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Printed Textbook and its Potential in Remote Learning during The Covid-19 Crisis

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Abstract

Remote learning which is mostly done online has become a new norm as schools are forced to close due to COVID-19. This learning setting has exposed a huge digital inequality among learners around the world, where not all of them are privileged to join remote learning sessions and they might be left behind for a long time as the pandemic is not showing any sign of slowing down. However, a solution to this pressing situation might be found through the always reliable printed textbook. As a printed textbook does not require an internet connection or a device to be utilized, it is thought that it can ensure a continuous access to education in this challenging time since it provides convenience in terms of time, money, and connectivity, while also offering credible content, standardization, and becoming a good vehicle for self-study among learners. However, the currently available printed textbook in the market is not intended to be used in a time of crisis like this; a better printed textbook must be urgently produced to suit the unprecedented time we are living in.

Keywords: Textbook, Remote Learning, Online Distance Learning, COVID-19, Digital Textbook

Introduction

To say that the COVID-19 has affected education around the world is an understatement. The rage of the pandemic has singlehandedly altered how education is sourced, conducted, delivered, and utilized. Schools and other educational institutions are forced to close; at one point in April 2020 for instance, it was reported that 166 territories have imposed country-wide closure of these establishments, effectively affecting almost 1.5 billion students around the world (UNESCO, 2021). This is done in the hope that social distancing will help to flatten the infection curve and minimize the overall fatalities from the pandemic (Murphy, 2020; Di Pietro et al., 2020).

With no end in sight, heaven knows just how long and how many times learning processes in these educational institutions will continue to be disrupted, especially with the

recent spikes of COVID-19 cases, Perhaps, this is the new norm that we not only have to overcome but also embrace as a part of our lives. Students are definitely missing out on in-class instruction, and instead have been attending school remotely via various online arrangements that in some ways resemble homeschooling or online education (Li & Lalani, 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020). This situation has presented unprecedented challenges for both educators and students in navigating their ways in online distance learning or ODL (Lau, Yang, & Dasgupta, 2020; United Nations, 2020), as educators are scrambling to source for the best materials and platforms for their lessons, and students have found themselves in unexpected places and situations just to get an acceptable access to participate in their ODL sessions.

While remote learning is championed as the savior and the future of education in this pandemic era, several issues continue to mar its implementation. One of the most talked about is the inequality in digital access among students especially in developing countries like Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries (Kapasias et al., 2020; Lau, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020; Upadhyaya et al., 2020).

Among other, this inequality in digital access happens when students do not have ample access to devices such as computers, tablets, laptops and smartphones to participate in ODL sessions easily (Di Pietro et al. 2020; United Nations, 2020; Wan, 2020). It was reported that in Malaysia for example, almost forty percent of the students will not be able to participate in ODL sessions as they do not possess any electronic device, with only 6 per cent of them own a computer, 5.67 per cent own a tablet, 9 per cent own a laptop and 46 per cent have a smartphone (Chan et al., 2020). At the same time, even though a family owns a device, it will still have to be shared among the family members not only for ODL purposes but also their caretaker's work purposes.

Apart from that, internet connection has also become another thorn in the implementation of ODL sessions. To ensure students to have a stable and unlimited internet connection is not an easy task. There are disparities in terms of internet connectivity, especially between students who live in urban and rural areas (Arumugam, 2020; Kapasias et al., 2020; Lim, 2020; Yee, 2020), where in Malaysia for example, urban users made up for seventy percent of the Internet users, while rural users only accounted for thirty percent (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018). Disparities are also detected between those who come from high- and low-income families (Andrew et al., 2020; Kapasias et al., 2020; Lau, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020; Upadhyaya et al., 2020). Interestingly, Kodachi (2020) disclosed that this matter is more widespread in high-income nations but not in developing ones. Jaeger and Blaabaek (2020) seem to agree with this, as they reported unequal access to resources between students who come from high-income and low-income families in Denmark. Similar situations are also prevalent in European Union countries as "students from higher socio-economic status are significantly more likely to have a laptop or a computer at home than those from lower socio-economic status" (Di Pietro et al., 2020, p. 14).

But all hope is not lost. In the spirit of addressing this digital divide and disparities, while providing 'Education for All' as aspired by UNESCO (2016) that aims at ensuring "universal equal access to inclusive and equitable quality education and learning [...] and leaving no one behind"(2016, p.27), this is where it is thought that a printed textbook could

come into the picture. Therefore, this paper will examine how a printed textbook could provide the much-needed continuation to the teaching and learning sessions and equal access to knowledge and education throughout this pandemic period and beyond, especially for those who come from lower to middle-income families (Chabbot & Sinclair, 2020) and those with limited digital devices to spare and insufficient access to the Internet due to their geographical situations (Bell et. al, 2020; Buchbinder, 2020). It will first look at the features of a printed textbook that might help its users to learn remotely without having to rely on a device or internet access before some considerations on producing a future printed textbook to better serve its users in times of crisis are discussed.

