

Learning Online Preparedness during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Thailand*



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Abstract

The objective of this academic paper is to guide and inspire Human Resource Management, School Leaders and Teachers to innovate practical solutions for issues in eLearning efficiency during the current COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on failures learnt from the past. A literature review was conducted to determine the state of pre-COVID19 eLearning in Thailand with regards to ICT, teacher training, student performance and pedagogy successes and failures. The particular focus is on identification of the approaches used by management concerning training, perceived barriers, and resistance to change in the transition of Thai schools to blended learning. The findings revealed that during the pandemic there was some progress in the areas of teacher collaboration, exploratory lesson design, the use of active learning, and sensitivity to student learning styles. However, there remain significant issues regarding the delivery of teacher training, teaching methodology and needs analysis. The paper concluded with a summary of recommendations for Human Resource management, school leaders and teachers based on the competency gaps identified in the research to prepare the Thai education system for successful transition to a flexible system of blended eLearning to cope with the long-term effects of COVID-19.

Keywords: learning online; COVID-19; pandemic; Thailand

Introduction

Implementation of successful eLearning in Thailand is severely impeded by elements of traditional Thai culture. The very wide paradigm shift from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered culture engaged in active eLearning causes considerable resistance on the part of Thai teachers, who may not embrace and incorporate the new learning styles so

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badly needed for students to survive in the 21st century. To compound the problem, a mandatory forced shift to 100% online learning is “a power-coercive unplanned innovation, a category with one of the lowest likelihoods of being successful (Lamie, as cited in Todd, 2020). Statistics from numerous studies indicate that Thai students actually lack many of the skills to function in an eLearning environment. Students are unable to cope with poorly designed and delivered lessons which are often nothing more than an imitation of the rote-classroom, teacher-centered environment.

There are many issues concerning the use of eLearning to deliver effective lessons to students at home during the pandemic crisis, when Thai school campuses are temporarily closed while learning must continue. There is general consensus that there needs to be a long-term rather than a temporary stop-gap solution, as there are already predictions of surges of COVID-19 that could last through to 2025, and that it may ‘never go away’ if it becomes an endemic disease in the population (Scudellari, 2020) (“Why the coronavirus,” 2020). If Thailand was previously ill-prepared in their capacity to deliver quality eLearning lessons prior to the pandemic, how much more critical is it to learn from and overcome the failures of the past.

Recent developments in ICT, social media apps, software tools and new platforms have opened up expanded and exciting opportunities for engagement of Generation Z (Ożadowicz, 2020). Successful eLearning depends on a wide-scale cultural shift. According to Puncreobutr (2016), describing the stages of Education 4.0, Thai education seems to have become stagnated between the stage of ‘Centuries of Memorization’ and ‘Internet-enabled learning’ thus hindering the nation’s ability to progress further. It is imperative that this blockage mentality be cleared to pave the way for effectiveness at higher levels. Online student behavior and feedback must be studied by school leaders and administrators in order to help struggling students manage the home-school environment and provide better quality online lessons by appropriately trained teachers (Thomas, 2020).

Barriers to Successful eLearning in Thailand

Thai teachers at all levels are familiar with the Thai Ministry of Education’s (MOE) rhetoric when it comes to idealizing educational reform, which for more than 20 years has failed to achieve its goals. The four main problems are defined and discussed.

1. The Concept of Thai-ness

Over the years, numerous reforms have been implemented in Thailand by the MOE in an attempt to both modernize education by borrowing Western pedagogies while at the same



time attempting to preserve traditional values. According to concept of ‘Thai-ness’, traditional values, which may not hold relevance in the modern age, are upheld, while new values face condemnation, resulting in a divergence of mutually incompatible values, having serious consequences on progress (Anderson, 2012). Pratt (as cited in Churngchow, Rorbkorb, Petchurai, and Tansakul, 2020) proposed that learning styles are culturally dependent due to the restrictions that their culture places on socially accepted behavioral, of which Thailand is a notable example.

2. Decentralization

The research indicates that the Thai MOE policy of decentralization works in favor of schools which already have well-trained and dedicated teachers proficient in lesson planning. For other schools, teacher training has been described as ‘a hotchpotch of poorly designed materials with no relation to any other policies’ (Darasawang and Watson Todd, (2012) in (Kaur, Young and Kirkpatrick, 2016). Few opportunities exist for Thai teachers to participate in the teacher empowerment training framework, meaning that teachers rarely contribute significantly to the planning of reform and education policies. This has a direct impact on teachers’ willingness to accept reforms and policies. Teachers’ direct involvement in educational planning at a national level will help teachers make more sense of new policies and narrow the gap between policies and practices (Kaur, Young and Kirkpatrick, 2016).

