

Columnists - Pinoy Kasi

Teaching & Covid (Philippines): Course packs

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Teachers throughout the country have been busy preparing for a tough new school year, forced by COVID-19 into various forms of online or distance learning.

I thought I should write about what we're going through for different reasons. First, to help people understand why your close friends who are teachers suddenly seem distant, or have even "ghosted" you, disappeared in terms of texts, calls, and emails. It's because of the preparations.

Second, if you are a parent with kids in school, especially in college, I hope after you read this you'll better appreciate what's been going on and the blood, sweat, and tears put in by teachers.

Over at UP, we are required to produce course packs, a collection of materials that will have a syllabus and learning guide accompanying lecture notes, pre-recorded lectures, reading materials, links to internet resources.

Here's what makes it all an ordeal. Initially, we were told to submit a complete set of materials for the entire semester. Fortunately, the administrators realized that this was asking too much and allowed a staggered submission, half of the semester's materials due last weekend and the other half in October.

To prepare the course packs, UP and other schools sponsored a series of tutorials and webinars that included just understanding how online learning happens. Other lectures were more technical — how to upload materials, for example.

Different schools have different learning platforms, some of which can be quite sophisticated but also complicated, such as formulating quizzes and exams in a way, multiple-choice usually, that allows the computer to actually do the corrections and calculate grades.

The most difficult part of preparations has been the core teaching materials, which have to be appropriate for independent learning. Because access to Wi-Fi is so uneven among the students, we decided not to have synchronous classes, meaning no real-time classes. This means preparing lectures for a non-lecture mode as well as learning guides to help students pace themselves and conduct self-evaluation, even as we offer to students access through email or text.

I chose to do PowerPoint presentations, something in between lectures and reading materials. I initially thought this would be easy considering that I had so many PowerPoints from previous years.

But PowerPoint for independent learning, I quickly realized, was going to be more difficult. PowerPoints that accompany a lecture are, as the name implies, just giving out important points. But producing PowerPoints for independent study pretty much comes close to writing books.

How many do I have to produce for the various classes I'm handling in UP Diliman, UP Los Baños,

UP Manila, and Ateneo? (Some are as part of a team.) A total of 46 PowerPoints. I'm about 60 percent done as of today.

Being forced into online learning has made serious teachers revisit the whole learning process. With a regular lecture, you can wing it, go ad hoc, crack jokes to lighten the mood. With online materials, you have to keep thinking: Will the student understand this part without additional materials, and if additional materials are needed, what will they be and how can they be accessed?

You scour books, journals, and the internet much more with online learning, to make sure students have a range of references, all the way up to YouTube videos.

Unlike lectures, PowerPoints do allow students to pace themselves, to stop and reflect, even to laugh at jokes (yes, I actually put some in the presentations), to look up words and concepts they don't quite understand.

For grade school and high school students, online classes have closer teacher supervision. My kids' school requires them to "report" everyday at fixed hours, and to be in uniform. The teachers check attendance, and call on students.

At the college level, the mode is more independent learning, which presumes maturity on the part of the students in terms of time management.

We're also being very conscious about equity issues, not wanting to privilege students who have super-fast Wi-fi connections and the latest computers.

For students whose internet access is very unreliable, UP will be using courier services to send hard copies of all materials, and, UP style, faculty are being asked to do this on their own and then get reimbursed later on.

It will be a tough school year ahead, a time when teachers and parents will be learners as well.

So, do understand if we're not as accessible these days as we think and dream (more like nightmares) of course packs.

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P.S.

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<https://opinion.inquirer.net/133422/course-packs>

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