Features of Printed Textbooks that Support Remote Learning

Convenience

One of the main reasons why a printed textbook could be the solution to remote learning is the convenience it offers (Millar & Schrier, 2015). It provides convenience in terms of time, money, and connectivity in this remote learning period. First, teachers experienced it first-hand on just how time-consuming the process of finding interesting materials and preparing classes can be at times while they were having face to face classes earlier. Now, with the sudden shift to remote learning, they will have to spend additional time to source for materials to suit their remote learning sessions that involve students of varying abilities and connectivity level. Hence, the use of a printed textbook is taught to be a great help to these teachers since it reduces the pressure of lesson planning, saves time, and considerably lighten the process of teaching and learning (McGrath, 2016). This is due in part to the fact that a textbook offers readymade materials and tasks that are appropriately pitched at the students' level (Ur, 1996). This saved time, according to Richard (2016), could enable teachers to concentrate on teaching and providing individualized support to their students, rather than creating or sourcing for content and materials. In addition, as working from home becomes a new norm, teachers might have to juggle multiple responsibilities at their household; they might have to complete their duties as a parent and become a teacher to their own children at the same time. Hence, the time convenience provided by a printed textbook could help them to ease some of these responsibilities.

Second, a printed textbook could offer financial convenience, as it offers the cheapest way of providing learning materials for each student (Ur, 1996). In some countries for instance, printed textbooks are heavily subsidized and are provided for free to the students, hence allowing for greater access to education regardless of the students' economic background. Some parties might argue that learning materials could be sourced for free from the internet example, or through electronic textbooks. However, this method of accessing learning materials must be done through a device or a software (Engbrecht, 2018), and this involves some financial considerations to be implemented fully, as opposed to a printed textbook that can be used as a stand-alone learning material. On the other hand, a printed textbook acts as a 'one-stop center' that offers, for example, English reading texts with various related exercises in the same place, without teachers having to source them from different places or publications which could again incur additional costs.

Third, a printed textbook is also convenient because it allows its users to be connected to each other in the simplest way without the use of sophisticated technology. For instance, with a printed textbook at home, teachers for example will be able to "use phone calls, WhatsApp messages, or announcements on the radio [or television] to instruct caregivers on

which pages the students should cover and when” (Chabbot & Sinclair, 2020, p.2). Then, in Malaysia for example, once the students have completed the work from the printed textbook, parents can return the work to their children school’s guard house for their teachers to mark and grade the work, before the work is returned to the students, also through the school’s guard house to be collected by the parents (Krishnan & Chan, 2020). This will ensure that these students can continue their study and are not left behind due to the lack of access to their teachers and electronic devices.

Credibility

Apart from providing convenience, it is widely known that academic publications such as printed textbooks are mostly written by experts in the pertinent field. Such publications have undergone a quality control process at publishers where their contents are vetted and scrutinized, also by editors and experts in a particular field, as opposed to the plethora of content on the Internet to be consumed by students which might not be curated well and carefully produced and examined. In addition, it is thought that even the greatest of technology will be of little use without contents that are credible and reliable (Knight, 2015). Not only that, useful educational technologies will be the ones that are built on reliable content using technologies to support students in manipulating the materials and engaging with the teaching [and learning process] (Knight, 2015, p.4). Hence, as suggested by Oates (2014), it would be naïve to ignore how credible, valid, and reliable content that can be found in carefully designed textbooks play a vital part in ensuring and maintaining the quality of education.

Standardization

Additionally, because a printed textbook is usually used by all students in an educational establishment, and in some cases, is being assigned to be used by the whole country, it could serve as an excellent tool for standards and standardization in this remote learning period. As we all are aware of, there is not really one governing body that governs the standards of learning materials on the Internet, as opposed to a printed textbook which is observed by an official education governing body in a country, state, or institution. Richard (2016) then argued that it could help to set a similar set of standards or skills that students should achieve at the end of a learning programme, and “can guarantee that students in different classes will receive a similar content and therefore, can be evaluated in the same way” (AbdelWahab, 2013, p.55). Moreover, a printed textbook could offer consistency in the topics, genres, and language skills it purports to cover (Zohrabi et al., 2014).

Self-Directed Learning

Most importantly, a printed textbook supports self-directed learning (Cunningsworth, 1995; Rubdy, 2013; Ahmed, Yaqoob, & Yaqoob, 2015), in which learning can take place beyond the classroom and at home (Jusuf, 2018). Ur (1996) supported this, as she stated that students can use it to learn new material, review and monitor progress and claimed that “a learner without a [printed text]book is more teacher-dependent” (1996, p.184). For students, it is simply not feasible for them to be teacher-dependent for their learning in this pandemic era, because they will not be able to have the similar face to face interaction with their teachers that they enjoyed earlier, and for some with connectivity issues, they will not be able to communicate with their teachers at all. Hence, learning must be self-directed, with minimal instructions from their teachers.