3. Teacher Training Failure

The resistance of Thai teachers in changing their teaching techniques is the major challenge holding back innovation in teaching methods. To overcome this problem, leadership and administrative support is needed. According to Piamsa-nga and Poovarawan (2020) the reasons Thai staff fall into habits of rote-learning, spoon-feeding and teacher-centered activities is due to overloaded schedules and time-consuming administrative paperwork. Prior to the pandemic, very few Thai teachers had taught entire courses online. To compound the problem, teacher training in Thailand had generally been both ineffective and inadequate even prior to the pandemic. According to a survey by Akarawang, Kidrakran and Nuangchalerm (2015) teacher training has not adequately been preparing teachers in the use of ICT media to instruct students, citing poor teacher competency and ICT understanding.

4. Student Attitudes Towards eLearning

Research by Imsa-ard (2020) reveals that the majority of Thai students prefer face-to-face classrooms to online learning and most of them are not willing to learn online in the future and that a minority, accounting for 11.2%, preferred learning through elearning only



(Charnbhumidol, Kraiwanich, and Kraiwanit, 2020). A 2006 study by (Pagram, and Pagram, 2006) concluded that as a result of teacher-centered pedagogy, Thai students lacked motivation and self-discipline, and these characteristics were deemed unsuitable for eLearning, especially given the lack of technical support and infrastructure at the time. It was also noted that Thai students learn better in groups, in adherence with the social constructs of Thai collectivism, which place emphasis on respect for seniority and favoring the group over the individual.

Although familiar with technology, especially noteworthy in Thai students' reluctance to accept eLearning was their belief that e-learning does not improve one's social status or reputation (Ngampornchai, and Adams, 2016) (Changwong, Sukkamart, and Sisan, 2018) (Moore, and Benbasat, 1991). However, this problem could be compounded even more with regards to eLearning, with students experiencing a lack of genuine interaction and feelings of isolation (Paechter et al. 2010 as cited in Imsa-ard, 2020).

Findings

Identification of ongoing trends and solutions to improve the quality of online learning brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic enable us to understand how teachers and students are coping and adapting.

1. Forced and Sudden Transition to eLearning

There are mixed messages deriving from the sudden and mandatory changeover of schools in Thailand to Home-based Learning (HBL). Schools which had not previously been utilizing eLearning regularly did not experience a smooth transition (Alqahtani, and Rajkhan, 2020). On the other hand, this situation has opened up new opportunities for teaching and learning, staff capacity building, collaboration, and experimentation with tools and lesson planning to deliver effective lessons via online learning platforms (Marinoni, Van't Land, and Jensen, 2020).

The initial shock of transitioning to eLearning experienced by teachers was quickly mitigated as teachers discovered new coping strategies to overcome what were rated as serious problems, such as 'chunking' lessons into shorter units, and identifying suitable stimulating activities to engage the students. As teachers accumulate more experience teaching online, they are likely to become much more proficient in managing and creating content for the online platform in the long term for what is likely to become the 'new normal' in education (Todd, 2020).



2. Management of Human Resources during COVID-19

The technological readiness factor of the organization represents the highest priority in promoting blended learning practices (Lim, and Wang, 2016). According to Ngampornchai and Adams (2016) schools need to arrange for ICT training for all staff, according to a Needs Analysis conducted prior to the training. A cooperative, supportive environment of paired mentorship can be established for knowledge sharing and a ‘learn by doing’ approach. (Noom-Ura, 2013) (Marinoni, Van’t Land, and Jensen, 2020). Teachers need to become familiar and encouraged to try different types of online collaborative tools – not only incorporating them strategically into online lessons for student preferring to work online in groups, but providing students with instructions for use.

To encourage the shift to online learning, and encourage collaborative innovation, especially for staff who may be reluctant, Deerajviset and Harbon (2014) advise providing additional time for content development. Research also indicates an increasing trend that teachers prefer a ‘bottom-up’ approach to management during COVID-19 (Sethakul, and Utakrit, 2019). At all levels in the curriculum, especially with regards to blended learning, teachers and administrators need to ensure that critical thinking skills and analytical thinking are continually reinforced from an early age, to enable competent life-long problem solving (Changwong, Sukkamart, and Sisan, 2018) (Supalak, 2016).

3. Inadequate Teacher Training Persists during COVID-19

As the shift occurred so suddenly, teaching staff were caught unprepared (Todd, 2020). The level of readiness of teachers to respond to this challenge was very diverse. (Marinoni, Van’t Land, and Jensen, 2020). To overcome the challenges of ineffective training, Akarawang, Kidrakran and Nuangchalerm (2015) have recommended conducting proper needs analysis of teachers before training, making the training more interesting and useful, with emphasis on collaborative problem solving, practical application of the knowledge and concepts taught, and the opportunity for group interaction, discussion, and knowledge sharing (Deerajviset, and Harbon, 2014).

4. How Thai Students are Coping with eLearning during the Pandemic

Alqahtani and Rajkhan (2020) state in order to achieve successful learning during the pandemic, students must be responsible for their own attitude and commitment, practice appropriate social distancing measures, and self-motivate. Furthermore, self-efficacy, high task value, and recognition of the benefits of eLearning are also important (Amir et al. 2020). If the education system is able to accommodate the characteristics of the students to a significant

degree, learning is likely to be more meaningful and retained longer. The current generation of Thai learners appreciate being given choices, the opportunity to express their personal opinions, and the quality of ‘sanook’- having an element of playful fun in work, school, and with their friends (Phanich as cited in Santhuenkeaw, Tontiwongwanich, and Pimdee, 2019).

