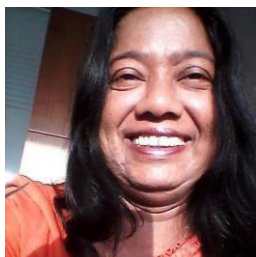


CHAPTER-10

HIGHER EDUCATION AND ONLINE TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC : EXPERIENCES OF A UNIVERSITY TEACHER



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INTRODUCTION

Pandemic is a disease prevalent all over the world. During a pandemic, restrictions on travel, disinfection of common places, social distancing and quarantining of the suspected are introduced influencing the normal lifestyles of people. Some industries boom while some others wither and as a result some people lose jobs and people who earn a living on a daily basis face difficulty in finding their bread and butter. While people are confined to their homes, some work online from home, some start a cottage industry, some paint or write, some engage in home gardening, and some others end up stressed for having nothing fruitful to concentrate on.

Each person who underwent undergoing the pandemic have their unique story as the individual experiences are different from each other based on the environment and conditions under which a person is undergoing the pandemic situation. From here onwards I will relate mine the lessons I learned from the Covid-19 pandemic as a citizen of Sri Lanka.

Managing Life during the Pandemic

On March 12th, 2020, the government decided to close schools for New Year vacations. Due to the immediate issue, most of my colleagues faced discomfort and had to leave their kids unattended at home and report to work from the next day. On my way home, I stepped into a nearby supermarket to see that the parking lot was fully occupied and the store was crowded and people were grabbing anything and everything that was remaining on shop shelves.

Going round the store I realized that there was hardly anything left for purchase and unfortunately I didn't have much money in my wallet too, thus I had to prioritize my purchases , first came medicine for my mother and a bottle of vitamin c tablets, two dozens of surgical masks and a few other things with the remaining money. Coming home I was relieved to see a kind relative of mine has brought home a substantial supply of grocery items, which included even the malted milk my mother consumes daily. Relieved and went to bed to find that everything seemed normal the

following day, everyone was going to work as usual, and a week went by with the first Covid -19 patient being identified from the community that the government decided to close the airport, and restrict movement of people by imposing curfew, and then started the real lock down. It came as a shock, not really prepared, days and nights spent in front of the television trying to grab any piece of information related to the pandemic.

The number infected increased gradually and the government , medical personnel , armed forces and the police was in the forefront monitoring the spread of the pandemic, distribution of essentials among the poor, religious places and homes for the aged /children. Some of the popular TV channels organized campaigns of distributing essential food items to the needy in addition to the monetary compensation paid by the government to the jobless. Days went by not doing anything particularly but cook and eat what we have and be on alert of the spread of the pandemic. As nobody knew how long the lock down would be , we were very careful with the foodstuff we had, food wastage was at a

minimum during this period and we had home cooked food for all three meals. Stuck inside the house I could mark all the answer scripts of an external examination, read all the books that were waiting to be read, pick up home gardening in pots, talk to friends and students via the telephone and make long chats with family members almost daily over evening tea. During the second week the government decided to let people work online. Luckily, we were on study leave for students after teaching in semester I and thus, any immediate action was not required.

Teaching experiences during the Pandemic

I work for a Public university. The Faculty to which I'm attached to "Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (FMSC)" called a meeting for the academics over Zoom, luckily online teaching was a hot topic even before the pandemic and almost all of us had our own zoom accounts created by the FMSC. How to reach students via online methods was discussed in depth and was decided to use the survey results which were conducted by the Information Technology

Resource Center of the FMSC. It was to assess the “Availability of ICT facilities among undergraduates “for which data was collected via an online survey during the period of 11th April to 10th May 2020. The Google form that was circulated contained questions on, availability of a computing device, availability of a computing device and a broadband connection, availability of prepaid / postpaid mobile data connection .Undergraduate population amounts to approximately 5000 students out of which 3545 FMSC undergraduates (71% of the population) have responded.

Results indicated a maximum of 36% of undergraduates have the necessary facility for effective online teaching and learning activities. Nevertheless, most of the students have mobile data connection. 88% of the students have a prepaid mobile data connection while 16% of students have a postpaid mobile data connection. With this information already available, the Dean of FMSC took steps to contact students who didn't have computer/ laptop/ smart phone and internet and decided to make sure they were provided with the

facilities. A facility to address 1500 students at the same time via zoom was also created with the support of the ITRC and the Department of IT.

The staff was given a series of training sessions on how to use go to meeting, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google classroom effectively with the LMS. A help desk was also created and the experts in the ITRC and the IT department were personally available for support.

With all this happening at the background we could start lectures online. We were allowed at the university to conduct the lectures as internet service is always better at university. Lecture rooms were allocated with all the facilities for use by the lecturers .Everyone was excited as we all felt that our workload is being doubled by going online. At this point I and another friend of mine decided to conduct a survey on experiences of university teachers on online teaching. We prepared a questionnaire, pilot tested it among a few of our colleagues, and circulated among all the lecturers in public universities in Sri Lanka. The data gathered were quite interesting although I would not discuss it here. My

first lecture was on Financial Management for MSC in Entrepreneurship program using go to meeting. This was a group of about 24 students. The coordinator facilitated by scheduling the meeting and coordinating with the students. Lecture was recorded by the coordinator. Students were very cooperative they asked questions and responded to my questions. Everything was smooth as the coordinator logged in as a participant controlling others in the class. My second experience was an undergraduate lecture on Project Management via zoom. This was a group of about 12 students. Here again the coordinator supported by scheduling the meeting and coordinating with the students.

