How Asian Universities can Rise to the Current Challenge – Interview with World Association for Online Education President Steve McCarty in Japan

by Steve McCarty and Rajesh Panhathodi


1. Medical experts are of the opinion that Covid-19 is going to stay with us until an effective antivirus is developed. Is the online educational sector ready to cater to the increasing needs during this pandemic?

Online education should not be a sector of technical specialists separate from educators, but rather a pan-disciplinary set of meta-skills that educators develop on top of subject matter expertise.

Perhaps I should explain the difference between fields and disciplines. Academia is divided into fields and areas thereof, but not every possible area in a field is researched, so disciplines have developed in each field in the form of university departments, academic journals, and a canon of cited literature. Academics have one or a cluster of specializations where they have expertise. [1]

India has abundant talent and thirst for knowledge, but its universities are not yet highly ranked globally. There does not seem to be enough thought given to disciplinarity, with journals sometimes combining odd combinations of fields, or events like Webinars not having a clear disciplinary focus.

Having stated that, now we are faced with the opposite problem as well, where practitioners in every discipline need to become online educators. Scholars in all fields can develop online teaching skills and benefit from interdisciplinary perspectives. Rather than looking to an online educational sector to cater to our needs, teachers and learners all need to rely on ourselves in a new world of online inquiry and communication.

2. What is the role of online classes in post-pandemic pedagogy?

Most online classes regarded as emergency remote teaching may be gladly abandoned when participants have the luxury of meeting face-to-face. Online classes are not a goal but rather a means to the end of facilitating optimized learning. It all depends on the local situation and what needs to be learned, but there will be a role for online classes in distance education or MOOCs – massive open online courses offered by universities or individuals, free or discounted, to learners anywhere who can access the Web. Because online classes offer flexibility of time, place, and pace, there is a demand for them even when teachers and learners are near each other. It makes continuing education possible for many learners who have to work or care for children. The role of online classes is therefore ever
expanding as Internet access increases, lifelong learning is needed, and more purposes can be served usefully by formal or informal online classes. [2]

3. What kind of online education policy best suits the post-pandemic world? Do we have an adaptable model in front of us?

One size does not fit all, so the policy needs to suit the local circumstances. Yet at the same time, globalization continues unabated online where the study skills to navigate information and communication technologies (ICT) are some of the same skills needed in the future workplace. ICT can serve as both subject matter and medium of instruction.

Regarding adaptable models, the distance education discipline provides principles and perspectives, for one thing to get away from equating physical distance with social separation. The recent term social distancing is a misnomer, because it merely refers to physical distancing in a world where people connect socially through ICT. Teleconferences can feel like being in the same room with others, most of whom we would not physically touch in person anyway.

Like telephoning, technologies utilizing only sound can still result in a meeting of minds like a lecture or a conversation. For more than 15 years, podcasting has increased in popularity, with on-demand sound files transmitted through the Internet, but then available offline for listening, like take-out food for thought. [3] For those with limited Internet access, podcasting could provide the next generation of radio for distance education. [4]

However, the closest we have to an adaptable model for post-pandemic education is blended learning. [5] That is, many of the technological solutions employed in online classes for emergency remote teaching will carry over into enhancing face-to-face classes with a supplemental online dimension available anywhere at any time. By necessity, the pedagogical repertoire of teachers has been expanded, and some of these innovations and perspectives will be incorporated into classroom teaching and assignments, just as our overall lifestyles migrate much further online.

4. Among many social disparities, a digital divide is seen more clearly during the pandemic. How do you think this will affect the effective outcome of online education?

This is an area where government policies would make a difference. The whole society would benefit economically and socially by empowering its disadvantaged members to participate in the online arena of daily life and education. If a middle-class society is the goal, reflecting democratic values and the aspirations of minority groups, then perhaps the government can be persuaded to be more representative of the governed.

5. Online education requires online meta-skills beyond subject matter. How is this going to affect the teaching community?

Online education is pan-disciplinary, but most educators teaching online have been able to rely on instructional designers or technical support, as if those meta-skills affecting the quality of education could be outsourced. Now that educators worldwide are forced into emergency remote teaching, it is
no longer the duty or responsibility of someone else. Blended learning and lifelong online learning are here to stay, so it is up to each educator to develop the skills to make online education effective, whether we have the luxury of face-to-face classes or not.

