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Ken

Manila, Philippines | Monday, July 21, 2003

E-Learning

A Byte Out of Teaching

At De La Salle University [DLSU], which has long held the reputation as the Philippines' lead university in the area of education technology, a large number of its faculty members are wired, literally as well as figuratively. With the help of computers, we are connected to colleagues from other universities around the world, conducting joint classes, creating virtual teams among our students, and spreading the good byte: E-learning is here!

Welcome to the age where teachers are being re-tooled to gain the skills to construct knowledge with the use of technology. We now create the learning environment that enables others to access information, to be reflexive about this information and in turn, produce new information.

The process has been a long one and can be traced to the early 70s when DLSU obtained a generous grant from the Ford Foundation to assess its resources and consolidate these into what is now the university's Information Technology center or ITC. By the 1980s, the university had already developed a computerized registration system for its Graduate School of Business and Economics (GSBE).

As far as teaching was concerned, there were scattered initiatives among the more tech-savvy faculty (mostly those in the College of Science) to integrate technology into their teaching. Most of these teachers utilized what they already knew, or what they had learned from conferences they attended abroad.

In 1999, DLSU established the center for Educational Multimedia or CREM precisely to institutionalize faculty training. CREM sought to approach the re-tooling of DLSU's faculty in a sustained and progressive basis.

According to its founder and head, Dr. Miguel Rapatan FSC, CREM guides teachers in re-examining their modes of instruction and in the process develop alternative paradigms of learning while keeping pace with technological developments. The question, Rapatan says, is no longer whether faculty ought to use technology, but rather, how to make technology simple enough for it to work for them.

CREM offers training, production, and consultancy services. It conducts workshops, seminars, and evaluation of faculty members so we become familiar with various types of instructional media and technology. There is also professional and technical assistance in production to faculty and other end-users in designing and producing computer-based instructional modules as well as assistance in the conceptualization of multimedia projects. CREM's computer facilities are also made available to teachers who wish to practice their new skills.

In 2000, DLSU was one of two Philippine universities licensed by the National University of Singapore (NUS) to use its online learning system, called Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) which I wrote about in [this column last year](#). IVLE was developed by the NUS in December of 1996 and at the time, was essentially just a group of Web

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pages with references to other Web sites. Using later versions, teachers post their course content online and students are able to access it via their computers at any time of day or night.

Last year, after several major version upgrades, the NUS formed a private limited company, WizLearn Pte Ltd, to commercialize its technology.

Alas! DLSU now has to pay for the license, as do hundreds of other universities around the world that found this learning management system an effective method of improving the teaching experience.

The program itself had been plagued by some glitches and with its commercialization, it is hoped the company can better address difficulties and conflicts surrounding issues such as compatible servers to be used, firewalls, as well as security concerns. It has not been glitch-free as of late which has caused some mirth among users who refer to it sometimes as 'wis-learning', *wis* being the colloquial for none.

Other than the IVLE, DLSU also pioneered in the setting up of a state-of-the-art e-classroom.

Just what is an e-classroom?

It is a special classroom equipped with 42 fully interactive multimedia workstations with high-speed internet access hooked to a master workstation used by the teacher. Each student is provided with a headset and a keypad that allows her/him to 'talk' directly to the teacher and vice-versa.

In the e-classroom, just as in using the IVLE, shy students are emboldened to participate, knowing they can keep their questions and answers directed solely at the teacher if they wish to. In the same way, the teacher, through her/his workstation can flash a screen on all 42 terminals or just one terminal. Slow students can get individualized instruction without slowing down the progress of more advanced students. Students may also initiate small group discussions with members of the class seated across the room with a few clicks of a button.

DLSU's e-classroom is also equipped with electronic interactive boards and wide-screen projectors as well as three video cameras. Images within the classroom may be projected onto the screen as well as sent to a remote location, say another classroom in another part of the country, or the world. Images from that remote site may also be beamed or projected on the local screen.

Rapatan says the students' response has been very positive. The e-classroom is fully utilized from Mondays to Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. He adds, "Teachers are now discovering that young people prefer this new method of teaching and learning based on their feedback to the materials produced."

This is why DLSU has opened its CREM training program to heads of provincial schools. At present, it offers an Executive Educational Management program that exposes principals, deans, owners, and directors to technology so that they can start thinking about technology in teaching and instruction in their own schools.

For sure, the costs are high. The e-classroom, when built two years ago, cost between PhP4 million to PhP5 million [US\$74,534 to \$93,167 at PhP53.667=\$1]. To build another one at today's prices will cost anywhere between PhP8 million to PhP9 million. The immediate plan, according to Rapatan, is to build one e-classroom in each of the De La Salle buildings in the Manila campus.

And what of the teachers and students still struggling to re-learn how to teach and learn with technology?

The response is very encouraging, especially as the benefits among students have been

very visible.

Tools such as the e-classroom foster group activity and collaborative projects. It proves that one-on-one interaction using new technologies reinforces learning. Students become not only computer literate, but also sophisticated and technologically competent for the demands of the future.


Delivery is enhanced as teachers may now use video streaming and 'broadcast' as it were, digital video images of them in action, blended with well-presented PowerPoint presentations.


We have gone beyond the simple idea of online learning. It is a form of blended learning that DLSU is now targeting. This means a good proportion between face-to-face teaching and technology-mediated instruction.

Satellites will also form part of future connectivity. Already, audio links-ups between classes in Manila and a class in London have been initiated. There is a need for teachers to tie up with colleagues in other institutions around the world.

DLSU sees itself as a regional resource center using technology in fulfilling its role as an institution of higher (and cyberspace) learning. In all these, there is a continuing realization that the essence of teaching lies somewhere between the face-to-face interaction of teacher and student and the bits and bytes that now seem to make sense in the jumble of technology in pedagogy.

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