A printed textbook seems to be able to support this as it is discovered by Lau et al. (2018) that the majority of existing printed textbooks that are available in the market support self-regulated low-order and mid-order learning in the conceptualization and the construction stages which focus primarily on understanding, searching, and editing, which are mostly personalized learning activities which require little or no interaction with a teacher, peer, or more knowledgeable adult. They also proposed that because the content in a printed textbook is unsophisticated, it could support basic and intermediate cognitive processes, such as remembering, understanding, applying, and analyzing. What is more, a printed textbook is usually accompanied with complete explanations, appropriate examples, and extensive instructions for its users on almost every page, since it is not uncommon for teachers to assign homework to their students in a printed textbook during the in-person learning session. With all these features, it is believed that teaching and learning can still be conducted continuously even though normal schooling comes to a halt and the students are having connectivity issues. On top of that, the students could also be encouraged to be more responsible for their own learning, and this could help them beyond this COVID-19 pandemic period.

Considerations in Producing Future Printed Textbooks

Unfortunately, printed textbooks are published in advance, and they are certainly not created for this kind of crisis. Chabbot and Sinclair (2020) for example, stated that not all textbooks are designed for self-study and they also provide minimal support and guidance for caretakers who are responsible in assisting learning at home. Not only that, only a few of these textbooks offer digital tie-ins and extensions such as a website or a mobile application that offer supplementary materials online which could prove to be useful for more advanced students and those with no connectivity and device issues. Therefore, better textbooks that are more suited to this type of crisis should be published.

To begin with, the content of a printed textbook could be structured in a way that it will support self-study at home. A lesson for instance, could be divided into several shorter units, not only to help the students to understand a particular topic, but to help those with connectivity issues to communicate with their teachers better. Activities offered by the printed textbook on the other hand should be simple and enable the students to utilize things, people, or places that are within their immediate surrounding, to assist them to make sense of what they are learning from the printed textbook and how it could be related to their daily life.

Meanwhile, the selection of the topics in the printed textbook should bear on public health, environmental concerns, and respect for all, and lessons drawn from COVID-19 itself and how they relate to their life in a greater sense (Chabbot & Sinclair, 2020). Not only that a printed textbook should also consider the local culture in its contents and topics, (Shak et al., 2021), to promote a sense of familiarity and relatedness among its potential users while lessening the anxiety of these users might experience in doing their remote learning individually. Even better, this printed textbook should strive to provide a balanced representation of foreign and local culture in its content, as suggested by (Deswila et al., 2021). The presence of foreign culture in this textbook is still important as it could act as a window to the world for the students, especially in the times where their movements are restricted, and they have to be confined at home.

At the same time, as a printed textbook usually comes with a Teacher's Edition, perhaps this pandemic period is a good time for printed textbook publishers to produce some sort of 'Caretakers' Edition' to accompany the textbook. This edition among others could

contain bite-sized explanations about the lessons in the textbook, proper guidance on how the caretakers can assist the students to complete the work in the textbook, full answer keys with explanations, and suggestions on how the lessons in the textbook could be expanded and related to the daily life.

Moreover, as we are living in a digital era, a printed textbook could ramp up its digital presence, especially in catering to the students with proper devices and connectivity and to provide a more exciting learning experience to them. A companion website or mobile application should be developed by the publisher of the printed textbook that offers enrichment activities to these students. Apart from that, the discussion and the content of the said textbook could also be extended to various social media such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. This will provide avenues for students to connect and communicate with other users of the textbook, which might prove to be useful for those who are continuously confined to their own home due to COVID-19 related lockdowns and stay-at-home orders.

Conclusion

The situations surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have created a crisis in education that no one can ever foresee, while exposing the vast digital inequality that exists among our students. Inevitably, there will be students who are “less privileged, and their only hope to gain access to continuous education is through a textbook that can easily be used for self-study and is readily available, without having the needs to have access to advanced technological devices” (Shak et al., 2021, p.177).

However, as once said by the great Albert Einstein, ‘In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity’; this crisis might be an opportunity for educators around the world to explore alternatives and ‘opportunities’ for the affected students. One of the ways is by re-imagining the potentials of a printed textbook in assisting remote learning during this pandemic. It is hoped that this paper has made its case in contributing to the discussion on how it is best to utilize a low technology method of knowledge delivery such as a printed textbook in disseminating knowledge especially for those who are marginalized by technology. In addition, this paper could also become a basis for future empirical and longitudinal studies which compare the effectiveness of knowledge delivery through technological methods and traditional textbook methods especially during a time of health crisis like COVID-19.

Viruses come and go, but a printed textbook is here to stay. Yes, a printed textbook might look humble, unappealing, and might lack the sophistication and complexity to support high-order learning (Lau et al., 2018). Yet, we can be certain that it will offer continuous access to education to the segment of our students that is affected the most by COVID-19, while delivering contents that are unrivalled in terms of its credibility and reliability. Qaddour (2020) puts it best that perhaps, what education really needs in this COVID-19 crisis is trained caregivers and well-thought textbooks, and not new and sophisticated technologies.

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