In a survey of 310 Thai undergraduate university students concerning the usefulness of eLearning conducted by Imsa-ard (2020) early during the pandemic, disagreement was expressed with following statements; online learning (81%) supports the communication between instructors and students, (71%) enhances the quality of learning (58%) encourages sufficient access to education, (42%) Instructors could organize the lessons efficiently, (61%) is more comfortable than face-to-face classrooms, and (55%) I am willing to learn online in the future. The overall results indicate that although Thai university students have the technological skills, they fail to recognise many of the significant benefits of eLearning.

5. How Thai Teachers are Coping with COVID-19 eLearning

One especially noteworthy and positive trend is that school leaders are beginning to open up to a new mindset of promoting a collaborative school culture among all staff where knowledge sharing is valued and trying out new ideas without fear of failure (Alqahtani, and Rajkhan, 2020). In a survey by Marinoni, Van’t Land and Jensen (2020), the staff welcomed the opportunity to explore different types of online learning strategies (hybrid, blended, and mixing synchronous and asynchronous). In another survey by Lim and Wang (2016), Thai teachers expressed more confidence in exploring the potential of flexible learning and the belief that this will lead to further innovations. An important concern for teachers with low proficiency in English is that the majority of quality online learning content is in English, which they may not be able to translate easily. (Lim and Wang, 2016). Thus, one strategy would be an incentive for Thai teachers to develop their own content, which is contingent on the support of school administration.

6. Thai Teacher Training Preferences

According to Kaur, Young and Kirkpatrick (2016) to enhance the productiveness of teacher training, the Thai Ministry of Education should consider the following feedback from the teachers themselves before launching initiatives on a nationwide scale. This includes replacing traditional training methods and 100% web-based training with a blended learning approach. Teachers have also expressed a high priority for the creation of electronic media for use in eLearning (Akarawang, Kidrakran, and Nuangchalerm, 2015). Furthermore, in addition to lack of training opportunities, lecturers want to work collaboratively with other universities



to share their knowledge and experiences with ICT, especially in the establishment of a mentorship scheme between novice and experienced teachers (Deerajviset, and Harbon, 2014).

7. Matching Student Learning Styles – Best Pedagogies

A different pedagogy is required for distance teaching (Marinoni, Van't Land, and Jensen, 2020). New pedagogies for eLearning must be accepted, as successful blended learning cannot be achieved unless both teachers and students transform their learning and teaching styles (Lim, and Wang, 2016). Thai teachers need to understand the importance of knowing the learning styles of their students, as well as their own teaching style. This important awareness enables a teacher to teach outside of their comfort zone in order to match the student's preferred learning styles (Supalak, 2016). An example of teacher/student incompatibility comes from Supalak (2016) who discovered that Thai students favor group learning style the most and individual learning style the least, while Thai teachers of English were found to be visual learners/teachers and group learning was their least favorite style. Biggs (as cited in Kaur, Young, and Kirkpatrick, 2016) suggests that it is the teacher's responsibility to adapt teaching methods to suit students' needs in accordance with their culture.

8. Suggested Activities for Blended Learning Engagement

Buaraphan (2015) stated that for all learning styles, teachers should provide students with these four types of activities:

- a) “Concrete Experience - teachers require students to have practical experiences from active participation in observation, hands-on activity, collecting a variety of data from direct experience,
- b) Reflection - teachers require students to exchange their ideas and experiences with their peers and reflect what they have understood, or learned
- c) Conceptualization - teachers require students to think collaboratively with others, link different ideas emerged from the class and finally conclude all into their own concepts,
- d) Application - teachers require students to apply their learned concepts into various situations.” Buaraphan (2015)

Additional strategies suggested by Buaraphan (2015) include offering chances to help each other as well as learn from their peers' strengths, weaknesses and learning styles. This kind of leaning experience may help students develop desirable learning styles for



themselves. More specifically, Thai students' learning preferences as identified in the research by Supalak (2016) include

- (1) a processing-active learning style,
- (2) active experimentation
- (3) group learning style (most preferred)
- (4) practical problem solving methods

Conclusion

Thai schools that are prepared can transition well to eLearning if the platform is stable and familiar, lessons are well-prepared, teachers know how to deliver, students know how to manage their learning environment and are engaged, direction and management of resources is driven by school leadership and administration. Technology is not the problem. Their reluctance to embrace eLearning stems from elements of Thai-ness and adherence to deeply ingrained cultural norms. Until teacher training is delivered in a blended training mode, with proper needs assessments of teachers before training, incorporating elements of group collaboration and prioritization of creation of electronic media for use in teaching students, teachers will be unable to deliver and design engaging and effective eLearning lessons.

Suggestion

Schools should enact policies for coordinated training, encouragement of content development, knowledge sharing sessions and managing best teaching practices.

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