibility as an essential component of online and distance education. They see it as a way of attracting professionals to engage in lifelong learning activities considering their personal dilemmas, such as their job, family responsibilities, and other life roles.

"I would like to note that in [the] online world, there is something unique it has to offer. You know, and again, the emergence of technologies is beneficial to all of us. I believe there is [a] wide range of [opportunities] to reach out [to] professionals from different parts of the world where teaching and learning can happen. We just need to embrace the virtual world. I mean, there's nothing wrong. Nowadays, the degree of access to learning instructions are everywhere" (P1)

More importantly, it was also mentioned that the use of online instructional delivery provides opportunities for professionals to have equitable access to professional growth and continuing education that breaks barriers towards a borderless learning society.

"I think aside from the fact that instructional delivery, which in the case of continuing education, can be available through online mode. I also believe that it promotes equity where learners have [a] chance to engage in lifelong learning through its characteristic of reaching out learners, as mentioned. Lastly, it provides [a] balance of personal responsibilities and continuous engagement in learning something" (P8)

The next theme revealed in our study talks about contextualization or the authenticity of online and distance CPD program. Although there was some disparity in the perceptions of teachers about authenticity, the majority still claims that online and distance education promotes contextualized learning that responds to their teaching and professional needs. P4 shared their common perspectives that in usual or face-to-face CPD seminars or trainings, the speakers are the sole source of knowledge. However, in online and distance CPD programs, they provide contextualized strategies for professionals to learn and engage more.

"The activities in online seminars are [much-interesting] compare to attending in physical seminar offerings. I believe it addresses my needs, as a professional teacher, [in] which the engagement in [an] online
seminar is true to its goal of relevance. I attended an online CPD program before, and our engagement is comparable. We had a case analysis task which we presented the following day. Our presentation, of course, [was] done online. If I am not mistaken, we also had post-chat discussion” (P4)

On the contrary, some also argued that in online and distance CPD programs the learning tasks are limited to online discussion since the lecturer and the participants are at a distant.

“I think both face-to-face and online CPD seminars offer pure lectures. The only difference in teaching and learning would be its mode of delivery. I might be wrong. But looking at some online CPD seminars, I think it just the same having so many concepts to be talked and discussed, while there is lacking personalize activities for fruitful engagement” (P6)

Lastly, the teachers perceived online and distance CPD offering as a social network. This theme recognizes that professionals learn from each other regardless of time and space through online collaboration.

"Also, I think in online CPD programs, collaborative engagement is observable. As I emphasized, some activities [promote] group exchanges of ideas. Sometimes, your classmates in online seminars will ask permission to add you in social media, which I think breaks barrier, hence it promotes learning as well” (P4)

This was also reiterated by P8, where she perceived online and distance CPD program as learning in a virtual world where social arguments take place and it promotes interaction, hence, it generates continuous discussion of insights, experiences, and argumentative information.

“To think that emergence of online platforms can bridge individuals from [another] side of the world to your own time and pace is really amazing. You don’t need to cross borders just to learn from others. The use of an online platform for continuous learning provides endless discussion and arguments which create social learning interaction. From that, I think online and distance CPD programs answer the need of collaborative engagement” (P8)

Discussion
This paper outlines the perceptions of secondary school in-service teachers towards online or distance learning in continuing professional development. Significantly, the findings can contribute to policymakers in resolving issues in terms of the pros on open and distance learning approach for continuing education for professionals, which in return can outweigh the cons perceived by professional learners.

The theme efficiency expresses that the use of technology-enabled resources provides the participants the opportunity to maximize their resources for continuous learning. This reflects that online and distance CPD programs offer teachers an efficient use of their time and money. Work-related tasks that are physically and mentally strenuous are done on a five-day workweek. They hardly had time to attend CPD programs since personal tasks such as spending time with their family are not to be neglected as well. Hence, these personal and work responsibilities impede them to engage in professional development. However, through utilizing the virtual world, it allows them to come back and earn CPD units which there is no need for them to leave the comforts of their houses [25, 38].