Moreover, through promotion of open online information and free distance learning opportunities, education can finally reach and lift up those who have been held back by poverty. The educational community now has the global community in our purview, hence a greater responsibility to engage in professional development, international collaboration, and sharing.

6. Remote communication and teaching cause a physical and psychological gap between students and teachers. Will this permanently redefine ‘teaching’, which has always been a social service profession?

Teaching will remain a social service and credentialing profession, and higher education stewards expertise and ethics in all the professions. Perhaps we are redefining ‘social’ more than ‘teaching’ by reaching learners at greater physical distances. Remote communication is not a cause but an effect of physical separation, and it provides an avenue for solutions to the tyranny of distance. Rather than remote teaching causing a psychological gap, it should aim to fill the gap. That is a criterion for effective communication and teaching.

7. Traditional educators are overwhelmed with the sudden shift to online education, and increased demands to maintain excellence in e-learning environments. In this case, should ‘emergency remote teaching’ be compared with regular online learning?

The term ‘emergency remote teaching’ has arisen precisely to avoid a judgmental comparison with professional online education. Educators who are suddenly thrust by a global pandemic into an unfamiliar mode of teaching deserve a humanistic understanding by the surrounding society. Unless teachers have presented themselves as all-knowing gurus, they should be held to neither traditional standards nor expectations in the online education field that face-to-face outcomes can be equaled or even surpassed by leveraging the affordances of new educational technologies.

8. Layoffs to balance budgets are common during the pandemic. Will online education fan the flames of unemployment in the educational sector? If so, will it not jeopardize the effectiveness of e-learning environments?

Online education itself would not normally cause unemployment unless bloated administrations tried to justify their existence by a futile attempt to save money through mass production of education. Layoffs of teachers can only hurt the quality of education. Schools often order hardware like computers without investing in the more important training of teachers to use the technologies effectively. Again, online education should not be a separate sector but rather a new way that teachers work. For quality in education, people should always be the essential priority.
9. There is an edge in online education for those countries with a robust infrastructure and governmental support. What kind of international cooperation can ensure educational parity in developing countries like India?

Especially in these times of global economic crisis, perhaps self-reliance to achieve parity is more effective than waiting for action at intergovernmental levels. The Internet has allowed for disintermediation – cutting out the middle man both in shopping and in international relations. First, get as many citizens online as possible, even with limited connectivity or by mobile phone. Next, urge them to acquire the language and content they need to participate in the global market of goods and ideas. Then approach individuals and institutions in other countries with knowledge and skills to exchange. In the case of educators, participate actively in international online events and academic associations.

10. Webinars and online conferences are plaguing the online learning environment during the pandemic. Should there be regulations to maintain quality of e-learning content?

Count it as a blessing if there are too many online events in your country rather than too few. The technology can be distracting until either it is perfected or it becomes embedded invisibly in the environment and the user’s experience. That is the meaning of the ubiquitous computing toward which we are heading. Thus, people need more experience and experimentation, which may be unsatisfying at the moment but is part of the learning process. The relevant regulations should be academic standards and ethics, not rules and restrictions imposed from above educational circles.

11. What is the role of the World Association for Online Education (WAOE) in popularizing and enabling online education during the pandemic?

Since 1998, although the WAOE is one of the first global virtual organizations, we struggle like most voices to be heard in an age of excess and questionable information fueled by the ease of social media expression. We are encouraged by the renewed interest in online education and the need for shared expertise, so we are trying to step up our outreach. We already have a global network of scholarly educators, and we especially amplify the voices of Asians and Africans, so we just need to provide specific activities and communication channels that are accessible and educational. In that spirit, we appreciate your sharing the news about our work with your readers. [6]
Endnotes: for further reading


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Full Professor for 22 years, he now lectures for Osaka Jogakuin University and the Japanese government international agency JICA. He has been President of the World Association for Online Education since 1998. He has delivered seven keynote addresses at international e-learning conferences. He has taught classes at three graduate schools including the national University of Tsukuba near Tokyo. At Kansai University from 2015-2020 he taught international ICT-related classes and held a unique Global Faculty Development position. Currently his CV lists 227 publications and 85 presentations, with Google Scholar finding more than 400 citations to his publications. Homepage: [https://japanned.hcommons.org](https://japanned.hcommons.org)