This group was very much conversant with the zoom program and they would even remind me when I forget to record the lecture. They will ask questions for clarification and would answer my questions. My third experience was a course in Research Methodology where the student group was about 150. I scheduled the meetings as I was the coordinator of the course. Scheduled all the sessions using zoom and used the LMS

to communicate with the students. Once I finish the lecture, I was expected to edit it and share it in the YouTube channel for the department. Not like in the earlier two, handling chats was a big problem due to the large number of students. I learnt how to create groups among students to let them have group discussions. It was decided that we would not conduct any student evaluation via zoom as it can be unfair by the ones who live in areas where the internet facility is of very low strength.

However, we found that this move created a demonization among the students, and we noticed the number of students participating at lectures drastically coming down, forcing us to introduce some sort of evaluation via zoom. Luckily the government announced opening of all educational institutions and we could let students come to university first, batch by batch for examinations and later all the students for lectures.

Lessons learnt

With many foreigners living, working and travelling in the country it was difficult to control the spread of the disease. However, the government took measures to control the situation by making wearing masks compulsory, maintaining social distancing, closing the airport, imposing a curfew to control movement of people and employing the armed forces and the police to distribute essential items including medicine for the ill and elderly. This was a bold decision by the government amidst lot of criticism, which proved correct at this time. Other countries where there were less controls experienced increased rates of infected persons and deaths. Thus, in a time of a disaster a country must have a firm governing body which can take firm decisions supported by all the parties concerned. If it was left for the medical services to handle it would not have been this successful. The armed forces and the police supported the dedicated medical personnel by building new hospitals at short notice, maintaining quarantine centers, helping identifying the infected or

the suspected victims, facilitating distribution of essential items to the public and even engaging in entertaining activities to kill the boredom of the apartment dwellers under lockdown.

Another reason was the free medical facilities provided by the government. It proved very useful during the pandemic; people were given free treatment as well as quarantine facilities free of charge. This was one factor appreciated even by the World Health Organization (WHO).

A country must have free medical services. Many people died in countries where medical services were not free. The socialistic orientation of supplying the basic essential services such as health services and education free was beneficial at this time of need.

In some countries people protested wearing masks, distancing and the lockdown. Those who lived by the rules could prevent the spread of the virus to a large extent. The timely lockdown and the strict adherence to quarantine rules helped Sri Lanka win the battle.

In terms of education, the biggest barrier was the internet facility and its strength. Students who are located around the suburbs of Colombo were better off when compared to the students from rural areas; as a result, students were unable to be in the lecture for the total time duration without a disturbance. Teachers were given a choice to use university internet services if required. Students could download the video for later reference.

Not like a live lecture they can watch it several times until they become very clear about the lesson learned. Lecturers received training as to how to conduct a lecture, upload material, and edit a document to upload it to U tube. Most of the teachers commented that preparation time increased and they missed the interaction with students in class. However, everybody agreed that online teaching can be used as a part of the teaching process which is a plus point.

Further, normally very few students seek personal support from teachers. During the pandemic students developed a habit of talking with teachers, not

only on academic matters but on the general life changes, their hobbies or personal problems they were going through. This gave the opportunity help them on a personal basis. Although, FMSC didn't organize it officially many teachers formed into groups to help students whose parents have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

Apart from these, there were effects on the individuals' lifestyles also. During the lock down many people opted to home gardening as a hobby which could also be a solution to the scarcity in vegetables due to limitations in movement of vehicles during the pandemic. We had leafy vegetables like spinach potted even before the pandemic which were part of salads, curries and omelets. Waste of food was very low as everyone was concerned about the uninterrupted supply of food with import restrictions due to the pandemic.

Almost all the fast food outlets, restaurants and take away joints were closed during the pandemic and people were preparing all three meals at home. This healthy style of eating resulted in reduced levels of

obesity and seemed to reduce the dependence on takeaways to a greater extent and looks like motivated to continue the healthy style of eating home cooked meals.

Conclusion

The Covid- 19 pandemic is still active in some countries, even our neighboring country India reports thousands of victims daily. Many people around the world have lost their lives. Sri Lanka has been able to control it successfully so far and the future controls will depend on the dedication of the people and the government in continuing the quarantine rules.

In order to survive a pandemic people in a country must change their behaviors and lifestyles. Universities and schools introduced online teaching, to enable continue learning despite the pandemic. No one objected, both students and the teachers cooperated with each other to continue the teaching learning process with limited resources. It was not an easy task to make people maintain distancing and wearing masks. But as a country we could do it. In addition to the rules imposed by the

government, the armed forces and the police made sure that people adhered to such rules while the health authorities did their best in attending to the patients. Every one of us, of us must understand the value of following rules and regulations and working as a group in the time of a pandemic.