From a practical perspective, the time and money that they will be spending is lesser compare to attending traditional face-to-face CPD seminar-workshops or trainings. This makes it more affordable and accessible [6, 13] considering that the starting salary of K-12 teachers in the Philippines, as of 2019, is around USD 415 per month [16]. This constitutes the essence that online and distance education approach is more practical for working professional in-service teachers, in the case of our findings. It is also more efficient to utilize technology-enabled resources for continuing education which is cheaper [10], yet, it offers quality professional learning engagement regardless of time and space [22, 31].

Additionally, the participants perceived the theme contextualization which presents that online and distance professional learning programs provide relevant, meaningful, and authentic since they are more engaging. Face-to-face seminars are seen with lesser engagement as the lecturer is the only
source of knowledge compared to a cross-cultural setup of online professional development programs. Problems-based tasks are solved from several facets of ideas which widens the limited knowledge of participants as well as the lecturer. This pertains to the idea of connectivism which makes use of complex, social, networked environments [40].

It was perceived that online programs are relevant in today's digital age of learning. This supports that learning occurs by sharing information and diverse opinions connected through technologies such as web browsers, emails, online forums, and social networks [36]. Thus, to thrive in the present and future times, teachers must understand and function well in online spaces [35]. This reflects the fact that open and distance world has become a part of our real world. Thus, teachers are still and will always be the fore runners in teaching students to live and to learn.

Interestingly, the theme accessibility emphasizes the idea set by the participants that continuing professional learning can be delivered and accessed through the virtual world. This provides hope for in-service teachers having a wide range of opportunities or alternative ways of engaging for future learning and competency enhancement. In a connectivist perspective, it presents the notion of accessibility wherein teachers are provided to immerse in various information through seeing connections between fields, ideas, and concepts beyond time and space [40].

As such, continuing professional learning at a distance serves as a pathway to keep up with the trend through accessing information from several perspectives [21, 23] of other professionals in the fields, and across cultures and at a global scale. This theme also supports that open and distance professional learning has the advantage to facilitate continue adult education which is accessible just-in-time and sustained over-time [7]. In this effect, professionals, being directly involved in their own professional growth will have the opportunity to learn topics that they are passionate about and interested in.

The last theme that emerged from the findings of our study talks about social networking. This presents the idea that open and distance professional learning development offers vast exchanges from the social network. Since professional development is a means to improve the craft by being relevant and up to date, this provides evidence that collaborative engagement [5, 9] is observable in the virtual world where participants have the ability to exchange creative and though-provoking questions and insightful ideas to other participants. Furthermore, it claims that although individuals are physically distant, they are still connected regardless of geographical location, race, or culture can break barriers and promote further professional exchanges [14].

It also posits that online learning promotes global gathering at a distance and has all the advantages for cross-cultural exchanges of ideas and information [20]. This reflects the unifying characteristic of social network learning which is not confined from the wealth of the resource person's knowledge, but more importantly, there is the presence of combined input from several practitioners and participants, such as their attitudes, experiences, and ideas, which are all connected through the social nodes of networks of learning [1, 39]. It further supports the notion that socially networked spaces for professional development allow teachers to gain new insights, to collaborate, and to contribute to a common knowledge [2, 35].

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, pursuing continuing professional development is a problem for many teachers due to personal or work-related uncertainties. Therefore, understanding the teachers' perception of online and distance learning in professional development is important as it will provide policymakers for an alternative avenue to rethink and redesign CPD program offerings. Several works of literature claimed that the development of online or distance learning programs for professionals offers a wide range of benefits similar to the findings of this study. The use of online and distance learning in CPD trainings should be maximized because it promotes time and cost-efficient means as professionals are burdened already with several tasks. It is also high time for this mode of learning, even at the professional level, as it can be easily accessible for anyone yet also relevant and meaningful in the digital age. While it may not necessarily respond to the needs of the learners, the opportunity to explore the ideas of others and share feedback and information in a network of professionals is something that cannot be rejected.

Moreover, despite the study's aim to contribute to the understanding of online and distance learning in professional development, the study has also limitations. As such, additional studies may be conducted in order to support or refute the present findings. Likewise, since it is a case of a particular locale and group of professionals, it is recommended to know as well the perceptions of other schools, especially in rural areas, as access to technology and the internet may vary. Hence, studies on the best practices and implications on policy and practice are suggested, as they will help resolve the difficulties and challenges of online and distance learning CPD programs.
Conflicts of Interest Disclosure
The authors certify that they have No Conflict of Interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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